

Tests, the curriculum and learning

Yesterday I got involved in an important conversation on a doorstep about education.

I was told by a teacher that she felt strongly the present stretching curriculum backed up by regular testing was getting in the way of encouraging a love of learning in primary school children. She felt there was now too much emphasis on knowing facts and science, to the exclusion of wider education.

It is a difficult issue. I think you can make a case that too much emphasis on requiring mental recall of a fixed body of knowledge with testing to try to ensure pupils have memorised it can put some pupils off. It may inculcate an attitude of learning for the test and not bothering about anything that is not needed to pass the test. On the other hand if you go too far the other way and do not insist on mastery of the basics of number and words children can arrive at Secondary school ill equipped to carry out the more complex tasks there.

I remember at my own primary there was a strong emphasis on learning tables, spelling well, writing neatly, and being able to respond quickly to mental arithmetic challenges. There was a lot of rote learning and endless classroom tests to see if you had put in the work to memorise what was needed. The more creative work took place through projects, where you were encouraged to use your own initiative and time at home to flesh out a folder on the appointed topic. This mixture worked for some of us well. Today we now have the welcome development of smaller classes which should mean we can do better.

I would be interested in your thoughts on what is the right balance and the best approach. I agreed with the teacher that it is best if the system used does develop in a child a wish to know more, and a spirit of enquiry which will lead them to learn more through their own initiatives. If education is just a process of learning by rote and repeating for a test it will miss some of the most important features of personal development, but in the schools I have visited there is usually a balance in these matters which the national curriculum does not prevent. What are your thoughts.

Promoted by Fraser Mc Farland on behalf of John Redwood, both at 30 Rose Street Wokingham RG40 1XU

The world recovery will be fine

There are many fears and alarms expressed about the state of various economies around the world. The curious thing is in recent years none of

these has come true. The world economy has continued to grow at a modest pace, with contributions from all the advanced countries led by the US and UK growth rates. China too has kept a steady growth of over 6% going, with many critics claiming it is about to end. This year we may also get some turnaround in Brazil and less of a drag from the oil and commodity based economies which suffered in recent past years from low oil and commodity prices.

The background with the Euro area continuing to create extra money and buying up sovereign bonds, Japan doing the same, and the persistence of ultra low interest rates outside the USA, is favourable for more growth. It is true there has been an uptick in US, UK and Euro area inflation this year. This owes much to the higher oil price, aided by some Chinese price rises on exported goods to reflect the higher input prices they are paying for energy and raw materials. This may well abate later this year, as oil and commodity prices have been weaker recently. Higher inflation has not so far impeded reasonable growth in consumer spending in all these affected areas.

Mr Trump's new found ability to get a Healthcare reform through the House of Representatives means he may be able to get through some reflation as well. He still has to get the Healthcare Bill through the Senate, who may wish to amend it and cause difficulties. Getting some kind of healthcare reform through is an important first step prior to tax cuts which will be easier to achieve if healthcare reform delivers some expenditure savings. Serious tax cuts in the USA would power more growth, which would benefit the rest of us as well.

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Fanciful figures

This week we saw a couple of sets of fanciful figures intrude on the debate. There was Labour's 10,000 police at £30 a year salary, hastily adjusted to £8000 a year, still way below what we normally pay our officers. Then there was the FT's take on the EU bill for the UK leaving the Union, at Euro 100bn.

The first sets of numbers were mistakes, and have been adjusted upwards as much Labour spending will need to be to make it realistic. £300 m a year is nearer the mark.

The second story that the UK owes up to Euro 100 bn is just silly. There are no legal obligations to pay beyond the sums we owe for our regular contributions over the next twenty two months before we leave. If they want a political deal on money, then of course they would need to knock off our share of the assets. I don't see that is a sensible or attractive way to proceed for them. They should just accept the Treaty that allows for no special bill.

The UK should continue to be friendly, outward going and positive about it all. We should continue to stress the great deal we are proposing for our future relationship. Free access to our market for all their exporters. Guarantees for all their citizens living and working in the UK. Continued large UK contributions to the defence, security, research and culture of Europe.

Stable and strong leadership is needed by the UK, to be optimistic but to be firm in resisting silly proposals that have no basis in law or political reality.

The EU disobliging briefings sound as if they are coming from people who suddenly realise their negotiating strategy of pressurising a member state into seeing it their way is not going to work. The EU thought the UK would want to stay in the Single market Custom Union. They could then seek to charge us for that. It was always a silly assumption, as the UK clearly wants to make its own free trade agreements with the rest of the world which means leaving the Customs Union. The UK was also clear it wanted to stop paying the money. It is the Commission who are most worried about the loss of the UK's contributions, as it's their budgets and salaries that will suffer.

The way countries pay to trade with other reluctant countries is via tariffs. If the EU wants to put tariffs up against us, it can only do so to a limited extent under WTO rules. It would be a lot cheaper than the bills we are hearing about. In return we can impose more tariffs on them given the nature and volume of their exports to us. That is why I have always thought it likely in the end they will want tariff free trade. It is, of course, always possible they wish to self harm. However, it seems it is more the EU Commission that favours a tough approach as the harm is to the member states, not to the Commission itself. The member states are more likely to wake up to the harm it could do their export companies and especially their farmers and want a more sensible approach.

If the EU seriously thinks we need to give them money to be able to sell them goods presumably they would need to give us money to sell us goods. I can't see that idea catching on.

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The French debate

The debate between Le Pen and Macron was by all accounts fiery, personal and intense. There may have been less policy detail than some wanted, but the big divides over policy were nonetheless clear.

They both are running as anti establishment candidates who want change. That is more difficult for Mr Macron as he was until recently a Minister in the socialist government. Agreeing with his opponent that unemployment is too

high and new economic measures are needed, he had to deal with why he had not done that as Economy Minister. He now wishes to liberalise the labour market, making it easier for companies to take on people. Madame Le Pen for her part wants to place barriers on the movement of people into the country and workforce, and to protect French trade and jobs by direct intervention. She was asked repeatedly for more detail of her measures and how they were supposed to work. They put the respective cases for a global and EU based approach versus a protectionist France first approach.

They differed strongly on the Euro and EU membership. Mr Macron is fully committed, and stressed the central importance of belonging to the Euro in his vision of the world. Mrs Le Pen argued that the Euro is the bankers' currency, not the currency of the people. She wants a French currency again.

Madam Le Pen attacked the powerful role of Germany in the EU and jibed that either way in this Presidential election France will be governed by a woman – herself or Mrs Merkel. Either when elected as President will need to construct a majority of representatives in the Parliament to help implement their programmes, which will make the Parliamentary elections most important after the choice of President.

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