

The EU's unemployment problem

EU has come to mean European Unemployment. The Euro seems to stand for European Unemployment and Recession Organisation. One of the main reasons the Euro and the Euro elite are under attack in so many Euro countries by new political forces challenging the project is their insouciance to the economic problems created by or co-existing with their single currency and single market.

If the Euro and the single market were all they are cracked up to be by the EU elite governing parties and senior officials they would have banished high youth unemployment and general unemployment in Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and others by now. They would have boosted the zone's growth rate up at least to that in the USA, UK, and the other leading non Euro advanced western countries. Instead Greece remains mired in a long recession punctuated by the odd quarter or two of slow growth. Italy languishes well below the levels of GDP achieved before the 2008 banking crash. They have no convincing explanation of why half the young people in Greece are out of work, or why one fifth of the Spaniards are still out of work after a year or so of recovery.

I first realised that the single market was not going to add jobs and incomes to the UK or anywhere else when I became the UK's single market Minister. I had accepted the verdict of the referendum in 1975 that UK voters wanted to be in a common market free trade area, though I had cast one of my first votes against, as the Treaty did not say it was going to be a free trade area. It looked in those early years like a Customs Union, with asymmetric relaxation of trade in goods where the UK was relatively weak and little or no relaxation in services where the UK was strong.

So it proved, with our big balance of payments deficit with the EU becoming a permanent feature based on the continental car industry and others outcompeting the UK. I tried to make it more like the free trade common market people had been promised. With so many matters settled by majority vote it became more and more difficult for the UK to stop measures which simply added to costs and made the EU less able to create jobs.

Instead the single market became the method by which large multinationals based in the EU lobbied to secure rules, laws and regulations that suited their existing way of doing business, and made market entry for competitors dearer and more difficult. The Common Agricultural Policy was well protected by heavy tariffs against cheaper food from poorer countries, and the Common Fishing Policy turned the UK with one of the richest fisheries in the world into an importer of fish. The single market was invoked as a reason for the EU to undertake wide ranging legislation on the environment, movement of people, transport, research and much else. The UK growth rate slowed after we joined the EEC and slowed again after the completion of the single market. The EU's Exchange Rate Mechanism did particular damage to our economy, costing us many jobs and lost output. The Euro crisis more recently hit the Euro badly and had some knock on effect to us.

The EU elite tell all those who are unhappy about Euro area growth rates, unemployment and wage levels that it works fine for Germany so the others just need to get their national governments to cut wages more and get on with competing. They've been trying this for years and it doesn't work economically. They may be about to find out it does not work politically for them either. The future of Euro and the zone's economic policy is now effectively on the ballot paper in national elections in several countries.

At least 10 dead in east China hotel fire

At least 10 people were killed in a hotel fire Saturday morning in Nanchang, capital of east China's Jiangxi Province, firefighters said.

The fire, which broke out around 8 a.m. in the HNA Platinum Mix Hotel in Honggutan New District, was put out around 9:40 a.m. More than 10 construction workers were working on the second floor at the time.

Firefighters found seven bodies in debris, and three of the 16 hospitalized died despite medical efforts.

The four-story hotel is connected to a 24-story apartment building where over 260 residents were evacuated.

Seven people in connection with the case have been taken into police custody.

Initial investigations found the fire was caused by cutting of decoration materials, and further investigation is under way.

Local legislative meetings raise growth expectations

China's resort island province of Hainan aimed to achieve growth of over 7 percent this year, after a 7.5-percent expansion in 2016, as its legislative session closed Friday.

Like Hainan, 20 other provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities lowered or maintained their growth targets this year, indicating the basic tone of "seeking progress while maintaining stability" as set by the central economic work conference in December.

To date, all provincial-level regions have concluded their annual meetings for local lawmakers and political advisors.

The new measures in reform, opening up and structural adjustment announced at local sessions have raised high expectations for the annual sessions of China's top legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), and the top political advisory body, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, in March.

The two meetings are among the most important political events in China, second only to the 19th National Congress of Communist Party of China (CPC) later this year, at which a new leadership of the Party will be elected.

The people's congress system, the country's political basis, has been in place for over six decades at the national, provincial, prefectural, county and township levels.

The NPC has nearly 3,000 deputies from provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities, Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions, and the People's Liberation Army. Its annual session deliberates and approves the economic and social development plan among other major policies, laws and regulations.

The new economic growth target to be announced at the opening meeting of the legislative session on March 5 will be of note.

China's economy has been continuing its slowdown trend. It reported 6.7 percent GDP growth in 2016, the lowest level in nearly three decades, but likely to top all other major economies. China aims to achieve average annual growth of more than 6.5 percent over the 2016 to 2020 period.

A framework of "new normal" is being introduced to inject new vitality into the economy and ensure more balanced growth.

The provincial growth targets in 2017 will leave room for governments to push on with transformation and supply-side structural reform, including slashing overcapacity in sectors like coal and steel. All these are critical for China to achieve a sustained and healthy economic growth.

Coal-rich Shanxi and central Henan both aim to cut 20 million tonnes of coal capacity this year, after each slashed 23 million tonnes last year.

Hebei, which neighbors Beijing and produces a quarter of the country's iron and steel, aims to further slash 32 million tonnes of steel capacity this year, after a similar level of reduction in 2016.

"This year will be our toughest for capacity reduction. No matter how difficult it is, we are determined to succeed," said Hebei Governor Zhang Qingwei.

Environmental protection is another key item on the agenda, with new pollution treatment targets and measures included in local government work

plans.

Beijing, a frequent victim of smog, aims to cut its PM2.5 density by 18 percent to 60 micrograms per cubic meter of air this year, at a planned cost of 18 billion yuan (2.6 billion U.S. dollars).

China's opening-up is expected to gain new momentum this year, as the provinces and municipalities with free trade zones (FTZs) push forward and refine the FTZ system.

There will also be more projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Commodity and service centers will be set up in Shanghai this year to boost trade with countries along the Belt and Road. The city signed construction contracts worth 8.9 billion dollars with countries along the ancient trade route last year, up 66 percent year on year.

Moreover, southwestern Sichuan Province plans to double the frequency of cargo trains bound for Europe to 1,000 this year. Foreign investment into the inland province hit 8.5 billion dollars in 2016, featuring projects from 17 of the world's top 500 companies.

"China is opening wider to the outside world and it is paying off with win-win results for all those involved," said Xu Yaotong, a professor from the Chinese Academy of Governance.

Reviving the real economy was a hot topic at the local sessions of provincial lawmakers.

Zhejiang Vice Governor Feng Fei said the province would help lower the costs for companies this year so that more resources can be distributed to the real economy.

Poverty alleviation remains a pressing task. Southwestern Yunnan Province will bring 1 million of the 3.5 million poor people above the poverty line in 2017.

To achieve "Xiaokang," or a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way, by 2020, this year China will help another 10 million people out of over 45.7 million get rid of poverty.

New government heads of at least 11 provincial-level regions, including Beijing and Shanghai, were elected at the local sessions. These regions' combined GDP exceeds that of Germany.

Notably, local two sessions also stressed the "four consciousnesses" – the ideology, the whole, the core and the line.

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, was endorsed as the core leader at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in late October.

"It is natural to stress the concept. The centralized and unified leadership

is gaining consensus,” said Dai Yanjun, of the Party School of the CPC Central Committee.

Three top-level tourism spots warned for poor quality

Three famous Chinese tourist spots were warned by the industry regulator Saturday for deteriorating quality.

The Old Town of Lijiang in southwestern China’s Yunnan Province was required by the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) to improve management within six months.

As a 5A-level national tourist attraction, or the top level, the Old Town of Lijiang was subject to rising complaints and poor security, the CNTA pointed out after inspecting 5A-licensed tourism spots.

China has recently delisted three 5A tourist attractions and warned 19 others, while 20 attractions were added to the 5A category.

China has a tourism-rating classification system which rates a tourist attraction from one A to 5A for its overall tourism quality.

30 years on, ID cards smooth life for Tibetans

Nyima Drolma has spent 15 years as a police officer, helping Tibetan people in remote areas to acquire ID cards. Compared to her work in the field, days spent at her desk in Lhasa are a walk in the park.

An ID card in China is an absolute essential. Chinese people use ID cards for everything: buying houses or train tickets, checking into hotels, visiting the doctor. The ID card system was born in 1984 and introduced to Tibet in 1987.

“Tibet is so vast and herdsmen live in far-flung areas where transportation is often problematic. It is the officers’ job to help them take photos, fill in forms and actually get the physical ID cards to the herdsmen,” said Drolma, 45.

"I have ridden horses, yaks, donkeys and tricycles to reach people in remote areas," she said.

In 1998, she and her colleagues spent days collecting information and taking photos of herdsmen in a settlement about 200 kilometers from the nearest town in Qushui county on the Lhasa River. "We lived in the tents of the herders. It was so cold that the photos could not be developed. Despite the hardship, we think it is important to make the system accessible to all people no matter where they live," she said.

Thirty years on, now almost all adults in Tibet have ID cards and frequently use them in modern social life.

"There was nothing like ID cards in the old Tibet," said He Xiaodong, a historian at the regional museum. The museum keeps private stamps of serf owners and indentures which tell the gruesome social structure. Serfdom was abolished in 1951 in Tibet.

Identity cards are a modern social necessity to grant each individual equal rights to public service, said He.

Tsering Namgyel, a 71-year-old carpenter in Lhasa, was one of the first Tibetans with an ID card.

"Before, we used the hukou registration document, and when we needed to travel to other places, we went to local community commissions to ask for stamps and endorsement, which involved complex procedures," he said.

In the first generation ID card, personal information was hand-written on small cards. China has been issuing its second-generation ID cards, featuring computer chips and digital encryption, nationwide since 2005. The cards have validity periods ranging from 10 years to 20 years.

The Tibetan regional police department said over three million 2nd-generation ID cards have been granted.

Generally, people over 16 years old are required to have an ID card, and those under 16 years old can get one if they wish.

Phurbu, a tourist guide in Lhasa, frequently uses his ID to book tickets for travelling. He cited a 2015 film "Tharlo," which depicted a pony-tailed Tibetan sheep herder's life, far from modernity, but upended after a journey he made to have an ID card made in the city.

"Life is not as dramatic as the story in the movie," said Phurbu. "ID cards tell who we are and record how we interact with the world around us."