

Money for Wokingham schools

I have been pressing for more cash for local schools. I have argued for a better national formula, and for more money for schools in total. I am still pressing for further improvement as I am well aware that schools would like more money.

I have just received the latest figures from Wokingham Borough Council comparing schools budgets for 2018/19 with their budgets for 2017/18. These budgets are still locally determined, though clearly national financial provision is an important determinant as it settled the totals for local schools.

The figures are for Wokingham Borough as a whole, so they stretch beyond just my constituency. They show that in total the schools budgets for 2017/18 of £94.45 m have gone up by 4.5% or £4.291 to a total for 2018/19 of £98.742 m. This is a useful increase. I am urging the government to provide further increases next year. I want more from a better national formula which gives relatively more to schools in areas like Wokingham which tend to be at the lower end of the national tables for cash. I am also seeking an increase in the general national totals for English schools.

The local distribution of the money by school does leave a few schools with less cash. This is because they have experienced a substantial loss of pupils. As a large part of the money is provided as a per pupil payment to cover individual pupil costs of teaching and provision, loss of pupils clearly does result in less grant. Bohunt is the school that gets the largest increase to reflect its rapid growth.

Shopping and parking

There seems to be virtual unanimity on this site that high charges for parking, and difficulty in parking in or near Town Centres is an important contributory cause to the decline in use of High Street shops. It is true that out of town centres and retail parks with plenty of free parking near to the shops have a distinct advantage, as does the internet. I will have another go at making this case as part of the debate on how to revive or improve town centres.

Solving the Irish border

The EU has long decided to use the Irish border issue as one to try to force the UK to stay in the Customs Union, keep all EU rules and make the exit payment they want which is not a legal requirement on the UK. It is most important that the UK civil service negotiators understand this is a silly ruse, and robustly put the alternative case. Let me remind them what it is.

The border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, part of the UK, is already a complex one. It is a currency, VAT, Excise and criminal law jurisdiction border. This means there are already so called hard border arrangements to ensure any goods moving across the border pay the right amount of VAT to the right authorities, and pay the relevant Excise duties. There are anti smuggling systems in place as there is obviously current scope to exploit differences of VAT and Excise by criminals. There are ways of handling movement of criminals across the frontier, and electronic systems for trade through TIR, registered economic operators and the rest.

If we also need to levy customs duties when we leave because the EU refuses the UK offer of tariff free trade, so be it. The same methods used for Vat and Excise can be used for the customs levies. It can be done electronically away from the border as it is today.

Before we entered the EU we had a free travel area with the Republic and all involved in the negotiations wish this to continue, so it is difficult to see new problems concerning movement of people. When the UK legislates its new borders system for movement of people it is likely to seek to reduce migrant numbers into the UK by changing benefit rules and requiring work permits, not by imposing new controls at the frontier. We already have external border checks on illegals and on criminals seeking to cross. We will continue to welcome as many tourists, visitors and people who pay their own bills who wish to come.

I trust the UK will give a robust defence of this approach and demonstrate that the Irish border is a put up job by the EU to push us back into conformity.

Retail growth and shop distress

In the USA and in the UK there has been great growth in internet retailing, overall growth in retail sales, and some hard knocks for some traditional retailers. In the US levels of distressed debt for retail companies, and the rate of bankruptcies is high against a background of an expanding economy and growing disposable incomes. In the UK too there have been some recent casualties, traditional High Street shop sales overall are disappointing,

and internet sales are growing well.

Some say the playing field is not level. The traditional retailers of course need shop property and plenty of in store staff which the web retailers do not need. That is their choice, and they are trying to persuade shoppers that works for them as well. It also means they have to pay more tax, incurring substantial property taxes on top of their additional cost base. Critics of the success stories of the digital age often allege the main companies do not pay a high enough tax charge.

The EU is saying it wants to make internet shopping dearer by imposing a turnover tax on digital companies on top of other taxes. Some say the internet companies need to pay some additional levy to allow for the property taxes they do not have to pay because they are on a different business model. Some traditional shop groups would just like some rate relief, to make it a bit easier for them.

I am inviting contributors to say what they think should be done, if anything? Is it just a case that the internet model has many attractions which will continue to win market share? Why do some large shopping centres attract more footfall than High Streets? What is the role of parking charges, access and the attitude of local government in settling which types of shops and shopping are popular, and which are in retreat?

Syria in perspective

Many people in the country agreed with the Prime Minister when she said she had no plans to involve the UK in the Syrian civil war. We also agreed with her achieved aim of not adding to the death toll by the limited and targeted military intervention she authorised.

It would be wrong for us to seek to engage in the civil war at this late stage when Assad supported by Russia is close to victory. No clear Opposition force has emerged that could displace the current regime by force and then go on to establish a decent democratic government in its place. Arming rebels and offering them military support against Assad would pitch us against Russia as well, add to the length and violence of the war and offer little prospect of a good result.

The truth is President Obama decided to leave the Syrian crisis to Assad and Russia. If the West had wanted regime change in Syria as they tried elsewhere then it should have been done years ago. Russia has occupied the space the West left, and now has a strong military presence there in its own right and as advisers and supporters of the substantial conventional forces of the Syrian government. The West's more recent interventions have been air based engagements against the forces of ISIS, which Assad is also fighting intensely on the ground along with Russian help. The West makes sure Russia

knows what they are doing to avoid a clash.

The West wishes to enforce the world ban on the use of chemical weapons. Mr Trump has led short targeted strikes against chemical weapons use on two occasions following particularly bad atrocities with their use, but otherwise has confined US action to a supportive role against ISIS. It is true he has also worked with the Kurds, which is a difficult complication in the north of Syria. The Kurds want an independent state. Neither Turkey nor Assad's Syria wishes to give them independent territory and self government, and both see them as enemies.

The recent strikes were against just three installations connected with chemical weapon production and use. There are more such facilities which were not attacked. The UK government argues that it has helped "degrade" the chemical weapons ability of Assad, without ending it. It also argues that the use of "appropriate" levels of force against some of these chemical weapons facilities should act as a deterrent against their future use, as of course the Western Coalition could target other chemical facilities should the regime use them again. Clearly the Western coalition did what it set out to do, destroying three facilities and avoiding any civilian or Russian casualties.

The West has intervened extensively in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. It has mainly been there to fight extremist groups like Al Qaeda and Isis and has wished to help establish democratic regimes to replace the dictators it has helped pull down. It has not sought to be taking sides in the Sunni-Shia religious war, though it has often been closer to Sunni Saudi Arabia and her allies than to Shia Iran and Syria. The USA has a network of allies including the Gulf States, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and now Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia has strong links with Iran and Syria.

It is not easy to see any negotiated peace in the violence ravaged country of Syria, but it is to diplomacy, negotiation and to talking that the allies should now turn. If killing more people solved Syria's problems they would be solved by now. There have been all too many deaths. The future of Syria is not in the West's control. That decision was taken some years ago.