

Productivity in education

Teachers want a pay rise. Schools lobby for larger budgets. Ministers have now had a second go at producing their Fairer Funding formula. This combines a higher total with a different distribution, as under the current one some schools receive small amounts and some receive up to twice as much as the lowest funded schools on a per pupil basis. I have supported both the move to spend more, and the demands to have a fairer distribution. I want schools in Wokingham to have enough teachers to do a good job and for the teachers to be paid properly as professionals.

We need also to ask how can the budgets be spent better. The Conservative government has granted many schools more independence of action. Each school has a Governing body bringing together local people with suitable skills to lead and to debate and guide the school management's use of the budget. Head teachers go on courses in school leadership, and most schools employ some combination of managers, executive secretaries, accountants and bursars depending on their size and the complexity of their tasks.

I am often told that productivity does not apply to schools. The argument runs that the main cost is that of teachers salaries, and the main aim of a better education requires increasing the number of teachers in relation to the number of pupils. Smaller class size is the holy grail of improvement programmes.

I of course agree that a school needs to have enough teachers so there can be sufficient one to one supervision of pupils as required, so that the marking work rate is realistic and so class activities can be managed successfully. That leaves many other options for improving how things are done in a school without needing more staff or additional budget.

It is not true that all classes should be small. If a class takes the form of a lecture or explanation by the teacher, it is a good idea for more pupils to see and hear an inspiring performance. If the teacher is teaching sport then they will need a group of 22 to have one of our popular competitive games on the playing fields. Class size should be related to the methods of teaching and the needs of the pupils. As someone who goes into local schools when invited to talk to pupils about the UK constitution or some other general topic I usually speak to a large group of pupils which makes sense as I can only do it once, as do other external lecturers.

More interesting is the question of what use if any should a school make of digital and recorded materials which allow star teachers or others with a good message to appear in many classrooms at the same time. What is the role of electronic learning programmes, which now figure so prominently in professional development and training when people leave school?

The main areas for raising productivity lie outside teaching. Like any other organisation there are smarter and less smart ways of organising building maintenance, cleaning, administration, procurement, use of supplies and the

rest. Like every modern organisation schools assisted by their Governors need to work away at improvements in all these areas.

The Boris article

I do not see the Boris article as a leadership bid or an offside comment. It is a clear statement of the possible gains from Brexit, by a senior member of the government speaking for the government. It is a reminder of how we can and should be better off by implementing the decision of the voters. It was good to see the reminder that we want to be able to scrap VAT on items that should not attract it when we take back control of our taxes, and to be able to spend more on public services when we get our money back.

Productivity

Productivity is an ugly sounding word from economics. Some are worried by it as they fear it means job losses, restructurings, making people work harder. Curiously enough it is a word which apparently unites the warring political parties. They all claim to want higher productivity. Some even understand that increased productivity is the key to higher real pay and better living standards. If business can produce more with less, prices can be lower or specifications and quality higher, and we can afford to buy more or better.

Agreeing to support the general cause is as good as it gets. As we discovered again on Tuesday in the Finance Bill debate, productivity is also a word which divides, as different parties have different views of what you need to do to raise productivity, and where you might apply the policy.

I detected once again a distinct unease by Labour to discuss public sector productivity, for example. This is odd, given that Ministers- and indirectly MPs – have much more influence over how the public sector is financed and managed than we do over the private sector. I pointed out that during the long Labour years 1997-2010 there were no overall productivity gains in the main public services, at a time when private sector productivity was advancing moderately every year. It would be good to know from them why that was, and what they learned from the experience of presiding over a large sector with no clear gains.

The public sector has struggled with the digital revolution more than the private. The application of computer technology and robotics to business is transforming many areas of our lives. The UK public sector still does not

have proper computerised records and controls in the NHS, tax has not yet gone fully digital and robotics are not much deployed.

The public sector has had access to substantial sums of capital to transform the way it does things, but has also had a disappointing record at implementing change through large computer programmes.

Pound hits \$1.36 -because of Brexit?

Today the pound got back to \$1.36, a fraction off the pre referendum low earlier in 2016.

This follows hints that the Bank might put interest rates back up to 0.5% where they were before the vote. Given the wish to blame everything on Brexit maybe we should say thanks to Brexit the pound has soared in recent weeks.

Visit to Arborfield Mill Weir by pass project

I went to see the works that have been carried out by the Loddon adjacent to the A 327 on the edge of Arborfield to the west.

I was told that the idea of the scheme is to assist fish and wildlife and to reduce the risk of flooding to the A 327.

I welcome any scheme that does reduce flood risk, and look forward to seeing the results.