

Bridge Farm

I was asked about possible delays in Environment Agency representations on this planning application. Wokingham Borough tells me the EA has submitted their objections to the proposal so there is no delay to chase up.

The Irish border issue

Eurosceptics do not see there is a problem with the land border between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. As the government has made clear, the UK will not be imposing new barriers or complex new checks at the border once we leave.

The present border is already a complex border. It is a VAT border and Excise border. Trucks do not have to wait at the border while someone in a kiosk works out the VAT owing. It is all done electronically away from the border. States are good at knocking tax off business accounts without needing to collect fivers when the truck arrives. It is a currency border. Again the currency calculations and exchanges occur well away from the transit point. It is an anti terrorist border, which works by mutual co-operation on both sides. The day after we leave arrangements to control smuggling and to intercept criminals will be the same as today. The UK and the Republic of Ireland have confirmed that the long standing Travel Area between our two countries will continue, avoiding the need for extra checks on people crossing.

The UK will continue to inspect food products after we leave as before. The EU authorities will presumably continue to check and certify the products they are sending for export without needing a check at their border, and the UK will continue to regulate wholesalers and retailers with inspections and spot checks on their facilities and product as required, all away from the border. UK retailers will continue to be under a legal duty of care to ensure anything they import from the EU is safe food.

So why is there an issue? The Republic of Ireland and the EU say there may be an issue because they are concerned about "the integrity of the single market". It reminds us that the single market was never a free trade area, but a heavily protected system ring fenced with tariffs and dependent on detailed product specification and regulation. Anyone inside the EU or outside the EU has to comply with all aspects of the rules and tax requirements in order to sell into this market. Once out the UK as other third countries like the USA and China will have to comply with all the rules on goods exported to the EU, just as we do today. The difference will be that we can adopt different standards if we wish to for other overseas markets and for our domestic market. We may design better ones or we may need to adopt

different standards for export product elsewhere. More importantly we will no longer be expected to pay large sums for the privilege of being inside this single market and we will be free to cut tariffs to buy cheaper goods from non EU countries if we wish.

The issue of the Irish border is therefore one for the EU, not for the UK. The question to them is what new checks if any will they impose on the Republic of Ireland border on their exports to the UK and their imports from the UK? Any checks they wish to impose on UK exports will of course have to be proportionate and appropriate under WTO rules. They also cannot impose checks against UK exports that they do not impose against exports from anywhere else in the world. The EU says it understands the history of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That means they will not wish to impose new barriers and difficult checks at the border. There are many crossing points, and like all such land borders smuggling is possible over fields and farms as well as along rural roads. There is smuggling today and there will be smuggling after Brexit. Authorities on both sides of the border have an interest in controlling and prosecuting smugglers, and do so today by intelligence led co-operation. The same is the best answer once the UK has left the EU.

The border issue is of course mainly a political issue designed to make it difficult or impossible for the UK to leave the single market and customs union. It only achieves this end if the UK accepts the faulty premise, that new barriers are needed at the border if we just leave. The UK government has stated clearly it does not think that. The EU also likes to claim there is no technology answer to this conundrum. They should remind themselves that their borders today work with much help from electronic manifests, off border settlement of taxes and dues, a low number of sampling checks at borders, checks at the factory or farm originating the product or at the wholesaler or retailer receiving the product, TIR transport systems and the rest. Computers and the internet offer plenty of ways of having smooth borders, reflected in the Facilitation of Trade rules of the WTO. The UK imports quite easily from non EU sources today despite EU rules and controls affecting such imports.

HS2 under review

I would be interested to hear from people about whether HS2 should proceed, be cancelled or built from the North first, leaving open the question of improvements into London.

I voted against HS2 when Parliament made the original decision and set out then the problems I saw with high costs, possible cost escalation, and optimistic revenue forecasts. Following the Mrs May review I accepted that government and Parliament want to build it, but now there is another government review after further large cost escalation.

Collapse of Italian government

The decision of the Italian Prime Minister to resign rather than face a Confidence vote brings to an end a curious government experiment. 2 populist parties with very different programmes and outlooks tried to govern together. Both found the restrictions of the EU budget rules and Euro scheme difficult to live with. Lega were keen to cut taxes and 5 Star wanted to introduce a more generous basic income payment by the state. The PM, not elected for either governing party, sought to keep the government more in line with EU requirements and tried to keep co-operation between the two leaders of the two main parties in the coalition against a background of disagreements. Meanwhile the Italian economy stagnated, and fell into a shallow recession for the second half of last year.

There will be efforts for the pro EU New Democracy party to ally in government with 5 Star to avoid an election both of them might do badly in. They might be able to establish a temporary government. It would have to pass a budget that appears compliant with EU rules. If they do this Lega will look for any way to bring on an early election which they think would give them more seats and more clout in the Parliament.

They will be looking to the new EU Commission to see if there is any scope to relax the current tight settlements, given the wish of many in Italy to spend more and be taxed less. They will also be hoping the new President of the European Central Bank follows an even more accommodating policy, and will expect Italy to continue as the number one borrower from that Bank under the Target 2 balances arrangements.

Italy is an interesting test of whether populist parties can govern in any way in the Euro area that keeps faith with what their electors want and what they promised. The Lega/5 Star coalition compromised with the EU to avoid a worse conflict in ways which prevented the implementation of much of their respective economic and financial programmes. Mr Salvini of Lega is hoping to bring about an election which he thinks he can win, when he would doubtless be less willing to compromise. This in turn raises bigger questions of Italian electors. Would they trust a committed populist government to challenge these EU orthodoxies? How far would they let such a government take their demands? When Syriza in Greece tried it they ended up backing down. Greece is a much smaller country that does not have the same weight as Italy financially and economically, so we would be in uncharted territory. Italy owes large sums to the ECB, which is Germany's problem as well as they have lent most of it.

All eyes on the Fed

This Friday at Jackson Hole Jerome Powell, Chairman of the Fed, will make a most important speech. The financial markets are expecting confirmation that there will be further interest rate cuts from the USA to promote faster growth and a weaker dollar. The self same market commentators that claim not to like Mr Trump very much nonetheless back the President's often repeated mantra that the Fed is holding up growth and more jobs and needs to cut rates by at least 1%, almost halving them.

Others point out that the US economy is growing much faster than the European or Japanese economies already, that money growth is strong, job numbers are increasing and real pay rising. They worry that further rate cuts could fuel an inflation after a decade of no serious inflationary pressures.

The Fed did it get badly wrong at the end of last year, when it was threatening major rate rises at a time when the world economy was slowing and markets were worried that slowdown could become recession. Jerome Powell backed off then, and reversed policy, promising not to raise rates. He went on to cut them. Now he needs to set out a new theory of how the Fed will set rates in future, to avoid the problems the current system created in 2018. The data on the economy suggests there is less need for rate cuts than many commentators suggest.

The Bank of England needs to study the work being done by the Fed as they seek a new consensus on how to run their monetary policy. UK money policy has not this year assisted the economy, being very tight at a time when the world and UK economies are slowing. The Bank has not followed either the Fed or the ECB in trying to offset some of the slowdown with monetary easing. China has now announced some more easing, alongside rate cuts from Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Brazil, the USA, Indonesia, Turkey, Thailand and others in recent weeks.