

Farming and the environment

I am all in favour of defending our landscapes, keeping our water and air clean and being kind to animals. Conservatives believe in conserving what is best in the natural world and working with the grain of Human nature and the environment.

I am in favour of reducing the pressures of development on our green fields and woods by having a more sustainable level of migration than we were allowed by the EU free movement rules. People who do come to live here should be welcomed and have access to decent housing and services. There are limits to how much extra can be supplied.

There are some who wish to re wild large areas. I do not think we have the same obligation to wolves or wild boar or wild cats as yet unborn as we do to allow space and food for all the birds and animals who currently share our land. When we seek places for wild flowers and shrubs we should balance that with the need to grow more of our own food. A field of corn or a pasture of sheep can look beautiful and is as much a part of the natural world as some newly created wild space.

We need to avoid policies which destroy livelihoods and land important to people's lives. The drowning of the Somerset levels was destroying homes and farmland in some strange experiment. The same was not tried in the Fens where they still dredged the ditches and manned the pumps to preserve England's most productive growing land. Why was the Somerset levels selected for different treatment? We also need to defend land subject to attack from the sea where it has been settled and matters to people's lives and livelihoods. In selective places we should consider as the Dutch do reclaiming land we could use for farms or dwellings.

I will continue to press DEFRA for their policies to promote food production. They seem keener on wilding when we need a proper balance.

Not enough growth

The OBR who got their last year deficit forecast wrong by £91bn estimate that 2023-2025 will see economic growth settle down to 1.7%, 1.6% and 1.7% a year. They assume migration continues with the population expanding by 0.3% a year, a bit down on pre pandemic and pre Brexit levels, to give per capita growth of around just 1.4% a year for the 3 years. These figures are disappointingly low.

It could be that they are simply more forecasting errors. After all they underestimated GDP last year and are usually on the pessimistic side. Or it

could be that they expect the Treasury to carry on following austerity, EU alignment and state debt driven policies for the next five years which would deliver similar low levels of growth to our years in the single market under the Maastricht economic rules which drove the Osborne/Hammond debt and deficit austerity policies.

The government should challenge these assumptions and work out a growth strategy to improve these forecasts. We need to put behind us the years of dependence when the UK willingly signed up to rules and systems which exported more and more of our industrial output to continental factories, made us more and more dependent on EU imported food, power and much else besides and left important parts of our economy smaller as a result.

It is high time the Treasury set itself the task of making a good improvement over the UK's performance of the last 28 years in the single market. We now have the freedoms to do better if only we will use them.

Tomorrow on Conservative Home I will set out a possible new framework for UK economic policy in response to the government statement that it is looking to change the rules governing economic management.

Lots of borrowing, but well below forecast

I sympathise with the official forecasters at a time of big change in the economy, with a large fall in output and incomes stemming from the measures to curb the pandemic. Getting forecasts right when the economy is falling further and faster when the measures go in and recovering faster and more when they are removed than in previous cycles makes it difficult to get the numbers right. I have had less sympathy with the undue gloom the OBR put into their November 2020 and March 2021 forecasts, and said at both times I thought they were exaggerating the deficit. So it has proved.

In November they forecast a deficit of £394 bn for 2020-21. In March this year forecasting the year to end March which had almost ended, they said the deficit would be £354bn, a £40bn fall in four months. Yesterday they announced the provisional outturn at £303bn, £51 bn down on a few weeks ago and £91bn down on November. They point out they were thinking in March of £27bn of losses on loans which have not yet materialised and would not be a new demand for cash or borrowing anyway. Even taking this out it still leaves the forecasts way too gloomy. They underestimated the amount of tax revenue collected, and overestimated state spending.

I am raising this again because it will have knock on effects on future years. The £51bn revision downwards to the estimated deficit between this March and April is twice as much as the government now thinks it needs to add to tax revenue in 2024-5 to control the deficit. Could it be that those

future years forecasts are also wrong? Might they be too pessimistic, so how necessary is the extra tax? I have other issues with the future tax policy over how you do secure more revenue and what the role of growth is in meeting the state's requirements. Even in their own terms, however, the OBR should examine the possibility that they have been too pessimistic for future years, and consider the need for some caution in drawing early policy conclusions for future years from forecast numbers which have recently proved so unreliable. Did they urge a needless or undesirable tax rise?

Justice for Post Office managers

I was pleased to learn that at last the Post Office accepts its accounting software was faulty and led to wrongful accusations and cases against Post Office managers. Various MPs took up these matters without success, as in this 2014 debate to highlight the problem:

Post Office Mediation Scheme, 17 December 2014

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for leading on this issue and for bravely taking the case of many people in the postal sector to the management. From his discussions with the senior management of the Post Office, is there any sign that it now recognises that it made mistakes? Is there any willingness on its part to recognise that at least some of those people are completely innocent and deserve an apology and compensation for the way that their lives and businesses have been wrecked?

Mr Arbuthnot: That is a very difficult question to answer, because the Post Office pleads secrecy. It will not tell us what is happening in the mediation scheme. We asked in July how the mediation scheme was going, but it refused to tell Members of Parliament because it was all confidential.

More lobbyists discovered gaining access to Ministers

I have to reveal today that there are around 250 privileged lobbyists nestling at Westminster who do not get enough scrutiny. These talented individuals have managed to organise themselves passes to the Palace of Westminster. They use their passes to loiter and linger around the corridors to get the opportunity of direct private exchanges with Ministers, to propose their

plans and causes without officials present.

They even get access to some meetings where Ministers brief them and take their questions in closed sessions.

They often work with private sector companies, trade unions and charities to help them make their case and make it look better based and respectable.

They themselves receive public money, and seek to raise other money to back their campaigns.

Their latest campaign is particularly clever. It is a campaign to stop other lobbyists from access, presumably to enhance their own special access and to cut down lobby competition.

I refer of course to the 250 Opposition MPs who are on the taxpayer payroll and can lobby for much of their active day. If Ministers stopped listening to lobbying I suspect they would have some sharp words to say. Parliament is a system partly for organised lobbying for causes MPs and their constituents back. There is no reason why others cannot see or write to Ministers. There is nothing wrong with charities, Trade Unions and businesses lobbying for policies that help them. That will be obvious and declared when they make their case.

Of course Ministers need to treat all representations properly, and avoid any conflict or avoid acting where they are themselves party to a lobbyists cause or profit.