

Green policies and producing food

Defra is keen that our new farming policy should be ultra green. If that means we value and look after our fields and farmland, and protect our forests and wild areas, I am all in favour. The good news is we can do that at the same time as expanding the food we produce and meeting more of our own food needs.

I trust the Defra Secretary will take on board from his current consultations a strong feeling in the rural community that we need a farming policy that puts food production into a more central role than it achieved during the years of the Common Agricultural Policy. There are good environmental reasons to cut down the food miles, as well as good economic reasons why it would be better to cut the balance of payments deficit.

Over the last winter I was pleased to find I could largely rely on home produce. There were good home grown potatoes, carrots, cauliflowers, leeks and onions available most of the time. For much of the winter there were excellent English coxes and varieties of pears. More recently I have turned to New Zealand for their fruit when English has not been available.

It was difficult to find oranges from anywhere other than Spain thanks to EU tariffs, though some citrus fruits from Israel, North Africa and South Africa did find their way to UK supermarkets. A new agriculture and tariff policy after we leave could be a big boost for our farms and a bonus for our consumers.

M4 improvement plans

Highways England came to see me to explain their plans to widen the M4 out to Junction 12 under their so called Smart Motorway project.

The aim is to provide a 33% increase in capacity by making a 3 lane a side highway into a 4 lane one. There need to be bridge works, new emergency reservations have to be constructed, a new central barrier installed, and new sensors and signs to regulate traffic flows and speeds.

Most of the work will take place at night. The motorway will be tackled in sections, starting in the west. Whilst works are underway on a section there will be 50mph narrower lane operation for traffic, with closures overnight when needed.

Works will start later this year, with completion of the whole motorway J 3 to J12 by March 2022

I stressed the importance of putting in the promised new noise barriers and noise reducing surfaces for the road.

I also stressed the need to keep the motorway flowing as freely as possible during the works, as this motorway is crucial to constituents travel plans and daily lives.

Should we limit everyone's bread as well as water?

I could scarce believe my ears when I heard there is talk of a limit being placed on how much water each one of us should be invited to use. Water is the staff of life. It is difficult to predict how much water you need for cleaning or cooking. I thought it was agreed that as water is so fundamental special care is taken to ensure we all have access to a good supply in our homes and places of work.

No-one argues that with strong growth in our population we could run out of bread in a few years time. They do not point out that baking more bread and putting in more ovens will entail burning more fuel and creating more emissions. They do not advocate a bread allowance, to ensure we control the total and at the same time allow fair shares for all.

We do not do so for a very good reason. The market can take care of future demand. There is no need to interrupt individual choice. I do not eat a loaf of bread at the expense of my neighbour. There are enough loaves at affordable prices for both of us. Bread supply expands to fill the shopping baskets available.

The same should be true of water. Water is a resource in massive supply. Much of the surface area of our planet is taken up by huge quantities of water. You do not destroy the water by using it, but return it to the water cycle after use for reuse. It is the ultimate renewable. If we allowed full competition to supply domestic water as we now allow for commercial water, supply would expand to meet the demand. Let's do just that.

Water is a good growth product. Let's clean, store and use more of it. If we need an additional reservoir, put it in. If mending leaking pipes is cheaper, do that. There is no need to ration.

Aircraft noise

I recently held a meeting with the Aviation Minister to encourage the government to do more to reduce aircraft noise over the Wokingham constituency.

I reminded the Minister that the changes NATs put through in 2014 concentrating more flights in a narrow Compton Gate without consultation or discussion increased flight noise over the constituency. It has led to many more complaints.

I asked for progress on

1. Flying higher for longer on approach to or departure from Heathrow
2. More encouragement of quieter aircraft
3. More dispersion of routes as before the changes
4. Ending the stack of aircraft, with more linear descents and regulation of flying speeds when distant from the UK to allow direct landing
5. More restrictions on early and late flights

The Minister explained that there are changes underway, with consultation, on how to manage the airspace going forwards. She promised to come back to me on consideration of these and the other points I made at the meeting.

Clean air

I'm all in favour of clean air. The Clean Air Acts which removed the smogs from London and our leading industrial cities were great acts of progress. They did not damage our economy, whilst improving the quality of life and saving our lungs.

Today more can be done. Particulate matter in the air can be unpleasant. It comes from domestic and commercial heating systems, from transport, from power generation and from some industrial processes. Progressively higher standards of pollution control can clean our air more.

There has been a tendency in the UK debate to concentrate on the impact of the car and lorry, and to minimise or ignore the role of other sources. It is true there has been quite strenuous efforts to clean the output from factory chimneys. There has been a strong move away from open fires and coal and coke burning boilers. Their replacement with oil or gas systems has lowered the output of hazardous waste. There has been less concentration on the particulates coming from diesel buses and trains.

The government will be long on words and targets, but more careful on

proposing changes to the way individuals live. You cannot suddenly demand that everyone replaces their domestic boiler or scraps their coal or wood burning devices. Effecting change in the hearths and boiler cupboards of the nation's homes requires patient progress and incentives to encourage voluntary change. Requiring people to burn less harmful fuel in solid fuel devices would be possible. Banning bonfires is part of modern life.

The state should look to its own. There are still cities where bus fumes and particulate matter from the exhaust are an important part of the problem on the streets, especially near bus stops . There are stations where waiting trains keep their diesel engines running, with smoke and particulates circulating in high concentrations by the platforms. There are many public buildings with inefficient and dirty heating systems. Improvement and change in these areas would be the most positive way the government could lead this change.