

[NATO and Ukraine](#)

The forces of Ukraine face a larger enemy and need plenty of help from NATO with weapons, ammunition and financial support.

So far the leading money donors, the EU and US, and the leading provider of military items, the USA have given enough to Ukraine to be able to largely halt and in some places reverse Russian advances, but not enough to give them victory. There are strict controls and rules over use, stopping Ukraine using NATO weapons outside Ukraine. A lot of the weapons given have been older ones from stocks.

I have no wish to see a NATO/Russia war. NATO has a large superiority to win a conventional war against Russia but victory could impose a high price in losses before achieved. NATO rightly claims to be a defensive alliance so it should continue to avoid provoking war with Russia. Russia has not invaded a NATO country which is the trigger wire. War would of course follow were Russia to attack a NATO member.

NATO led by the dominant US power needs to be clearer about its plans for Ukraine. It is not good for Ukraine to be able to largely hold the line but be unable to win. Clearly if the EU and US do will a Ukrainian victory as they say they do they need to expand weapons supplies greatly to show Russia the West can win any battle of ammunition and weapons production. Putin has turned to a new Defence Minister said to be good at cranking up Russian war production. This is no time for the EU and USA to be reducing their commitments if they both want a Ukraine win. The Ukraine war has shown NATO weapons stocks were low and has led to more investment in weapons manufacture and more orders for the armourers.

At some point there will need to be negotiations and a ceasefire. It is strange how current debates and US policy are dominated by the imperative of a ceasefire in Gaza to end civilian deaths whilst preoccupied with continuing and intensifying the war in Ukraine where civilians and reluctant conscripts are also being killed.

[Wokingham Council gets a substantial uplift in money this year](#)

I keep hearing from the Lib Dem Council that Wokingham gets little money from central government. I will use a few blogs to set out again what Wokingham Council is receiving from government. These are often areas where I have put

the case for more funding to government.

The biggest sum of money the Borough never mentions is the £167,979,385 of grant to run our schools. Education represents around a half of the Council's spending and all the main costs are covered by government grant. Why do they forget this? The current year money is up by more than 7% on the previous year.

In addition this year there is an additional £4,555,857 of Additional grant , £1,480,767 to cover extra pay rises this year for teachers and an extra £552,039 to cover additional pension contributions.

Wokingham will also receive a general pupil premium of £3,982,757. There is an extra £1,048,340 for sports.

There is a grant of £2,386,368 to cover the costs of free meals for infants. There is £510,885 for the National Tutoring programme. There are payments for the Coronavirus recovery programme of £816,058. There will be additional money later this year under these last two headings.

There is also £10,823,438 of capital money for schools. to improve and expand buildings.

It would be good to hear a bit more from the Council about how this money is being spent and some recognition of these substantial national grant sums.

Wars in Europe

The UK has fought all too many wars in Europe. Often we were fighting to defend the right of another country to govern itself, or to support political and religious freedoms. We had to fight Philip II of Spain, Napoleon and Hitler for our very national survival as we fought for Europe's liberties and saw off invasion threats.

After the world war ended in 1945 there was an uneasy peace in much of Europe, with an iron curtain between an enforced Union of the USSR, and the increasing number of democracies in the West as Spain and Greece threw off dictators and military government.

Following the break up of the USSR a series of nasty wars broke out . Slovenia and Croatia detached from Serbia. Bosnia partially left Serbia after an intense civil war. Kosovo wants to leave Serbia.

This century Putin's Russia pushes to recreate part of the old USSR. There is a scramble for influence between an expansion minded EU wishing to grow by arguments, votes and treaties, and Russia prepared to use force as well as persuasion and diplomacy. The EU has pushed its borders up to Russia in

Finland, Poland and the Baltic Republics.

The obvious current centre of this battle is Ukraine. The Kosovo/Serbia split, the Transnistria /Moldova split, the Georgia arguments and others are all part of this clash with a subjugating Russia. In Ukraine the EU backed the protests to remove an elected pro Russian President in 2014, only to see Russia seize Crimea. In Georgia today an anti EU majority in Parliament has passed a media control bill which the EU and its supporters condemn. Serbia, and Moldova are both candidate countries to join the EU, though Serbia is out of favour. Kosovo could become a candidate. The range of candidate countries will give the EU closer exposure and longer borders with Russia.

I will look tomorrow at NATO and UK options

[My Intervention on the Agriculture Motion – homegrown food](#)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

I am pleased that the Minister and the Prime Minister are keen on promoting more home-grown food. As the transition occurs, what proportion of total subsidies paid will be for promoting food? It still seems to be too small.

My right hon. Friend will understand that the basic payment scheme did not motivate food production at all, as it was not linked to it. As we move to the new regime, we are promoting better productivity through grants for better equipment. We are investing in new technology. Alongside that, we are pushing to improve gene editing and gene technology, to try to make agriculture more sustainable and more productive at the same time. As we go through this transition, we are certainly keen to increase the productivity of our agricultural sector.

[My Conservative Home article on Mayors and Councils](#)

The local elections were ignored by a large majority of the electorate. Whilst polls usually show enthusiasm for more devolution and more local decision making, when people are offered a chance to vote for local representatives most choose not to.

The Police and Crime Commissioners have not taken off as an idea,

with many people regarding it as an unnecessary layer of government. Few of them become well known names in their regions, and most avoid undue controversy. The public want an independent police force enforcing the law without party preferences coming into it. The Commissioner has to be careful not to intervene in operational matters or seek to politicise the look and thrust of daily policing. Setting a budget, an agenda and priorities are all good things to do, but they have rarely become matters of general debate. There is no formal opposition to the Police Commissioner to highlight issues, options and differences.

The idea of elected mayors is not universally popular and some areas have rejected the proposition. Some of them decide to use the mayoralty as a platform to grandstand on national issues. Labour mayors often seek to enter the national debate talking about things they have little or no power over, and may see the mayoral pulpit as a means of enhancing their position and career prospects within their own party. When it comes to things they do have power over they normally blame the government for anything that goes wrong whilst claiming credit for anything positive that happens whether they initiated it or whether it came from government. They often have difficult relations with the Councils they need to work with.

As a former County Councillor myself I want local government to work. A good Council can make a lot of difference for the better, making wise choices over local services and the local environment whilst providing good value for money. I find too many Councils lack good political leadership capable of using the considerable financial and other resources they command to serve their public well. The Lib Dems running Wokingham Borough waste huge sums on things we do not want, pursue vendettas against local drivers, hike the car parking charges and Council tax, plead poverty and blame the government for everything that goes wrong. They often ignore the views of the public whilst spending liberally on formal consultations. Many Labour and Liberal led Councils run down local government, belittle their budgets and powers and run campaigns against the government and local Conservative MPs. They see their job as advancing their party rather than looking after the needs and the money of the people they are meant to serve.

Many Councils have spent too much money buying up properties at high prices, claiming they would make money for taxpayers,. Some of them are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy as a result, now finding the interest they have to pay on the large borrowings they took out exceeds the rentals .They did not forecast the big changes to local property markets which have led to some empty shops, lower office rents and difficulty in keeping and recruiting tenants. The private sector saw them coming and offloaded shops and fringe properties to Councils. These same Councils apparently have plenty of money to spend on consultants, on new schemes to wreck roads and impose more cameras, lights and controls, to increase their numbers of well paid officials and maintain large office estates.

Few Councils experiment with better ways of delivering social care. Not enough spend transport money on improving junctions to make them safer and easier to use, avoiding jams and delays. Most Councils think they can keep on adding extra homes without adding road capacity, and without facilitating more cables and pipes to increase utility supplies. They often even allow delays in putting in more surgeries and school places, then have to rush to catch up.

To succeed Councils need opposition groups that concentrate on expressing the needs and preferences of the public. They need to expose what is wrong with the way the ruling group is spending all the money available with a view to improving priorities and value for money. Those Councillors leading Councils need a good working relationship with officers, need to be well informed about what is going on and need to take complaints seriously. Local government controls much of social care, education, most roads, local transport services, leisure and amenities, and the maintenance of our important public spaces. They have wide ranging planning powers to decide on how much development and where it should go.

We need a better and more honest account of how much money they spend and how much power they have. We need more focus on their options and their responsibilities. With that more people would see a good reason to go and vote. Democracy needs the voters to engage as well as the politicians. Too many are put off by parties wrongly claiming everything comes from central government.