

The leadership candidates set out their stalls

On Sunday I received a number of phone calls from leadership hopefuls. With other colleagues yesterday and on Monday we had meetings with each of the candidates in turn. We asked them for their views on the main topics including the economy, public services, foreign and defence policy, Brexit, and identity politics. They are all now developing a Manifesto covering the main topics, though most were having to rush to put it together as the timetable is very rapid.

Only Rishi Sunak wanted to delay tax cuts and was keen to persevere with the company and windfall tax rises he was planning as Chancellor. The others made a variety of proposals to cut VAT, remove the increase in company tax rates, cut National Insurance or Income Tax. Some wished to pay for this out of fiscal headroom in the current budgets, some from faster growth and some from reductions in public spending. All thought defence spending needed to rise over the rest of this decade. Some had proposals for slimming the civil service and overheads of large services like the NHS, some to reduce welfare spending through more improvements to foster more ,jobs and better paid jobs for those on benefits. A couple queried the pace and cost of UK adaptation to net zero given the growing reliance of China on coal, using that to send us manufactures we import.

All promised to see through the Northern Ireland Protocol bill and if necessary use the Parliament Act to get it through the Lords. All said they would bring it into force if the EU does not offer a solution to the issues we have raised. All said they accepted the result of the referendum and wished to work to use the freedoms Brexit brings to expand the UK' global reach and influence, develop more trade deals and improve the regulatory position to foster more UK investment and business led growth.

Today there will be votes on the 8 candidates how have made it this far. When we know the results we will at last have some hard polling data to think about which two might emerge victorious form the MP competition phase.