

The Hugo Chavez factor

Others have reminded us that Jeremy Corbyn is an admirer of the late Hugo Chavez, the author of Venezuela's current economic and social misfortunes. Mr Corbyn praised his socialism and singled out for favourable comment the way Mr Chavez shared wealth and changed Venezuela's society. He has been quieter about all this over the last couple of years, as Venezuela has slipped into deep recession, hyperinflation, and social disorder. There are no official economic numbers because they are too embarrassing, but the IMF and others think GDP fell by more than 10% last year and continues to fall. Imports halved and supermarket shelves are often empty.

Mr Chavez nationalised a large number of businesses, including the all important oil industry. Venezuela used to be a relatively well off economy, based on huge oil reserves exploited by commercial companies and taxed by the state. As nationalisation tightened its grip on Venezuela's oil they fell behind in paying contractors, in getting work done to expand and replace, and in pumping enough oil for Venezuela's financial needs. This week they are in the news because a government which has run out of foreign exchange has had to sell deeply discounted bonds to Goldman Sachs to raise some dollars, bonds issued by the nationalised oil company backed by the very oil revenues that are needed for the future bills of the Venezuelan state. There are regular reports of massive food shortages with people going hungry. Now we are told of state violence on the streets against the opposition who seek a change of President and policy.

Mr Chavez gave large sums to the poor by borrowing and by taxing others more heavily. Today this generosity has been badly eroded by rapid inflation, and made worse by the physical scarcity of basic goods to carry on a normal life. Is this really the better way, the socialist dream, that Mr Corbyn recommends? Surely it should be a warning to us all. Nationalising might end up with bad malfunction, as with Venezuela's crucial oil industry. Too much generosity with printed money may just destroy the many through hyperinflation. If people go hungry and are unable to change their government by normal democratic means you do not get an egalitarian paradise, but an authoritarian government trying to stop a civil war born of desperation.

Perhaps Mr Corbyn would like to revisit his enthusiasm for Mr Maduro, the heir to Mr Chavez, and tell us what he has now learned about socialist policies. They were as well intentioned as his, but they have miscarried mightily. Venezuela shows you cannot make the poor rich by making the rich poor. You end up making the whole society poorer, whilst the very rich and the large companies simply leave or stop investing.

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Fairer funding for Wokingham and West Berkshire schools

At the recent candidates debate for the Wokingham constituency some misunderstandings about fairer funding were on display.

I have been lobbying for fairer funding, making this clear in private meetings with the Secretary of State, in public debates and on this website. It is true Rob Wilson also took a delegation to see the junior Minister, Mr Gibb. When I heard about it after the event I also lobbied him, telling him of my exchanges with his boss, the Secretary of State. Local Conservative Councillors have been as keen on fair funding as I have been, and have also lobbied.

The main policy issue has been handled by the Secretary of State. I helped secure the place of fairer funding in the 2015 Manifesto, and have been keen to see the government enact it since. I did not agree with the formula proposed in the Consultation document, as I wish to see a higher proportion of the money allocated as an identical lump sum per pupil for every school which will help our schools and seems to me to be fairer. Many of the costs are similar around the country given national pay scales.

If elected to Parliament next week I will press for a better formula and will argue for increases in the total money going to English schools. One way or another I want our local schools to have a real increase to help meet their budgetary pressures.

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No deal is better than a bad deal

Those simple eight words mean the UK has a good negotiating position when it comes to sorting out our future relationship with the EU. Without them the UK would be in a very weak position.

There are those in the EU who talk darkly of a punishment deal, seeking to make the UK pay for daring to leave. There are those who want to send us a large bill with no legal backing to it and expect the UK to pay. There are those who think it a clever idea to volunteer continental farm products up for high WTO tariffs in order to make a political point. That is why the UK has to make it clear we will not accept any such deal.

None of this means the UK negotiators should walk out in a huff at the first

available opportunity if the EU's demands are silly. There is still a good prospect of reaching sensible conclusions. The UK intends to take back control of our borders, money and laws. It is happy to have extensive agreements on free trade, security sharing, academic collaborations, transport rights and the rest. We are leaving the EU's legal structures, single currency and budget, not leaving Europe. It will require a combination of friendly patience, stressing the advantages of many collaborations, and unbending clarity that we are taking back control of our laws, our money and our borders.

It is clear that many on the continent do wish to keep tariff free access to our lucrative market. It is obvious they like sharing security and Intelligence with us. The only way to get a good outcome for both sides is for the UK government to repeat that it makes no sense for us to take a bad deal. Nor would that in practice help them. It's a pity the other main parties contesting the General Election do not recognise this simple truth. If they understood negotiating they would also say with Mrs May , "No deal is better than a bad deal."

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[The A329M and the M4](#)

The decision of Highways England to alter the slip road access at the A329M and M4 junction has caused difficulties for those travelling on the A 329 M. I have been seeking a remedy ever since I first saw the plans, which decided to halve the road capacity on the A 329 M for through traffic in order to relieve pressure and back up on the M 4.

I was told that traffic models showed one lane was sufficient for the A 329 M , and one dedicated lane for merging M 4 traffic would help the flow off the M 4. That did not seem likely to me. It hasn't worked out like that.

They did agree to undertake a study to see why people have been unhappy about the results of their works. As I expected this study has concluded that there is increased congestion on the A329 M following the works on the junction. They then seek to blame driver behaviour and look for solutions that will guide or direct drivers to get it to work. The truth is driver behaviour has been affected by the changes made to the road layout. Drivers do cut across from the M4 slip onto the fast lane of the A 329 M which is the single through lane because they see they have to merge with other cars on the slip. Cars have to pull out of the slow lane into the fast lane on the A 329 M because their lane disappears altogether. This can cause difficulties.

There may be modest improvements to be had from clearer signs and road markings to control where cars can switch lanes, but the real need is for

more capacity which I will continue to press for.

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Enterprise for everyone

Time was when your late or cancelled train, your high energy bill, your rationed water or your delayed phone line was the direct result of nationalised industries. Privatisation especially when it involved competition offered more choice, better quality and lower prices. After privatisation electricity and gas prices fell in the early years of the policy. Water was available all summer without hosepipe bans. The long post war decline in rail travel ended and passenger numbers and journeys started to increase. Competition in phones meant instead access to telephony for those who wanted it, rather than a long delay for the state company to put a line in or requiring you to have a line shared with the neighbours.

Today when things go wrong or prices go up in several of these areas it is the result of actions by privatised companies as the public see it. This is not always true. The bulk of rail assets are nationalised, with public ownership of all track, signals and stations. So one if there is a delay or cancellation it is owing to signal failures, overhead track power systems, or physical problems with track and points. It is true Southern Rail has let commuters down and that it is a private company. The granting of near monopoly rights for train services is not ideal, but the franchise can be taken back, or the operator may lose it for poor performance when it comes up for rebidding. Energy prices may also be the result of EU renewables and energy policy, not the result of a company trying to up its margins.

Today people have issues with some large private sector companies. The popular enthusiasm for new social media, new mobile phones and modern computing is obvious from the fast growth rates of these businesses. There is also some disquiet about the power and governance of some large corporations. Large banks have been hauled before courts and Regulators for misdeeds. Various companies have been accused of paying too little tax in various countries. Some companies have not been sufficiently customer friendly, have been too keen to push up prices or keep out competitors.

The new challenge is to provide a legal and regulatory framework for more enterprise, more choice and more competition. There is also the problem of some international and EU governmental interventions in policy which make energy dearer or prevent banks lending, or impede new transport investment. Going back to nationalisation which added monopoly to a lack of innovation is not the answer. Today we need more enterprise for all, to take advantage of the fast moving technologies for growth and improvement.

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