

Christmas message 2019

Christmas began in an unusual style in Wokingham this year. As we gathered for the traditional carols near the Town Hall as part of the Winter Carnival, we clustered on the steps of the building. There was no room for a larger podium as we surveyed the continuing pavement works all around us. There was no carnival parade through closed streets, so we enjoyed a laser light show instead. Wokingham had improvised a good welcome to Christmas despite the works.

It reminded me that Christmas is a time when our great traditions have to adjust to modern realities. What endures is the spirit of Christmas. We look forward to a time of giving, when we think more of those in need and those members of our family and those in the circle of our friends that need some extra mid winter care. It is good to think less of the daily work worries, and more of what we can do to brighten the lives of others.

The Wokingham community has many generous and caring people who do work a little magic for the rest. I have heard great singing from the choral societies, seen the plans for a lively living advent calendar, and know of charitable help being planned for those in need. I would like to thank all involved,. I would also like to thank all who serve the public throughout the year in different ways. There are many who ensure we are kept safe, can be treated when ill, can buy our daily bread and ensure our water and energy comes on at home when we need it.

My hope for this Christmas and the new year as is we can make more progress in putting behind us wars in the Middle East that have so disfigured that part of the world for so long. It is not in our power to stop all the insurrections and civil wars, but it does now seem possible for us to intervene less militarily ourselves, and to work with the UN and other interested nations to promote more dialogue and less bombing. I also look forward to next year when the centre of Wokingham is complete with its new shops and new pavements.

Unemployment continues to fall

UK unemployment fell to 4.3% in November, a new low since 1975.

The economy over the last year continued to generate a large number of additional jobs, enabling more people to find work.

This good result was not the one many forecasters assumed, as they expected a downturn which did not happen.

Rail fares

The recent fare increases have been unwelcome. Rail pricing in the UK stretches the idea that you should pay a lot more for popular routes at popular times and a lot less for the off peak hours and journeys. I have no problem with the general idea that pricing needs to try to fill more seats, and to encourage sensible time shifting for those who have some flexibility over when they travel. What I do not like is to take it out on commuters who have to meet normal business hours for their jobs and who have little or no flexibility over when they get on a train.

The wide range of fares for the same route often combines ultra low fares that make little addition to train revenue net of costs with extremely expensive penalty fares at other times of day. Season tickets are now very expensive over longer commuting distances. It could be time to think again about how the railway can sell more seats, collect more overall revenue, but go a bit easier on the reliable captive passengers who need to commute to work.

There is an advantage in people using trains at peaks for commuting. The road system is totally overloaded at peak times. Trains offer easier and better ways for many to get straight into the centre of a city or large town where more of the jobs are based. Greater adoption of digital signalling and intelligent on board train information systems could make a substantial boost to peak hour capacity without needing extra track. The present artificial scarcity of train seats into our main cities is used as an excuse for high prices for season tickets.

Comments to this site

There are too many long comments and too many multiple comments from some participants. I will have to delete more for reason of length or multiple postings to try to keep up.

Universal credit and better incomes

Yesterday Labour organised another debate on Universal Credit.

The idea behind the reform is to simplify the complex benefits system, ensure financial support for those who need it, and to make it easier to get into work. Labour used to support the general aims of the reform, but they now want to slow down its implementation.

The government reports that people find faster routes into work from Universal Credit which is designed to make it always worthwhile working. They estimate another 250,000 getting into work as Universal Credit is rolled out.

Universal Credit provides a basic income for those out of work, and tops up incomes of those in lower paid work. It gives people more if they have children, if they are disabled, and if they need help with housing costs. The aim is no-one in our society should be unable to afford normal living costs, ending up homeless or cold or hungry.

Promoting work helps people achieve higher incomes. Benefit is withdrawn in a way which leaves people better off as they work more hours or take on better paid work. There is every incentive to get a job, get a better job and move to full time working from part time employment. Labour are right to speak out for people who are stuck in low pay employment or in underemployment. The government shares their wish to help people move into something better, and supports the aim of giving them benefit to top up inadequate incomes.

The best way to raise living standards is to help, mentor and train people so they can get into better paid work. Quite often it is easier to get into better paid work from less well paid work, or into a full time job from a part or contract job. That is why we need a benefit top up system that is flexible and helps people when they have need of financial support. A growing economy, and an economy that is thriving with growing companies in new and advanced areas of work, is the best ally of getting people higher living standards.

Meanwhile there have been some welcome improvements in the scheme following lobbying and consultation. More money will be made available earlier for claimants, with the 7 day waiting period going in February. Claimants will be told the housing component in any benefit they receive can be paid directly to landlords if they wish. Interest free advances of credit will be available to new claimants, as it is paid monthly in arrears.