

Overseas Aid

I am glad the UK spends money on ships and equipment that go to assist countries facing flood and tempest. I am in admiration of our medics and armed forces when they sometimes go to help treat and contain dangerous infectious diseases abroad. I am pleased the UK as one of the leading and richest countries of the world helps alleviate and tackle poverty in the developing nations.

The UK should set out what it can do and what it is good at, and should be generous where need arises and where we have the means to help. I want to see reform of our budgets and our activities in these areas so we achieve more with better value for taxpayers.

I went along with the Conservative leaderships' support for hitting the 0.7% target of GDP, though I have misgivings about such targets. I do not think we should commit to spend a certain proportion of a fluctuating and usually growing number. We should decide on spending on a case by case basis and against our general budget background. We do not pledge to spend a fixed proportion of GDP on health or education or policing, but look at those budgets in the light of needs and costs.

Labour will doubtless oppose such a change. They averaged under 0.4% of GDP on overseas aid in their period in government 1997-2010, despite pretending to support the international commitment to spend around twice as much as they usually managed. Others will join them in opposition. I would suggest it would be best to lobby the EU and its members, who consistently spend well below our spend levels and well below the international target, and will still do so next year. What matters more to me is what each country achieves and how ready it is to go the help of those in immediate need, where the UK rightly excels.

Last year the UK again spent 0.7% or £15bn on overseas aid. £10bn of this was spent on projects and activities we chose along with the recipient country in so called bilateral aid. The balance of £5bn was spent by our giving the money to the EU and other multinational bodies to spend as they saw fit in so called multilateral aid. As we leave the EU it is a good time to bring our overseas aid spending back in house and decide on how we can best help those in need. We should also look at the full support we give, which goes wider than the items allowed under international conventions to be called Overseas Aid. Some of our Defence expenditure is aid, being used to help bring peace to strife torn countries and providing assets to tackle disasters.

I want us to identify the areas where we have most expertise and can do most to help. Maybe the UK should specialise in a few large areas like the provision of clean water to each home, the provision of primary education to all girls as well as boys in poor countries and the roll out of programmes to tackle infectious diseases.

We should follow certain guidelines. The money should for preference be spent

in the country we are trying to help, using as much local labour and skills as possible. Where we need advanced country inputs these should usually come from people and companies based in the UK. We should work on the principle that it is better to teach a hungry person to fish and farm for themselves rather than sending them food parcels. The aim is to get countries out of poverty, not into dependence. More trade is often of more help than more aid.

It will be great to see us achieve more by concentrating our efforts in areas where we have most to offer, harnessing public and private sectors together, and taking control with more programmes we run for the benefit of the poorer countries.

Time for Defra to use our freedoms from the EU

The Defra website is more of a history lesson than a celebration of new opportunities and freedoms for farmers. Instead of brimming over with the changes they want to make to our fishing and farming policies now we can control them, it faithfully records the EU laws, rules and old schemes that dominated us for so long. It tells us there is a Countryside Productivity scheme offering only small grants funded by the EU, but goes on to say it is closed. It tells us there were forestry, Water, waste and food productivity schemes but these are also all closed.

It is true it does also now set out more recent U.K. schemes of support but most of these are for environmental improvements. Some of its latest initiatives in wilding and nature look like UK versions of work being done in the EU. Some are worthwhile but the overall impression given is the Department wants less land available for food production and has not yet got round to offering positive support for better farming to boost our output.

You could of course say why not leave it all to the market? There are two reasons. The first is other countries do not , so the UK has to compete under the EU free trade arrangements with farms on the continent that do get subsidies and other support. The second is if the Department itself is offering cash incentives not to farm on potential farmland it may need to level the playing field by offering suitable help for good farming on that land. It is all very well to say wilding cuts the carbon output on the land wilded, but if we then have to transport food into the UK from hundreds or even thousands of miles away, grown and produced in carbon generating ways, we have done nothing to save the planet and much to damage the UK economy.

The government has promised new schemes to stimulate innovation, investment and promotion of more U.K. food. I wish it would get on with them. We need to promote our farms and food now. There is no good reason for delay.

Helping the jobs market

A BBC journalist remarked on how a pro Brexit entrepreneur is now lobbying for more work permits for people from the EU as if this is some contradiction or denial of Brexit. They still do not get it. Brexit was about taking back control. We voted for Brexit so a wide range of decisions including the decision of who we invited to work here is taken in future in the U.K. by Ministers and MPs who can be thrown out at the next election if they get things wrong. We did not vote to ban all economic migrants to the U.K., though many did vote to reduce the large flows we were experiencing under freedom of movement. It was the EU's demand that all arriving EU citizens had access to benefits on arrival that David Cameron tried to change and failed, illustrating how little influence we had on EU policy.

The way the U.K. came to depend on hundreds of thousands of low paid workers from the EU in a number of sectors was not a good model for them or us. We need going forward to do more to raise productivity by investing in people and in machine and computer support to raise wages and reduce our need for cheap unskilled Labour. The so called cheap labour imposed strains on housing, welfare and public service budgets whilst not guaranteeing a good lifestyle to the migrants. We can do better by welcoming fewer economic migrants, attracting a higher proportion with skills, and doing more to promote higher productivity and wages.

There is also a regularly repeated need to have more control over illegal economic migrants. The government has promised new legislation to allow it to take tougher action against the scandal of people trafficking and the dangerous boat services across the Channel. I do not doubt the Home Secretary's wish to end this Nasty trade. Given the decisions in the courts it will take a change of law to bring this under some control.

I respond to the Farming Today challenge

On Tuesday Morning BBC's Farming Today asked listeners to send in ideas for future programmes. They certainly need some to vary their diet of stories on climate change, the dangers of free trade and the need to wild the countryside. We have had five years of anti Brexit and climate change dominance.

So here's some of the missing stories and viewpoints they can catch up on

- 1 The dangers of free trade with the EU to our farms. Why did we lose so much market share to the EU as members of the single market and how can we correct now?
2. The way we can raise animal welfare standards now out of the EU, and how we can enforce higher standards on EU imports
3. The scope for a much bigger timber industry in the U.K. as the plans for planting so many more trees are rolled out
4. Why DEFRA has still not set out its subsidy and support packages for more food growing and farm productivity improvements. How can we expand our food production?
5. When will the U.K. ban the large industrial foreign supertrawlers overfishing our waters and damaging the marine environment?
6. Will the U.K. regulators and water industry put in more reservoir capacity so farms in future will have access to irrigation water in dry spells?
7. As there is growing demand for U.K. fruit and veg What more needs to be done to expand the U.K. industry. Can we reverse the damage done by past EU grants to grub up U.K. orchards.
8. An evaluation of training, wages and career prospects in farming to nurture more home talent and increase the number of better paid jobs.
9. An assessment of damage to dairy in the U.K. from keeping U.K. short of milk quota for many years.
10. Opportunities to reclaim land for agricultural use through better drainage, water management, and sea defences.

Yesterday I was relieved to learn from this programme's expert witness on landslips in the Brecon Beacons indicating climate change that landslips are the "canary in the mine" and the canary is "singing loudly" at the moment. That is a relief, so no undue landslips then. The canary in the mine did not sing but passed out if dangerous carbon monoxide gas was present. How do the BBC find such well informed experts?

What use will you make of the railway?

I have been in discussions with the rail industry and Ministers over the future of the railway.

In order to define a post Covid role and to regain lost market share the railway needs to understand what many people think about railways. When people are considering how to carry out a journey they will consider the time it takes, the cost it incurs, and wider issues of convenience and comfort. They are interested in their door to door journey, not just the part of the journey they could do by train.

The pre Covid railway depended on commuters for a lot of its passenger revenue. Off peak leisure travel was often on heavily discounted tickets, and often with trains that were not full. As many office based businesses examine hybrid working with more done at home on digital systems and less in the office both the numbers using the trains and the fares they are prepared to

pay are likely to come down substantially. People will want flexible season tickets that allow a wide choice over days and times of travel. Correct pricing probably by a system of rising discounts as people travel more will also be more popular if the part time commuter can also have some journeys off peak, which could also help the railway company when planning capacity provision.

At the core of the new railway should be freight. Most people in the country would like to see more freight on the trains and fewer large foreign trucks on the motorways. To make this practical there needs to be keener pricing and better service from rail. Time was when the large industrial estates were crossed by branch lines linking them to the main rail network, with single waggon marshalling to allow use by smaller factories as well as by the trainload users. Today most industrial parks boast good motorway or trunk road access instead. In its later years before privatisation BR was not interested in single waggon traffic but majored on oil, cement, aggregates, bricks, cars and the other large scale trainload customers. The rail industry needs to put in more access to industrial parks, more marshalling yards and state of the art freight control and surveillance systems. Sealed freight containers on trains could assist with streamlining border checks and controls.

The railways have a disadvantage in not in many cases being able to do door to door, so they need easy transfer of containers from rail waggon to truck tractor unit for end delivery. They should have big advantages on fuel and driver costs with low friction transit and far bigger loads per driver. These advantages increase the longer the total journey distance.

There remains the issue of what social and leisure use will people want to make of the railway? Should that be subsidised and if so by how much? Can the railway do more by way of specials to events to take congestion and parking strain away from Concerts, football and the rest? What use do you want to make of the railway?