

The collapse of traditional parties on the continent

Mrs Merkel's bad loss of votes and seats in the 2017 German election was part of a continental pattern. In practically every Euro member state there has been a similar collapse in support for the two traditional parties of the centre left and centre right that alternated in government in the last century. Their vote has been lost to challenger parties of the right and the left. Some say the rise of the so called populist parties is the result of the financial crash and the poor economic performance since 2007.

This explanation does not seem to be correct, as the USA and the UK also suffered from a similar banking crash and recession in 2007-9. It is true that we have made a bit better recovery than many parts of the continent since then, but the similar problems with real income growth and productivity characterise most of the advanced world. In the USA the two main traditional parties continue to dominate US politics. In the UK following the Brexit vote there was a sharp improvement in the vote share going to both the Conservative and Labour parties in the 2017 UK election, giving the UK a very different political path to that on the continent. Between them Labour and Conservative commanded 83% of the vote.

The extent of the decline of the parties similar to Labour and Conservative in the rest of the EU is very marked. In Greece, Pasok (centre left) recorded just 6.3% of the vote in the last General election, and New Democracy (centre right) 28.1%. A left inclined Syriza has taken over as the main governing party.

In Belgium The Socialist party polled just 11.7% in the 2014 election, and The Christian Democrats 11.6%. The vote has splintered to a range of regionally based parties. In the Netherlands in the 2017 election the socialists claimed just 9.1% of the vote and the VVD (centre right) 21.3%.

In Spain the PP (centre right) managed 33% with PSOE (socialist) on 22.6%. The PP is in minority coalition government.

In France En Marche swept all aside in the legislative elections, leaving the Republican party (centre right) on 22% and the Socialists on 5.7%.

In Germany the CDU polled just 26.8% this autumn and the SPD 22.6%.

The challenger parties that have captured much of the support have several similar characteristics. They often campaign to relax the austerity controls of the Euro scheme on their economies, favouring higher levels of public spending and borrowing than is permitted. Some of them also campaign in favour of ending freedom of movement within the EU, wanting some controls on migrant numbers into their countries. Some of the parties are Eurosceptic, seeking exit from the Euro. Others merely campaign for a very different type of Euro with a subsidy union to back it up. Some of the successful challenger

parties are wanting regional independence or autonomy, as with the Catalan nationalists, the Belgian regional parties and the Lega Nord in Italy.

It looks as if the collapse of the old main parties on the continent is a Euro area phenomenon related to economic pressures within the zone, leading to identity issues affecting national and regional politics. It is curious how the grand old parties allow this decline to happen, and how none of them so far have found a way to recover. One of their main problems is they cannot offer much change in economic policy given the way the Euro scheme works. Locked into policies which electors do not like, voters turn instead to new parties and noisier parties in the hope they will break out of the EU consensus. Normally democratic parties change policies that make them unpopular and fight to keep their voting base. The EU has changed all that in the Euro area.

The Irish border with Northern Ireland

The UK government is keen to keep an open border similar to the present one after Brexit. It has set out how this can take place.

The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have enjoyed a Common Travel area for many years. It pre dated our entry into the EEC. There is no wish to change this on exit. People will be free to cross the Ireland/Northern Ireland border as today. New UK migration controls are likely to rely on benefit controls and work permits if people wish to settle in the UK.

The current border is a VAT and currency border at the moment. Goods and services entailing cross border transactions require today paperwork or electronic filings to handle the different tax regimes and any currency adjustments. If we end up with the WTO model for Brexit, it will be possible to add a customs tariff line to the documentation that already is generated for a trade transaction across the border.

The likely approach will be for the larger importers and exporters to register as Authorised Economic Operators. They will be able to file electronic paperwork about truck consignments in advance of travel. Number plate recognition technology can be used at road border points to ensure the necessary registrations and payments occur without the need for physical barriers or stops.

Smaller consignments by small businesses living near the border can be exempted.

The UK has offered a friendly and sensible approach to preserve the advantages of the current border arrangements. The EU could adopt the same or could suggest other improvements for mutual agreement.

We owe the EU nothing

There is general agreement that there is no legal requirement for the UK to pay the EU anything on exit. There is no provision in the Treaty for an exit bill. We received no payment on joining to deal with liabilities the other members had already incurred. No one suggests if a net recipient country wanted to leave they would receive a leaving bonus. No one in the referendum campaign said we would face a bill. The EU has never produced a legal base for a divorce bill.

Some seem to think we should nonetheless pay something to get a deal. It is most important that this is always called an ex gratia payment or gift, as the UK must not by its language and promises create some legal obligation under EU law that does not exist at the moment. There is a danger in seeking some signed promise of trade talks in return for some written offer of money in turn. Under EU law we could create a legal obligation if we use the wrong words where there is none at the moment. There is a danger that making a contingent offer subject to getting a good Agreement will just be banked by the EU.

Trying to keep discussion of payments to general indications and headings will not stop the EU putting a figure on any indication and applying moral pressure on us to pay that amount. Nor would it stop them trying to get that money without a good Agreement.

As we don't owe anything the best thing to do is to offer nothing. The public show in polls that they have no wish to pay large sums to the EU. It is time to spend the money at home instead.

Build rates and planning permissions

Wokingham Borough has made a substantial number of planning permissions for new homes available to the housebuilding industry. Sometimes the developers do not build these homes at the pace the local plan would like. Others then apply for additional planning permissions because the build rate is not fast enough.

The Council and I have made these points to the government. In the Budget the Chancellor announced that Sir Oliver Letwin will lead an Inquiry into how the build rate can be speeded up to avoid the unplanned consequences of failure to use existing permissions. I will take this up again with the Inquiry.

New garden towns and the Oxford to Cambridge corridor

The government has stated its wish to find locations for new garden towns, and to expand ambitions for the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor.

The UK's original garden settlements grew from the provision of housing for a workforce. Josiah Wedgwood built better employee housing near his new factory at Etruria in the eighteenth century. Later developments like Port Sunlight and Bournville continued the tradition of creating a village community for a workforce, with better quality housing with gardens, green spaces and community facilities.

The garden towns movement began with Letchworth and Welwyn. It extended its influence over larger and more recent new towns like Milton Keynes. The idea was to preserve a more rural setting for housing and to use good architecture and design to create a better environment. The developments contrasted with the more crowded housing of the Industrial Revolution in the large industrial cities where gardens were cramped or non-existent and space more restricted for each family.

These success stories of UK architecture and planning show that it is possible to build in ways that reflect the wishes of many to live in green surroundings and to harness the best of design.

Modern developers often build properties that draw on traditional styles of house with characteristics from former eras. There are contemporary variants of Elizabethan half-timbered, of Georgian classical and terrace, and of Victorian villa and terrace.

It will be interesting to see where the government might find support for new garden towns and to see what designs the advocates will propose. Milton Keynes is in my view a success story, with a very green environment to offset the grid pattern of main roads and service roads which place the town firmly in the age of the car.

Our traditional settlements that have grown more slowly over the years benefit from a rich diversity in styles as each era added or replaced some parts of the urban landscape. They usually retain an ancient road pattern which creates jams and bottlenecks as people try to get to school, work and the shops using their cars. The new towns offer a chance of design that accommodates the instinct for personal mobility that people share.