

The EU tries to strengthen a weak hand

The EU wants more of our money. It wants to send us more of its unemployed. It wants to continue its huge trade surplus. All this puts it in a weak position as we leave.

So it invents silly ideas. It says the ECJ will continue ruling us after we have gone. This does not apply to any other independent country and should not apply to us. No need to pay to remove it!

It says it will stop UK citizens legally settled in one EU country moving to another after we have left. Fine. We can't stop them doing that if they want to. I doubt UK pensioners who have bought villas in Spain or Portugal will want to move to Poland or Germany anyway. Again, no need to pay for that.

They would be foolish to demand we pay to export to them, as that would be illegal under WTO rules. The only legal way to pay to trade is recognised tariffs, where their exports would then gift us a £12 bn tariff revenue to give back as tax cuts.

The estate we are now in – public sector land and buildings

The public sector has collected much land and many buildings over the years. Managing this well can provide better conditions for employees and better results for taxpayers.

I am not one who thinks we should sell off our core estate, or go in for expensive financing through sales and leasebacks. I was critical of Gordon Brown doing some of this. It is cheapest and best to own the freehold of the core estate, and to take direct responsibility for the maintenance and replacement of the buildings on the core estate. The UK government still has crucial sites with heritage buildings in Central London and elsewhere. Most Councils have good central sites, some with heritage buildings. Let's use them and look after them in the public sector.

In central London the Foreign Office, Downing Street, the Treasury, Parliament, the Scottish and Welsh Offices, the Banqueting Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Conference centre are all important sites and heritage buildings of varying ages. Keeping a strong central estate around the palaces of Westminster and Whitehall makes sense. Beyond the historic core it is good to have some other sites close to the action. The buildings for departments like Education, Business, Culture Media and Sport, Transport and the Home Office do not have the same architectural and historical significance as the

heritage buildings. Some of this space may become surplus to overall Whitehall requirements, and some of the properties where the state is freeholder may be suitable for substantial redevelopment. Sub letting to other users in some cases may be a good source of revenue whilst keeping land holdings that could be useful. The further from the core, the better the case for disposal of surplus accommodation.

Beyond central London there are huge MOD holdings. There is some move away from the most valuable areas. In my own constituency the army has moved out from its large Arborfield base so that can be sold for the taxpayers and transformed into private housing. There needs to be suitable forces housing supplied elsewhere. I continue to campaign for a home base approach for all three services where single or family accommodation is provided for service personnel at a constant place where their children can go to school and their loved ones can live or be nearby without constant change.

There is some movement down in total numbers of public service employees, as various services come to rely more on computing power. This over time frees space for disposal or re letting. As a general policy aim those officials who need regular and easy access to Ministers should come to live on the heritage estate near to Parliament. Major centres of public sector employment should be away from highly stressed and expensive parts of the country. As more comes to be done on line so there will be more scope to streamline local offices, and to create more one stop shops incorporating more than one government function or department.

The government is going over to a system of centrally managed estates with rental charges to departments for use whether the state is paying rent to a third party or owns the building. This should inject more discipline into property use, and could also lead to a demand for higher standards of services and interior fitment from client departments. This would be good for morale.

[Some big businesses contradict themselves on Brexit](#)

The large companies that still want us to remain in the EU are pushing back hard on the government.

They contradict themselves. They say an early exit with no deal will be bad for their UK activities, yet their main demand is continuing access to lots of cheap continental labour after we leave! They must be planning to expand their UK businesses whilst suggesting the opposite.

As many of them recommended the disastrous recession creating Exchange Rate Mechanism to the UK, and thought the Euro would be good for the economies of Europe the UK government should be sceptical of their judgement.

Absenteeism in the public sector

“They can’t all be ill” said someone looking at high absence figures in part of the public sector. They probably were not. Some private sector organisations have an absenteeism problem. There it is usually a sign of low morale, poor leadership, poorly structured jobs. Some parts of the public sector suffer from high absentee rates too. Senior public sector managers need to change their organisations so more people turn up. The public sector probably has to have 1% more staff to cover for excess absence.

Anyone who is ill should of course have time off to have it checked out and to recover. The flu ridden employee or the staff member with an infectious cold may do more harm than good struggling in to work, only to spread the disease more. The issue is the employees who claim they are sick because they wish to extend the week-end, have a hangover from excessive drinking the night before, have better things to do than turn up for work. I once had to help senior managers tackle high absenteeism in a factory environment. The factory needed improving in all sorts of ways to make it a better working environment, which management did. They fired the worst offender who took far too much time off when they could prove they were not ill. This had a galvanising effect. Management was congratulated by other staff members who said they were fed up having to cover for that person when they knew it was not illness. General standards rose as a result.

If you wish to manage something you need to show it matters and explain what you want to achieve. It must be fair and sensible. The aim here is not to make people feel they mustn’t be ill, or hurry them when they need rest and treatment. The aim here is to deal with abuse. That needs to be explained. You then need to measure and monitor it, to see if the team follow the new policy laid out.

Figures can be revealing. If there is an outbreak of flu then you would expect a big surge in absence. If the absence figures shows a cluster of non attendance on Fridays or Mondays, or on hot days or days when there are major events or functions, suspicions should be aroused. You should also know your workforce well enough to help them realise their wishes whilst still doing a decent week’s work. If there is a big football match on tv they all want to watch, then consider letting them do that at work. You’ll lose 100 minutes, not the whole day, and have some goodwill.

Why do we run such a large balance of payments deficit with the EU?

As some are still worried about the possibility we will trade with the rest of the EU on WTO terms after exit, I am inviting them to explain why it is we run a huge trade deficit with the rest of the EU but a surplus with the rest of the world. Why has this usually been true during our 45 years of membership? Not even large devaluations against the DM and the Euro have changed this.