

The tragedy in Kensington

I have just heard of the tragic deaths and injuries in the flat fire. I send my condolences to those who have lost loved ones, and my best wishes to all those injured for a speedy recovery. I thank all involved in saving people from the fire.

Creating a stable government

The current position in the Commons should allow a stable government to be formed. There are 650 MPs. If you take out the 7 Sinn Fein MPS who do not attend, and the Speaker and three Deputies who do not vote, there are 639 voting MPs. 320 is a majority. The Conservatives have 316 (and 2 Deputy Speakers). There are 10 DUP members, and one independent Unionist who are likely to vote with the Conservatives. That gives the government a majority.

In the last Parliament we regularly won votes by 40 to 50, well ahead of the nominal majority. It is difficult for the Opposition to get all its parties to the same view and then to get them all to turn up to vote. As the main Bill to be in the Queens Speech this time is likely to be the Repeal of the 1972 Act and continuity of EU regulations in UK law, there will be some Labour Brexiteers who will vote with the government whatever contortions Labour is going through. Labour fought the election on a Manifesto pledging Brexit, and agreeing this meant leaving the single market. They are keen to see employment laws from the EU transferred into UK law. On these bases they need to vote for the government Bill.

If they do as they promised the Brexit bill will sail through. If they play politics and find ways to oppose, the government looks as if it has enough votes. There is no need for the government to propose lots of contentious legislation to make life more difficult.

The arrangement with the DUP will not be a formal coalition, and will not entail Conservatives changing their views on moral and religious matters. They will want to be more involved in UK politics and have a strong dislike of Mr Corbyn for his past views on Irish matters.

The BBC and devolution

The election coverage once again revealed the BBC's disdain for England. We had many programmes and representations of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish viewpoint and their separate issues but nothing on England. England once again did not exist as a country of the Union in the BBC handling of questions, guests and subjects. The same has been true of their remorseless anti Brexit coverage. We often hear of special problems for Northern Ireland or Scotland over Brexit, but never hear why England wants it and voted for it. Either the BBC should concentrate on being the UK's national broadcaster on its main channels, or it must be fair to all four parts of our devolved country.

This matters. Let me remind the BBC that 84% of the population of the UK lives in England and pays their Licence fees. Many of us wish to hear English news and discussion of English matters yet we are denied this. Instead the BBC provides a BBC Wales and a BBC Scotland for those parts of the country, and doubles up by reproducing some of the Scottish and Welsh content and debate on BBC UK. It does neither for England.

When it came to the leader debates their attitude to devolution was a mess. They decided that they would give equal prominence to the SNP and the Welsh Nationalists, though neither of these parties could form a UK government or supply a Prime Minister because both only fielded candidates in a few Westminster seats. Yet they ignored the leaders of the main Ulster parties, who surely deserved attention if the Welsh and Scottish Nationalists got it? I could understand asking all party leaders to a big debate, or just inviting all party leaders who led parties fielding candidates in a majority of the Westminster seats. I could not see any justification for the choice of Leaders they did make.

What the BBC achieved by their seven way Leaders debate was an unruly shouting match between two parties that might provide a PM and form a government, three other national parties that were polling badly and two devolved regional parties out of the several who could have been invited who could clearly not provide a PM. The balance politically was by these means skewed heavily to the left of the voting patterns of the electors, with just two leaders representing the half of the electorate with Conservative and Eurosceptic leanings, and with five representing the other half. It meant there were far more pro EU representatives, out of line with the referendum results.

I made no complaints or remarks at the time. Media is a bit like the weather to candidates. You have to accept much of it and just make sure you have an umbrella handy, as they are out to rain on you. Now after the event I would suggest the BBC rethinks its whole approach to reporting devolution, and to choosing which people and issues to select for main election broadcasts. If they want to play up devolution then give England a voice and a role. Maybe it would be better to stick to the UK as the BBC's country in a General Election, and do more to discuss the national issues and matters common to

the whole country. The more non English lop sided devolution the BBC goes in for, the more it appears to be on the side of independence movements which are currently waning in popularity.

Let's end austerity

Many readers will know that I was critical of Mr Osborne's austerity policy. It was always more based on increased tax revenues than on cutting spending, but it ground on with the rhetoric of cuts. The growth in spending on overseas aid, EU contributions, pensions and welfare placed more of a strain on some other important programmes. Today I want us to end the rhetoric of austerity, and to ensure decent levels of funding for those important parts of the public sector that are finding it difficult to manage.

It is true that total spending on the NHS and on schools went up, but the cumulative impact of low real increases in areas under pressure of numbers now requires more of an increase. I have been arguing for some time for more cash for schools in Wokingham and West Berkshire, and other similarly placed fast growth areas with low current levels of per pupil funding. I have also argued for more money for social care, to relieve more of the pressures on NHS hospital beds and provide more back up for the elderly and infirm in their own homes. I expect more money to be forthcoming. We could start to spend the saved net contributions to the EU, which should materialise in twenty months time.

I see no need to impose new taxes or raise individual tax rates to do this. The budget deficit is now under good control. What we need instead is a combination of tax and other economic policies that help lift the growth rate a bit, which in turn will bring in more revenue. There are as I have often argued tax rates that could be lowered to foster more tax collection. Treasury orthodoxy seems to think that even a few hundred million pounds extra spending, a small sum in relation to the total budget, needs to be offset by specified tax increases. Whilst accepting that some taxes collect more at lower rates, they still do not have working accurate models to show just how much CGT, Stamp Duty and other similar taxes can increase with a sensible rate. Given the huge inaccuracies in the Treasury forecasts of tax revenue their precision over sums that need to be raised are within the rounding error or may simply be wrong. What we need to ensure is a livelier rate of tax revenue growth, which can best come from lower rates where taxes are easily avoidable, and from a range of policies that can spur a better economic performance. These include policies to promote better public sector productivity performance, more productive investment, embracing the digital revolution in the public sector as well as stimulating it in the private sector, and improving transport and broadband infrastructure.

Total votes cast under recent leaders

The Conservatives under Mrs May polled 13.667 m votes this time. This is more than Labour under Tony Blair at his peak in 1997 when he polled 13.518m, and more than he polled in 2001 when he had a landslide in seats – he polled just 10.724 m.votes

Theresa May's leadership at 13.667 m was well ahead of the Conservatives led by David Cameron who managed 11.34 m in 2015 and just 10.73 m in 2010 despite the banking crash under Labour.

It also is massively better than John Major in 1997 after his ERM European disaster, when he polled just 9.6m.

William Hague took the prize for the worst Conservative performance of the last half century with only 8.357m.votes. Michael Howard lifted it modestly in 2005 to 8.784 m.