

Museum farming

When Owen Paterson set out how we can use our new freedoms out of the EU to have a better environment and a stronger farming industry, he majored his remarks on the need for innovation.

He characterised the Common Agricultural Policy as one based on protectionism to keep us in a museum of out of date farming practices. He drew attention to how the ban on neo nics had led to a fall in rape seed production in the EU, making us more dependent on imports from the Ukraine which uses neo nics. He made the case for selective gene editing , and argued that gm progress is necessary. It is after all a version of selective breeding which has characterised past agricultural progress inside the EU, done with more precision, understanding and speed.

He reminded us of the damage done to our landscape by EU inspired policies of abandoning pumps and refusing to dredge ditches and water courses, leading to extensive flooding. Owen himself made an effective case when in government to revert to proven water management techniques with modern high capacity pumps and dredgers to free the Somerset levels of excessive water. He studied how the Fens were still well drained and usually kept out of flooding despite being very low lying, and how the EU/Environmental Agency system abandoned this approach elsewhere to the detriment of residents and farmers.

Agriculture offers great scope for improvement as we leave the EU. We have a huge food deficit running at more than £20bn a year. We are made to put high tariffs on important food items from outside the EU. Setting our own policy should produce more home grown food and lower overall prices for consumers. we will impose lower tariffs than the EU but will impose them on the whole world once we have left.

More training and jobs for UK citizens

Sir Iain Duncan Smith gave a good paper to the Seminar on Friday about controlling our borders and doing more to promote better paid work for people already legally settled in the UK.

He told us that when he was Work and Pensions Secretary he drew attention to the large numbers of people in the UK in entry level jobs who do not go on to receive training and promotion as we would like. He highlighted the way for example we have been importing people to be lorry drivers. It is a short course to convert a car licence into a truck permit. This qualification opens up better paid jobs for those who try it from having no formal qualifications. He asked his department to buy up training places and making them available to UK residents. They told him no-one would want to do

it. He bought 100 places for a pilot and there was plenty of demand. His officials told him it would be wasted money as they would not stay the course. 85% successfully completed it. He proved that we can train our own lorry drivers at home.

He then turned his mind to the shortage of nurses, where the UK has been raiding the health services of other, often poorer nations, to find us the nurses we need. It of course takes a lot longer to train a nurse. The same experience repeated. There were plenty of UK volunteers to train as a nurse. We need a system where the state pays if the person undergoing the training pledges to work for the NHS for a stated period after training. If they wish to avoid working for the NHS then they should have to repay the training cost.

Some UK companies are great at training and growing their own talent. The public sector and the other private companies need to get better at it. It is high time we ended the cheap labour from abroad model, and spent more time and money on nurturing talent and encouraging qualifications at home. I understand why big business think free movement of labour to scoop people from low pay countries is a good idea, but it is more difficult to grasp why the Lib Dems are so keen on it.

Iain recommended requiring everyone advertising a job here to advertise in the UK first. He backed the principles of the government's points based system for migration, saying we would need to monitor levels. He supported ending right to benefits until someone has worked here for a number of years or become a citizen. He used Migration Watch figures to demonstrate the net cost to the UK of inviting in people to do poorly paid jobs.

UK/EU talks

I held a conference in Westminster yesterday on the EU talks.

I was able to praise the government for its opening approach. They are right to insist on talking about all issues in a series of simultaneous working groups. They are right to say we want a Free Trade Agreement, not a comprehensive Partnership Agreement or Association Agreement designed for countries seeking to converge and join the EU. They are right to stress there is no read across from say fishing to free trade. Each has to be settled on its own merits.

The EU still seems to think the UK is the weak party to the talks and needs to make more concessions. It also seems to think the UK will be so desperate for a deal it will crack and concede on fishing, convergence of laws, powers of the ECJ and all the rest of their federal agenda.

The Conference provided unified advice. We do not need to pay to trade. An

FTA is very much in the EU's interest. We need to take control of our fish and land many more of them at home. We want to free ourselves of the controls of the ECJ, and will establish the right to shape our own laws as we see fit. Canada and Japan have FTAs with the EU but do not accept EU laws and the ultimate power of the ECJ. Our defence arrangements should be under our control, and our main collaboration through NATO. We should not impose any border between Northern Ireland and GB and not accept any continuing EU jurisdiction over any part of the UK from January 1. 2021.

Why I am not worried about UK state debt levels

The UK government has put in a new control on UK state debt. It is a sensible one. The interest on the debt should not be more than 6% of total public spending. This appears to be quite a tough target, as very year bar one from 1945 to 2000 saw interest higher than 6% of spending.

Today debt interest is around 4% of public spending, or under 2% of GDP. It is down at this level mainly because UK interest rates are so low and look likely to stay low. UK rates remain higher than the Euro area and Japan though below the US.

State debt at the end of last financial year was £1.82bn or a quite high 85% of National Income. This was a gross figure. The Bank of England, 100% owned by the state on behalf of taxpayers, owned £435 bn of that. If you deduct that, state debt was a more realistic £1.39tn or 67% of GDP, a low figure by contemporary standards.

Refinancing UK state net debt today at rates under 1% for up to 30 year borrowing would leave the state with an net interest bill to pay of under £13.9bn or under 2% of state spending. There is every reason to get on with funding the debt longer and refinancing. It is clearly affordable. It is, however, as some will rightly point out, no reason to waste money. Tax cuts are a particularly good idea.

Levelling up

The government has committed itself to levelling up. It wants to adopt policies that spread wealth and income more widely around the country, given the big gaps between London and the rest.

It is right to talk positively of levelling up, and not to talk negatively about taxing the rich out of London to bring London's figures down to nearer the national average. It's no help to the other cities of the UK if London is poorer. Indeed, levelling London down might also entail some loss of income and wealth for the rest of the country as well.

There are various differences between London and the rest of the country. London's productivity is higher. The capital has many more small and competing companies per 1000 residents than the rest of the nation. There is much more private sector wealth and income per person than elsewhere.

One of the curious features of the imbalance is it is much dearer to live, work and set up a business in London than elsewhere, yet more people choose to do it. They do so because they seek access to the better paid jobs, or access to the better off customers that London provides. There are many competing London restaurants, often with high meal prices, yet many of them make a good living. There are so many people in London wanting to buy a meal with the income to pay for them. With more companies and more highly paid people there is more need of lawyers, accountants, business consultants, personal advisers and the rest. In turn these service sector professionals are well paid and create more demand.

In some other cities and towns around the country there is a shortage of spending power and free enterprise. Oxford and Cambridge are demonstrating that it is possible for smaller provincial cities to attract a cluster of new investors and businesses around themes or strengths of that place. It requires ensuring there is suitable housing for those with the money to develop a business or to supply the high level talent the businesses need. As the cluster of new activities grows so the city attracts the supporting trades and services that can work with the new wealth creators.

Manchester in its prosperous past was King Cotton. Liverpool developed from a great port with many merchant traders. Birmingham was always a big manufacturing and engineering centre. Modern versions of these concentrations of talent and investment will drive wealthier and more productive cities and towns around the country. The levelling up agenda needs to make it easier for them to attract the talent and investment it takes to build a much bigger private sector. The policies needed include lower taxes, more supportive government interventions and fewer penal regulations, and a belief at all levels of government that free enterprise is a big part of the answer, not part of the problem.