

Surely the Chancellor does not want to mar Brexit?

I have been reading strange stories this week that the Chancellor is going on to the Marr show this morning to seek to change government policy on Brexit. I find this difficult to believe. The Chancellor is a senior member of the Cabinet and Brexit Committee, so he would have put his point of view strongly when the Brexit policy was decided. The government deliberated long and hard, and then produced a White Paper, several statements to Parliament, and the Article 50 letter and Act. These all made it clear the UK would be leaving the EU and its single market and Customs Union, but would be negotiating for a business friendly comprehensive free trade agreement with the rest of the EU. This approach received overwhelming support from MPs in the last Parliament who voted through the Article 50 Act on that basis. The Chancellor was in full support.

I also find it difficult to believe the stories because the policy the unnamed briefers say we need to change to is stupid. I would be surprised if the Chancellor wanted to sign up to such a policy. It is said we need to seek associate membership of the Customs Union, with an opt out of its strict rule that a member cannot negotiate free trade deals of its own for certain UK trade in services. How on earth could that work? The main gains from negotiating free trade agreements with other countries will come from those where the present tariff barriers are highest. These are the lower income countries with a big export industry in farm products and basic industry. In order to get access for our services we will of course have to offer zero tariffs and reduced barriers on things like tropical and Mediterranean agricultural products which currently are made dearer by EU impositions. If we can't negotiate on non service trade we have no leverage.

It is also foolish because it creates the impression with the rest of the EU that the UK is constantly changing her mind and is too busy negotiating with herself to be able to negotiate seriously with them. Such a change at this late stage would send the wrong signal, and would not leave the government with the strong position accepted by Parliament that we have at the moment. The General election saw 85% of the voters vote for parties that stated we will leave the EU and the single market and negotiate our own trade deals. That is incompatible with any kind of membership of the Customs Union which would prevent us feeling our trade with others.

That's why I think it unlikely the Chancellor will oppose government policy on the Marr show. Doubtless he will say he wants a business friendly Brexit. On that I agree with him. That much is agreed by Labour and the Conservatives. The way to achieve it is through maximum access to the EU market, and through much better trade deals with the rest of the world.

The Grenfell Tower inferno

As feared all too many people died in the fire. The government has rightly set up an Inquiry. We need to know what caused the fire, why the fire spread so fiercely and rapidly, and what differences in the building could have prevented it or lessened the impact. We need to know if people were given the right advice on what to do on that fateful night. It is harrowing to hear of what happened and to learn that even now we do not know who died and where they died. Relatives live with dreadful uncertainty and are now warned that if their loved ones have died they may not be able to identify the bodies. We all are grieving for those lost and are appalled by the extent of the losses.

A full independent Judge Inquiry is needed and has been agreed between government and Opposition. However, these take time and do not satisfy the immediate need for some answers and urgent action elsewhere if other blocks are at risk. We will need statements from the government, Councils and housing management companies about the safety of all the blocks in the country. The government needs to advise Parliament if it wants to change fire regulations or issue any new guidance to Councils. Individual Councils need to review their housing and debate the matter in each locality. They are the main owners and purchasers of social housing with planning and building control functions that go to heart of this matter. Management organisations need to talk to tenants and review their homes, so they can either reassure or improve their safety.

I am glad the government has said it is now reviewing urgently all tower blocks and will report back. It has said it will make sure all those who have lost their homes from the fire will be housed by the government. It has made emergency money available to the local Council and has helped set up a local co-ordinating committee to deal with all problems. It has made money and other assistance available to those who have lost their homes.

Many say the new cladding put in to improve thermal insulation, cut tenant heating bills and improve the appearance of the block for residents and the wider neighbourhood may have speeded the progress of the fire. If this is so it follows that other buildings with the same system need safety improvements, and future improvement schemes need reviewing. It looks as if fire alarms and response systems were not good enough or did not exist. It would be prudent for all other public sector landlords to review their estates – and private sector ones as well for that matter.

Ensuring the safety of tenants or leaseholders should be the overriding priority. Local and national government needs to work hard and swiftly with that in mind.

A business friendly Brexit

I have good news for you all. Despite all the noise and disagreement, most people and political parties want the same things from Brexit. No-one wants it to damage business or lose us jobs. Most in the debate think more free trade rather than less free trade is a good idea. The Labour Manifesto spent time setting out the kind of free trade deals they would like a UK outside the single market and customs union to be able to negotiate.

Business has some legitimate questions of government that need answering. Where we currently receive grants and subsidies from the EU budget, business needs to know what the UK government will do back in control of the contribution money which currently funds those payments. This is particularly important to farming businesses where government payments and subsidies are an important part of farm incomes. IT is also important to those parts of the UK that qualify for extra grants for economic development. I look forward to more detail from the Treasury.

Business would like to know how and when the UK can expand its free trade agreements with non EU countries. The Department for International Trade is working away with options for early trade deals with a number of countries. The sooner we can make progress with these the better, bearing in mind we cannot sign the deals until we leave.

Business also of course wants to know what will be the basis of future trade with the rest of the EU. The UK is offering a continuation of current free trade with no new barriers. It is also saying it will translate into UK law all the present rules and regulations to allow continuity. The UK Parliament will in future be able to improve or repeal individual measures, but would not of course seek to block business being EU compliant for all their exports to the continent, which they are currently. Parliament will take into account the EU business needs when legislating in future, but may wish to allow different arrangements for non EU and domestic business.

The sooner we discuss the future relationship with the EU the sooner we will be able to clarify these matters. Whilst there will be more tough talk and posturing from some EU officials, many in the other member states will want easy access to the UK market and will see that has to be reciprocal.

Some say there is not time to negotiate a free trade agreement with the EU. That would be true if we had lots of barriers to remove and discuss. Instead we already have free trade with the EU, so it is simple to confirm it if there is the will on both sides to do so. If the EU really does want to impose barreirs on their trade with us they will need to set out what these are, and we can then consider what barriers we would need to place in return. All of course would have to be complaint with WTO rules, which limits the ability of the EU to do damage. The main sector which could end up with high tariffs is agriculture, where they sell us twice as much as we sell them. We

also have the option on that scenario of sourcing much more food cheaper from outside the EU, where we could lower tariffs where it suited us, or produce more at home where we can.

I note that after a media barrage about staying in the Customs Union the government has not changed the policy set out in the White Paper and approved overwhelmingly by the Commons to send the letter. I also note the Chancellor still supports government policy despite press briefings to the contrary. We will leave the single market and the Customs Union when we leave the EU, as the rest of the EU also intends and as the Conservative and Labour Manifestos made clear.

There is no soft or hard Brexit

I do not know how many more times I have to argue the obvious. There is Brexit, or there is staying in the EU. The EU has made it crystal clear you cannot stay in the single market without accepting freedom of movement and paying contributions, two things the people clearly rejected in the referendum and again in the General election. You cannot stay in the Customs Union if you want to have free trade deals with the rest of the world.

The Labour Manifesto in 2017 stated they accepted the decision of the referendum. They set out policies to negotiate a range of new free trade and investment agreements with non EU countries that assume we are leaving the single market and the Customs Union. The Manifesto talked positively about a new trading relationship they wished to negotiate, again assuming the current one stemming from single market and customs union membership had gone. Their document stated that “freedom of movement will end when we leave the EU”. The Conservative and DUP Manifestos also made clear we will be leaving the single market and Customs Union and looked forward to new free trade deals around the world.

So we have overwhelming agreement, endorsed by 86% of the voters in the election, that the UK will run her own immigration policy and her own trade policy on leaving. People in the UK have to grasp that arguing amongst ourselves about what our negotiating position should be, when the government has already set one out, can only help those in the EU institutions who wish to harm the UK. Fortunately most of the member states want access to our market and want good relations with us for a wide variety of reasons. Fortunately also the Lisbon Treaty has in Clause 8 a clear legal requirement that the EU itself seeks an “area of prosperity and good neighbourliness” with us. We know how keen Commissioners are to stick to the law of the Treaty.

I am optimistic about the negotiations. It would help our country if more people got behind the government's stance. After all what the government wants is what all say they want – good access to the single market, and many

collaborations and joint workings based on bilateral agreement. To change stance now would undermine us. We negotiate with the rest of the EU, not amongst ourselves!

Sworn in as MP for Wokingham

Today I was sworn in as the newly elected MP for Wokingham. It was privilege. The solemn ceremony is designed to remind MPs of the seriousness of their job, and the role of Parliament is making government and authority accountable to the people.

I am most grateful to all those who voted for me. I wish to live up to their trust. I am also conscious that it is my duty to represent all the people of my constituency, however they voted. I will be taking up the issues which emerged strongly in the election, including money for schools and for social care.