

New rail investment in your area

I received this letter from the Department for Transport:

I am writing to inform you about new rail investment that we are supporting to improve journeys for passengers and support the economy in the Reading area.

Passenger numbers have more than doubled since privatisation of the railways 20 years ago and our country's railways need to adapt to cope with this and future demands. This includes investing in new stations, new services and upgrades across the country.

As you may be aware, we announced £20m for a second round of the New Stations Fund in 2016, following the success of the first £20m round, which has already delivered passenger benefits in South Wales, the East Midlands, the South West and South East through new stations. We have funded this competition to improve journeys for passengers, and create new leisure, training, employment and business opportunities, by supporting the delivery of new and fully accessible stations.

Reading Borough Council applied to the New Stations Fund to deliver the new Reading Green Park station. Following the evaluation of all of the applications we received, I am delighted to inform you that we will be supporting this new station. This means that the new Reading Green Park station will be benefiting passengers and opening up access to new rail journeys in the South East from March 2020 at the latest.

Our priority is to deliver improved journeys for rail passengers across the country, and we look forward to this station providing real benefits to the Reading area.

Yours sincerely

Paul Maynard MP

Freedom of movement to end says Minister

The Minister for Immigration confirmed freedom of movement ends in March 2019 when we leave. The Home Secretary is consulting on how much EU migration we want once we are out. Your thoughts would be interesting on this topic.

I am keen to give more job opportunity to people already settled here, and to

encourage productivity boosting investment to assist with higher wages. We need to take capital costs into account for each migrant as we need to provide decent housing, healthcare, educational and transport provision for new arrivals. The government has always made clear it will be welcoming to talent and let business fill skill shortages that the domestic economy cannot manage.

Government grants to charities

Government's relationship with charities has become another part of the lively debate about how much the government should give in grants and to whom.

Pre New Labour there was an attempt to segregate government from charity. Charities were not encouraged to undertake work in areas covered by government. Government did not spend a lot of money on giving grants to charities. Charity law sought to ensure charities did not use money they had raised for political purposes, and did seek to keep their overheads down to maximise the favourable use of the donations.

Under Labour there was a policy to expand the so called third sector, and to offer it public service contracts to undertake functions that the state wanted done. There was a deliberate wish to blur the distinctions between charities, companies and state activity, and to create collaborations between the three sectors. The state could end up financing more than at first appeared, by making a direct contribution through its own participation in the joint venture, offering contract money to the private sector participant, and offering contact money and donations to the charity. So called public private partnerships also often concealed more state money and underwriting than was at first apparent. The state paid its own contribution, and then helped pay or underwrite the private sector contribution.

The more the state became involved in offering grants and contracts to charities, the more the charities had to build a well paid bureaucracy in their organisation to meet the paperwork requirements of the state. There needed to be lengthier and more detailed appraisals of projects, tasks and outcomes, and plenty of material for record keeping and audit. Charities needed expensive people to participate with the danger that overheads as a proportion of donations rose.

It now seems timely to ask what benefits has all this brought to users of these services and to taxpayers? How do the regular private donors of the charities feel about this? Are current controls on charities' political involvement and campaigning working well?

Electric cars

I have no problem with a government encouraging electric cars. I am keen on measures to clean up old bus and other vehicle exhausts to improve air quality and support money for bus retrofits.

It seems to me the best way to promote electric cars is for the industry to make them our vehicles of choice by improving their product choices. These cars need to offer longer range, faster charging and lower prices for more people to want to buy them.

Grants to persons and bodies

Much of government is a great recycling machine. It collects huge sums from taxpayers, and redistributes money to people, companies and institutions that it judges worthy or in need of it. Much of Parliamentary debate is about who should receive these grants, and about whether they are paid enough.

The most contentious grants are those to foreigners. The Coalition, the present Conservative government and the Labour Opposition all defend the idea that 0.7% of our GDP or 1.7% of our total public spending should be granted to overseas governments and companies operating in overseas places where incomes are low. The UK is one of the few countries to meet this UN target, with rich countries like the US and Germany refusing to get anywhere near it.

In order to hit the target there are times when ODA has made grants which many people and some of the press and media have thought foolish or inappropriate. There are rules over what is allowable as an overseas aid payment under the UN rules. There has been considerable argument within government over what should legitimately be included, and what flexibility there is within the UN rules.

For the rest of this article I am accepting that the current Parliament has no wish to repeal the legislation requiring us to spend 0.7%. Some of you may write in again to complain, but the reality is this is now widely accepted across the parties. I wish to explore what is and what should be included within this total.

The UK, for example, undertakes humanitarian missions using its armed forces. When they are called out to assist with an ebola outbreak in Africa I think all their costs for the duration of that mission including overheads and salaries as well as the accepted marginal costs should be charged to the Overseas Aid budget. What better example of good aid could there be, than UK

personnel giving direct relief to the sick in a low income country.

The UK also often uses its military to undertake peace keeping missions in low income countries. Keeping the peace is fundamental to the success of any aid programme and programme of economic recovery. One of the main requirements to allow better growth and higher incomes in low income countries is stronger law and order. Shouldn't this also be fully allowable as a charge against the overseas aid budget?

The UK gives refuge to many people fleeing violence, and to many economic migrants who have come from low income countries. Some of the initial expenditure is allowable as aid. Shouldn't all the set up costs of a refugee be part of our aid budget? We need to provide an extra home, extra school place, extra surgery and hospital capacity.