

What for NATO and the West now?

The weakness President Biden demonstrated in the Middle East over Afghanistan was unfortunate. It should not be repeated elsewhere. The President wanted to be closer to allies but has instead upset them by his unilateral and unwise decision. That is all the more reason for him now to draw closer in other places where alliances are important.

In Korea the USA still maintains a substantial military presence to support the South Korean forces. North Korea with its erratic autocrat in charge needs to know that the USA continues with her long term commitment to support the South. So does China need to understand that trying to control her wayward neighbouring state.

President Biden has in the past made clear he will support Taiwan. He will need to do so again, and be ready to respond to any further tests of resolve from Chinese naval vessels and planes coming close to the island. NATO as a whole is engaged, with naval vessels from other NATO countries assisting the USA in keeping open international waters in the South China Sea.

In eastern Europe NATO has forces in the Baltic Republics as a reminder to Russia that they have chosen to be allies of the West. US rapid reaction forces are an important part of the NATO support.

The world has just got even more dangerous with the collapse of the Afghan government and the release of prisoners from Afghan jails. Counter terrorism is a daily task for many years, not something democratic countries can get bored with or pretend the need has gone away. There are regular challenges to western defences by conventional weapons and by many cyber probes and assaults. Some come from rogue states or from terrorist groups. Some are tolerated if not directed by large states that the West has to do business with. This requires clear leadership, defining lines of conduct and imposing sanctions or responding as needed where lines are crossed. After Afghanistan President Biden will have to be tougher and clearer to avoid more disasters elsewhere. UK diplomacy could help rebuild trust between the USA and the allies, assuming President Biden recognises the need to reassert US leadership against violent and unacceptable conduct.

Carry on trucking

I have written a piece requested by Conservative Home which they published today on the shortage of truck drivers.

www.conservativehome.com

The collapse of the two main parties in EU countries

The UK has kept something close to a two party system in General elections. Labour and Conservative have alternated in power based on their ability or lack of it to improve living standards and preside over a successful economy. Labour's bankrupting of the UK and trip to the IMF to borrow in the mid 1978s led to them being out of office for 18 years. The Conservatives adoption of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and the predictable inflation and recession that caused led to Conservatives being out of office for 13 years. Labour's boom and bust and banking crash of 2008 has so far led to them being out of office for 11 years.

I know some contributors here want a new or third party to emerge. The Social Democrats tried that in the 1980s and failed after a few by election successes. The Lib Dems are always positioning themselves as a potential new force but have never made it to first or second place in a General election and cannot truthfully claim to be new. The Referendum party, UKIP and the Brexit party tried it mainly around an important single issue but only ever won one seat in a General election between them. As I always advised here, if you wanted a referendum and then wanted Brexit done they had to be achieved with Conservative MP votes in the Commons. In Scotland the SNP has demonstrated that in the first past the post Westminster elections they have been able to break through into first place, displacing Labour, because they have made their constitutional issue more salient than economic management for the UK as whole.

On the continent there was the same alternation between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in office in the last century. This century in all the main EU countries the big two have lost support with new populist parties emerging. It is true they have different voting systems which can assist splintering of the vote, but they had these same systems in the last century when Christian Democrats and Social Democrats were each likely to get around 40 % of the vote and to dominate coalitions with smaller parties formed by the winner.

This seems to have occurred because electors realise that unlike in the UK the once dominant parties can no longer guarantee or mess up the economy in the same way because they do not have the powers. EU control of interest rates, money and credit, state borrowing and some taxes changes things a lot. Elections are fought on other matters more.

The decline of the Christian Democrats has been speeded by EU policies. The lower tax greater freedom part of the conservative vote has been alienated by the compromises needed to accept a large and growing EU budget, independent collective EU borrowing, huge transfers at zero interest from

surplus to deficit countries through the European Central Bank, and a regulatory colossus laying down detailed controls over many aspects of life. The conservative impulse has as a result been driven into newer parties of a more Eurosceptic tone. They are normally defeated by a coming together of all the other parties that are broadly pro EU to prevent any Eurosceptic movement gaining power again, as Syriza briefly did in Greece before its leaders gave in. In some cases as in France this has occurred in the second round of an election. In other cases as in current Italy it comes by excluding the Eurosceptic party from any post election coalition.

Let's end the secrecy about the German election

The BBC and Channel 4 always go to town over any US Presidential election, and provide comment about US Congressional mid terms. Any error or politically incorrect comment by a Republican is played up, and suitable bon mots by Democrats are reported. There is even sometimes commentary designed to produce a little balance.

When it comes to a pivotal and important European General election there is usually a deafening silence. In a month's time Germany goes to the polls to choose a replacement Chancellor for Mrs Merkel. Voters will also be invited to pass judgement on how green electors want policy to be, how much more power the EU should enjoy, and how prudent the budget of the EU's largest economy should be. Given the media's enthusiasm for all things EU the lack of interest in all this is noteworthy.

Many people in the UK have not even heard the names of the 3 main challengers to take over as Chancellor. Armin Laschet is the new leader of Merkel's CDU party (sort of Conservative). Annalena Baerbock is the chosen Chancellor candidate for the Greens. Olaf Scholz is the leader of the SPD (Labour like).

The election has been through three phases so far. It began with a surge for the Greens when they announced their fresh new candidate for Chancellor who briefly went into first place in the polls. It swung back to the CDU. In the last few days the lagging SPD has had a strong run and pulled level with the CDU in joint first.

The Greens have fallen back into third thanks to claims that Ms Baerbock's CV had elements of fiction in it and that her book had borrowed material from elsewhere without credits. More importantly Green policies of raising fuel taxes and subsidising cycling are going down badly. The CDU has lost traction partly thanks to Mr Laschet's unfortunate joke cracking as a backdrop to the German President speaking about the deaths of people in the recent floods. Mr Scholz has picked up support by avoiding such disasters.

There have been some continuities in the polls. The polls have always said the 3 main parties remain very unpopular, struggling to get much above 20% each. The polls have always said the 3 Chancellor candidates are unpopular, with more than half the voters often preferring none of the top 3. They have also said that the most talked about possible coalitions, CDU/Green/Free Democrats (Jamaica) and SPD/Free Democrats/Green (Traffic light) are more unpopular than any of the top three parties! The polls regularly give the Eurosceptic AFD 9-11% so they will definitely have no role to play in a future German government as none of the pro EU parties want them in a coalition.

The green arguments are especially important. Mr Laschet as current head of the government of Rhineland Palatinate has to defend the decision to allow the loss of six more settlements and a major expansion of the strip mine for lignite at Garzweiler. The CDU/SPD coalition federal government led by Merkel has just agreed that Germany will continue to mine coal and burn it for electricity until 2038. This means Germany will not make much of a contribution to COP26 and the climate change pledges, refusing to match the UK by ending electricity from coal early. German electors seem worried by the lignite expansion but not enough to make the SPD less popular. They seem even more worried by the Greens wish to use taxes and subsidies to change things faster. There are also important differences over taxes, spending levels, borrowing and the size of the EU budget. I will keep you posted.

The pace of migration

When income per head is \$63,543 in the USA, around \$40,000 in the richer European countries and under \$6,000 a head in poorer countries it is no wonder that many people want to be economic migrants. The USA is the most popular destination for migrants, followed by Germany, Saudi Arabia and the UK. Millions of Indians, Mexicans, Syrians, Bangladeshis and others have made the often arduous journeys to new lands in search of a better life.

These strong patterns of economic migration have been reinforced by waves of migration as people flee authoritarian regimes, civil wars and individual threats to their lives. The West struggles to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees fleeing genuine threats of persecution and violence. The difference is fundamental to policy, as the need of the refugee is greater than that of the economic migrant, and the numbers should be much smaller and more manageable .

There are three broad views over how we should react and respond to these impulses. One group including Labour and the Lib Dems thinks the west should be even more welcoming of any kind of migrant. It is to them our duty to be generous and kind. One group thinks it best to concentrate our policy efforts on aid and trade to try to create better circumstances in the poorer

countries so people there can seize more opportunities and enjoy some hope of a better future. Our generosity should be limited to defined groups and individuals who face persecution, with the west sharing the responsibility by taking manageable numbers of people from crisis areas. Some targeted economic migration should be allowed where we need the people and skills concerned. A third group thinks we take too many migrants with stresses on our housing and public service provision and wishes to see numbers reduced in the best way possible.

The UK debate has not been helped by poor and misleading official statistics. The argument was intensified by the arrival of a large number of people under EU freedom of movement rules. The official figures told us EU migration was lower than non EU migration, and the Blair government gave a very low figure for eastern European migration which was soon proved to be massively wrong. More recently the ONS has apologised for the large errors and produced new figures showing EU migration did run consistently at higher levels than non EU migration over the last decade, that EU migration was under recorded and non EU migration was overstated. The revised figures are still problematic as they do not include children and have to be adjusted for students that do not also get some part time work. The dodgy numbers have led opponents of the current pace of migration to think this was more than an embarrassing error.

Many countries in Europe, the Middle East and the Americas have put up border walls and fences to try to stem the flows of economic migrants. Some countries like Turkey and Pakistan shelter large number of migrants from broken states near their borders. International aid is often directed to camps established near to a country people have left in the hope that some order can be restored and they can in due course make their way back to their homeland.

The UK according to the latest revised figures was welcoming at least 300,000 additional people every year up to 2018. In 2015 and 2016 EU net migration hit 282,000 a year with another around 100,000 from non EU. These numbers of non EU migrants are a small proportion of those who would like to come, but they are large numbers when it comes to finding new homes, school places, doctors surgeries and transport capacity so they can enjoy a decent lifestyle. Given the magnitude of the problem and the persistence of low incomes in too many populous countries in the world, more of the answer must lie with helping those countries to succeed rather than with helping drain them of talent by fostering more migration.

The UK now has more control over how many people to welcome. With a new borders Bill going through the Commons the government should be able to be more precise over how many each year it wishes to help and accommodate. What would you like to see them do? I think the totals of economic migrants in recent years have been too high.