

## A better railway

The current railway is effectively a nationalised industry. Its main assets the tracks, stations and signalling system are all in public ownership. The train companies are heavily regulated and have to conform to timetables agreed by government and constrained by what track capacity the nationalised business cares to make available. One of the results of public ownership is a restrictive and unhelpful approach to managing railway property.

It is true that at last the industry has got round to transforming some of the large London stations with retail and service improvements, and to one or two of the prize City properties outside London like Birmingham New Street. Meanwhile much of the rest of the network fails to exploit the obvious opportunities to redevelop station properties to create proper transport interchanges with bus, taxi and private vehicles, and fails to develop the retail and service opportunities. Worse than the failure to initiate, the railway often blocks, delays or prices out suggestions from others to improve or develop general railway property anywhere on the extensive estate.

As a train traveller I often look out on a bleak landscape of disused sidings, weed strewn derelict property, surplus land, under developed and old stations. The railway itself is one of the main barriers to a better road system requiring expensive bridges to get roads across. Too many level crossings present a safety issue to the railway as well as creating big delays for road traffic. Better investment schemes could include more bridges to get traffic safely over the lines. In Wokingham the railway blocked my proposals for a new station using private money funded by some private development of retail and café facilities on public land, only for them eventually to give into pressure to build a new station, using public money without much increase in service.

Harnessing more private capital and re uniting track and trains would assist in creating a more positive atmosphere for station and property development. Kings Cross and St Pancras show what can be done on a grand scale when private sector services are allowed to flourish alongside the train service. Much more could be done elsewhere.

The railway review also needs to consider how ticketing and ticket pricing could be improved. The multiplicity of tickets from conventional paper through printed out pieces of paper to electronic tickets on smart phones can cause delays and complications getting through automatic ticket barriers. The range of prices turns buying a ticket into a kind of lottery, where you could pay anything from a low price bargain to a very high price penalty style fare depending on time of day, route and timing of your purchase of the ticket. There is little flexibility so if on the day you wish to travel by a different train your surcharge for switching can be disproportionate even where you are switching to a relatively empty alternative train. The heavily discounted bargain tickets bought in advance for non peak travel cannot represent a good deal for the train operator, whilst the penal high fares for a peak period journey bought the same day is certainly not value for the

passenger. The fare structure is an assault course for the unwary, with great complexity leading to difficulties or discouraging potential passengers.

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## Letter to Brexit Secretary about the Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB)

Dear Stephen

I understand the government is considering putting the Withdrawal Agreement Bill to the Commons for a vote on the principles of the Bill following a Second Reading debate. Indeed we were all told to be ready to answer a 3 line whip for this purpose on Thursday, only for this to be postponed.

I understand this is a long and complex piece of constitutional legislation which will require careful study by all those asked to improve or approve it. I would therefore urge you again to publish this Bill as soon as possible so MPs can have an intelligent debate about what it is seeking to do and how it might try to do that. Why the delay in releasing a piece of legislation for scrutiny which the government claims is so important. It must have been drafted for some time, as the draft Agreement it seeks to implement has been settled for many weeks and is not subject to renegotiation according to both the government and the EU.

The legislation presumably seeks to repeal much of the EU Withdrawal Act and will reintroduce the European Communities Act 1972 into the UK constitution to restore all EU powers for a flexible and long transitional period and maybe beyond that. It needs to make provision for the substantial sums of money the draft Agreement commits the UK to pay and for the imposition of new EU law upon the UK. It needs to confirm the powers of the Joint Committee and European Court of Justice in making important decisions about our future government and resolving disputes between the UK and the EU. These are all weighty matters which warrant proper consideration by MPs before any debate and vote on them.

The Bill could be more accurately called the "Delay our exit from the EU " Bill, or " The Reimposition of EU powers "Bill given the requirements of the draft Withdrawal Treaty. The Bill itself would of course need to conform precisely with the Treaty, as the Treaty will be binding in European law anyway.

Yours ever

John

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## Earley St Peter's 175th anniversary

I was invited to St Peter's Church Earley on Sunday afternoon. The local clergy and the Bishop of Oxford led a service of thanksgiving and commemoration of 175 years of community involvement by the Church. Quite early in its life it helped launch the popular St Peter's School next door. Pupils were present at the service and sang to the congregation.

I thank all involved in organising an excellent service and tea party, and am grateful to the Church and its helpers for all they do for the local community.

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## What answer should the Attorney have sent to my letter about the draft treaty?

When I sent my letter I was still hoping to persuade the government to announce it could not get its Withdrawal Agreement through and to process to the free trade WTO exit route. A good answer would have been along these lines:

Dear John

You are right that in order to try to get an Agreement with the EU the UK did make various compromises. It also asked for an extension to our membership for a 21 month or two year period which came at a price over money and powers. The government thought this the best answer, but it is now clear people and Parliament do not agree.

We are therefore now looking at an expedited exit from the EU without signing the Withdrawal Agreement. We will be tabling a comprehensive free trade proposal, which the EU Commission has indicated it will consider.

Yours etc

I also thought I might get a whitewash brush off letter:

Dear John

Thank you for your letter. Whilst we do not agree with your interpretation of what might happen were we to sign the EU Withdrawal Treaty, I acknowledge as

you mainly point out that in the transition period the UK will continue to make budgetary payments and observe EU laws. This seems to the government to be entirely fair and to give the UK more time to adjust to exit. I do not accept we will necessarily be in transition for almost four more years, nor accept that we will have to stay in the customs union indefinitely owing to the backstop provision. The powers and charges that last beyond transition are proportionate and reasonable.

You need to accept that compromises have to be made and this was the best deal the UK government was able to negotiate.

Yours etc

The argument over which of two Ministers might reply indicates to me a certain unhappiness about having to deal with the individual points highlighted in the letter, and a recognition that the draft treaty does indeed keep the UK under the full control of the EU for at least 21 more months and maybe much longer depending on how things work out. It is on any reading a Stay in not a leave agreement. The argument is over how long it might last and what it does to any eventual leaving, given the way it removes many of the UK's best bargaining levers. The backstop threatens permanent customs membership and other clauses have an impact well beyond the next 21 months. It does not unequivocally let us leave at any future date, and binds us in to more EU controls and bills without vote or voice to protest. Under it you can be sure we are locked in on bad terms for an unspecified period, with no easy way out and under huge pressure to sacrifice yet more to try to get out.

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## [The latest opinion polls](#)

Looking at the latest European election polls, I am urging the Conservative government to change its approach to our exit from the EU.

A large majority of the public do not see the Withdrawal Agreement as a good deal for the UK, or as Brexit. It unites Remain and Leave voters in opposition.

It is urgent not just for the Conservative party but for our country that either Mrs May accepts the Agreement cannot proceed, or a new PM takes over who starts by telling the EU the Agreement is unacceptable. The Conservative-Labour talks as predicted are not helping either party. We need to leave now, responding positively to the EU offer of talks on a free trade agreement. We should not be holding these European elections as we do not want to have another 5 years as members of the EU. The 2017 Conservative Manifesto was right to say No deal is better than a bad deal, and to propose exit on 29 March 2019.