

Record UK manufacturing orders

The economic good news keeps flowing. The November CBI survey showed orders for manufacturing in the UK higher than any time since 1988 under Margaret Thatcher. Retail sales continued to rise in real terms despite all the gloomy forecasts. Large sums have been invested in UK property by overseas investors who believe in it more than UK valuers.

Yesterday we were told that the UK plans to maintain open access for EU businesses coming to the UK under current rules, whether we leave with or without a deal. It makes sense to stress we do not want to put up new barriers. Such a statement if one comes from official sources needs to complement a direct question to the EU negotiators. Given our wish to have no new barriers, will the EU agree to the same? Or if they do want barriers, will they get on and specify what barriers they intend to place so business can progress and adjust accordingly? Any such barriers will of course need to be compliant with World Trade rules and international commercial law.

If the EU does decide on barriers I trust the UK government will see that as good reason to spare us paying any so called divorce settlement. From here there should be upside for us, and downside for the Commission if they continue to be unhelpful.

High Speed Broadband to become a legal right.

Having lobbied the Government on my constituents' access to high speed broadband I am pleased that the Government has announced that it has declined BT's proposal to deliver universal broadband through a voluntary agreement. Universal high speed broadband will be delivered by a regulatory Service Obligation (USO) which will give everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 Mbps by 2020.

1. Home (<https://www.gov.uk/>)

Press release

High speed broadband to become a legal right

Universal Service Obligation will deliver high speed broadband across the UK

Published 20 December 2017

From:

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-digital-culture-media-sport>) and The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/karen-bradley>)



The Government has confirmed that universal high speed broadband will be delivered by a regulatory Universal Service Obligation (USO), giving everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 Mbps by 2020.

This is the speed that Ofcom, the independent regulator, says is needed to meet the requirements of an average family. After careful consideration the government has decided that regulation is the best way of making sure everyone in the UK can get a decent broadband connection of at least 10 Mbps as soon as possible.

Following the creation of new powers when the Government passed the Digital Economy Act 2017, we launched our consultation on the design of the regulatory USO in the summer. The Government will now set out the design for a legal right to high speed broadband in secondary legislation early next year, alongside our detailed response to the consultation.

Ofcom's implementation is expected to take two years from when we lay secondary legislation, meeting the Government's commitment of giving everyone access to high speed broadband by 2020.

In the summer, we received a proposal from BT to deliver universal broadband through a voluntary agreement. We welcomed BT's proposal and have considered this in detail alongside a regulatory approach. We did not feel the proposal was strong enough for us to take the regulatory USO off the table, and have therefore decided not to pursue BT's proposal in favour of providing a legal right to broadband.

The government believes that only a regulatory USO offers sufficient certainty and the legal enforceability that is required to ensure high speed broadband access for the whole of the UK by 2020. However, we welcome BT's continued investment to deliver broadband to all parts of the UK.

Culture Secretary Karen Bradley said:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/high-speed-broadband-to-become-a-legal-right>

We know how important broadband is to homes and businesses and we want everyone to benefit from a fast and reliable connection. We are grateful to BT for their proposal but have decided that only a regulatory approach will make high speed broadband a reality for everyone in the UK, regardless of where they live or work.

This is all part of our work on ensuring that Britain's telecoms infrastructure is fit for the future and will continue to deliver the connectivity that consumers need in the digital age.

This regulatory approach also brings a number of other advantages for the consumer:

- the minimum speed of connection can be increased over time as consumers' connectivity requirements evolve;
- it provides for greater enforcement to help ensure households and businesses do get connected
- the scheme will maximise the provision of fixed line connections in the hardest to reach areas.
- places a legal requirement for high speed broadband to be provided to anyone requesting it, subject to a cost threshold (in the same way the universal service right to a landline telephone works)

ENDS

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Party discipline, the referendum and the Manifesto

I have been careful not to criticise Conservative MPs personally who voted for Amendment 7, and am not going to change my stance in this article. I do wish, however, to explore why some MPs vote against the whip and ask is it reasonable to do so in certain circumstances? In the UK system an MP is there to exercise judgement and to hold the government to account, or to be part of the government. He or she should also be conscious that they were voted in because they belonged to a particular party, as well as for their own merits. It is important to look at the general Manifesto of their party when considering their later conduct.

It is true that Brexiteer MPs did often vote against new European laws, larger EU budgets and other increases in EU power under the Coalition. We did

so because we took seriously the Conservative party Manifesto of 2010 which we had stood on. It said:

“There should be no further extension of the EU’s power over the UK without the British people’s consent... We will bring back key powers over legal rights, criminal justice and social and employment legislation to the UK”.
“The steady and unacceptable intrusion of the EU into almost every aspect of our lives has gone too far”

We took this to mean that we should resist the extra powers which successive new EU inspired laws and larger budgets brought to the EU. We understood the Lib Dems in government took a pro federalist line which was very different to the our party view in the Manifesto.

So what did the 2017 Manifesto say which might influence the conduct of Conservative MPs today? It said

“We are leaving the EU. In leaving the EU we have chosen a truly global role for Britain...No deal is better than a bad deal...We will no longer be members of the single market or customs union...the days of Britain making vast annual contributions to the EU will end”

Any individual MP may have stood on a personal Manifesto that modified some part of the national Manifesto. Ken Clarke, for example, has always made clear his opposition to the Referendum and its result. The rest of us did not disagree with the views I have quoted above. In 2010 I included in my personal platform a pledge to work for a referendum on the issue of membership of the EU, which we secured as a policy promise before 2015.

Those Labour Opposition MPs who are seeking to use Parliamentary tactics to delay or derail Brexit are opposing both the decision of UK voters in the referendum and the terms of their own Manifesto in 2017. To defy one expression of the public will is foolish To defy two may prove very damaging to them in a future election.

[Thames Valley police funding](#)

Today we heard of the police financial settlement for 2018-19. The Thames Valley force will receive an extra £12.7m in cash for next year, which is needed to help maintain services.

The government also announced a £50m increase in national money for counter terrorism and a general strengthening of budgets to tackle cyber crime.

European Council: The Article 50 meeting – Guidelines

There has been some confusion created by this slim document that came from the EU after the recent Council meeting. Some seem to think it was an agreed document with the UK, and that we should therefore take its positions as the likely outcome of the negotiations between the UK and the EU. It is, of course, just a statement of a bargaining position by the EU preparatory to the talks on transition and a future relationship. The UK's opening position will I assume be rather different!

That became clear in the Prime Minister's response to questions on her Statement yesterday following the EU Council meeting. She confirmed that

1. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed
2. The UK will not make a formal offer of money unless and until there is an Agreement on everything else which the UK Parliament approves
3. There will need to be UK legislation to provide the powers to pay the money and to implement any Agreement
4. The UK is seeking a wide ranging partnership based on good access to the EU single market.

The EU document wants the UK to convert the draft partial Agreement so far into legally binding promises. It says if there is to be a 2 year transition the UK will have to obey all legal and financial commitments of a member of the EU. It is coy over what it might offer on trade and access to the single market over and above the access we will have anyway as a WTO partner. It suggests no deal on trade before we have left. It imagines we will spend two years accepting all EU law and decisions, without the benefit any more of a veto over some items and a vote in Council on others.

There would clearly need to be changes to this approach if there is to be any deal the UK could expect Parliament to accept. It remains the case that a zero for zero tariff deal on goods is greatly in the EU's interest, as is continued similar service access.

Any potential Agreement will be subject to ratification by both sides. This rightly includes the UK Parliament, as well as the Council and the EU Parliament. The EU will need to understand that a Deal does indeed have to be better than No Deal. No Deal gives us freedom to make our own laws, settle our own borders, sign our own trade deals and spend our own money. A wide ranging partnership could add to that, but only if the price of it does not damage the changes No Deal offers too much.