

Another bad algorithm

On Wednesday the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local government listened to concerns from MPs in private at a meeting. Yesterday he listened in public to more of those concerns in a Parliamentary debate.

I have put my issues with his Planning proposals to him on several occasions now. I think planning needs to have three principles at its heart. The first is planning solutions should allow local communities and their Councils to shape the built landscape they live in and preside over. The second is levelling up is an important and popular policy. That means diverting more of the large investment in new housing to the parts of the country that welcome more investment and need to attract more talented people to their communities who may well want to be buy a new home as part of the attraction. The third is the promotion of home ownership, which is going to be easier to do in parts of the country with lower house prices and most difficult in affluent communities with highly priced land.

The government proposal genuflects to the first principle and says it wants local communities and Councils to have their say, but that is overridden by the algorithm which decides in advance how many extra homes a place will have whether they want them or not.

The second principle and policy aim is not only overridden but overturned by the algorithm. By making high prices of homes the main determinant of where to put new ones it guarantees increasing the build of homes and the investment and jobs that goes with it in the most affluent places, and starves the places that want more jobs and investment by actually reducing the numbers of homes built there to below the current level.

The third principle is also thwarted by the algorithm, ensuring new homes will remain expensive.

Instead if there is to be the other reforms of planning the government wants, we need an algorithm or a way of calculating how many homes based on the reverse principles. It should offer more new home investment where house prices are low, where there is a shortage of good new family and executive homes, and should be linked to a community and Council which it says it buys into levelling up and welcomes new talent to come to the new homes.

Areas like Wokingham have attracted disproportionate amounts of the talent and well qualified people through the building of large new estates of executive and family homes. It is time to share this growth and prosperity more widely. We should not reinforce the growth by the planning system in the most successful areas, but copy the success elsewhere. This rogue algorithm will do the opposite of levelling up.

Lock down rules

I was working with a group of MPs led by Sir Graham Brady to secure debates and votes on the Rule of 6 and the 10pm curfew, which the government conceded. Both votes were to be held this week.

Following my consultation on the Rule of 6, and following discussions with other MPs, it seemed best to vote against the Curfew measures. These do more economic damage than the rule of 6, and are opposed by the Opposition giving us a real opportunity to win the vote. The Rule of 6 was not opposed by the Opposition.

The consultation showed a predictable split of opinion, with some favouring laws and strong guidance over conduct to try to control the spread of the virus, and some wanting the controls removed to allow people to make their own decisions.

I did not vote for the Rule of 6, wanting to see more evidence of how it would reduce the spread. Many people think, for example, that it should be amended to exclude young children. Yesterday we did not get a vote on the curfew which I wished to oppose. The government is presumably thinking again about the wisdom of this measure. It needs to bring this for ratification or defeat soon. Many think forcing people out onto the streets all at the same time at 10pm, with knock on effects on pavements and public transport in busy locations, is not a good idea. It can also transfer drinking from pubs to private homes which may not be as well set up to limit the spread of any airborne disease.

The Rule of 6 passed by 287 to 17 with most of the Opposition abstaining but not against the measure in principle. If all the Opposition join Conservative opponents of the curfew it should be defeated. It is interesting that the Rule of 6 did not command a majority of the possible votes in the Commons.

New borders and migration policy for EU

The Home Secretary has announced that she plans legislation in the UK to ensure more people traffickers can be caught or prevented from exploiting people by taking money to help them break the law. She also has made clear that this legislation will also allow the removal of illegals who do not qualify for asylum in a timely way, after their case has been considered.

Meanwhile the EU is acknowledging that its migration policy "no longer works". The Commission has set out how Member states reject 370,000 asylum

claims a year, but only return one third of these people to the states they came from. It chronicles how there were 1.8 million illegal crossings of the EU border in 2015, falling to 142,000 last year. It proposes a changed law to replace the Dublin convention, which states that each asylum seeker should apply for asylum in the first member state they enter. This has widely been seen as unfair on Italy, Spain and Greece who receive the bulk of the illegal arrivals and the asylum seekers.

The new scheme they want will entail a common migration policy with a solidarity requirement that all Member states contribute to housing those who qualify to stay, and help secure the return of those who do not. "The new Solidarity mechanism will primarily focus on relocation or return sponsorship. Member states would supply all necessary support to the Member State under pressure to swiftly return those who have no right to stay, with the supporting Member State taking full responsibility if return is not carried out within a set period. Member states can concentrate on nationalities where they see a better chance of effecting returns."

The EU has very long borders, with difficult policing problems. They also now have substantial areas that are fenced to try to close off land routes. They propose the appointment of a senior person as Return Co-ordinator and a "High Level Network for returns". Frontex, their border force, is to be expanded to "a standing corps with a capacity of 10,000 staff " which "remains essential". All illegals seeking to enter will be "health checked, finger printed and registered on the Eurodac database.

It is interesting to see how the EU is now trying to exert control over illegal migrants, and reminds us it is a much more difficult problem for the EU with massive borders including land borders, than for the islands of the UK.

Poor car sales

The attack on diesel and petrol cars continues to work. Sales were down in September on last year and well down for 2020 so far thanks to the CV19 effects as well. Battery electric vehicle sales grew, but are still only 6.7% of the total reduced sales. Various types of hybrid are being bought, but are often driven as normal petrol or diesel cars.

Taking back control

There are two ways from here to take back control properly from the EU on 1 January. The first is to do so by an Agreement about our future relationship. This would not only include a Free Trade Area but would also end the residual jurisdiction of the ECJ , end the payments to the EU and end any further ability of the EU to tie us to their laws.

The second is to leave without an Agreement and pass a short confirming Act of Parliament removing the remaining powers of the EU. This would build on the essential assertion of Parliamentary sovereignty in Clause 38 of the Withdrawal Agreement Act, confirming the notwithstanding clause over all residual matters.

I assume given the view of the EU it will need to be the latter. Far from undermining our standing in the world such an Act would be seen as a sign of strength by the UK, clearly setting out our independence. As the Supreme Court and the Commons has confirmed, the UK Parliament can make these laws and lead our country in the way required by the referendum decision.