

On the doorsteps

I have been out and about in Wokingham, Earley and Shinfield ahead of the local elections. The main issues raised continue to be local to do with the pace and location of development and the need for better roads and less congestion. There is still no mention of Ukraine. If asked people are concerned about the cost of living squeeze.

There is strong support for weekly bin collections rather than less frequent and for keeping the Council Tax down.

Why don't the railways want our business?

It's the Bank holiday week-end. Many people want to travel to be with family or friends. Others want to take a short break at a UK holiday destination, giving some work to our hotels, visitor attractions and restaurants. An effectively nationalised railway which is heavily loss making has an opportunity to provide us with a great public service. It could take some of the strain off the roads. It could earn some much needed extra revenue to offset some of the huge losses it is racking up and expensing to the taxpayer.

Instead the papers and media report a long list of closed lines and services. Maybe when the railway earned most of its non subsidy money from fleecing commuters for the their five days a week service it made sense to do maintenance at Bank holidays when the commuters did not need the travel. Haven't the railways noticed the five day a week commuting model is broken. We have witnessed the post covid revolt of the commuter, with so many agreeing with their employers far fewer days in the office to escape the high costs and poor service of their past railway experience. Surely the railway bosses should be scouring the booking patterns for holidays, special events, sporting activities and the rest to see how they can capture more of the leisure and pleasure market. That means not only keeping open the full range of lines for a busy Bank holiday but also flexing the pattern of services to attract more of the travelling public. The A 303, the M5, the M6, the M25 and all the other overloaded holiday roads need this help from this expensive set of great straight routes spanning the country and giving traffic free access to all our main cities and tourist destinations.

The largely nationalised railway is another example of huge sums of public money and public sector power being deployed by so called independent bodies. Ministers need to intervene more when so much public money and the public interest is at stake. If the railway management will not serve the railway

demand when it is there they need to be told to do so or changed for those who will. We need business people guiding the railway and helping the Ministers who want to grow the business and make sensible offers to people who do not want to sit in endless traffic jams if there is something better on offer. A big sporting or cultural event should be a business opportunity, not a reason to ration or even close the relevant station for fear of too many people.

[Good Friday Churches Together in Wokingham](#)

I attended the coffee morning at St Paul's Church today and enjoyed seeing the displays and tasks for the children around the Biblical account of the death of Christ. I joined those walking into town and attended the ecumenical service in the Methodist Church with 48 others from the range of Wokingham Christian Churches. I am grateful to those who organised these events under the banner of Churches Together and invited me to attend.

During the morning three told me they dislike the Conservative party and our current leader intensely and wish to see him and the party out of office. The immediate complaints related to the breaches of rules over covid in Downing Street but there were clearly wider and long standing disagreements. Local Conservatives accept the Prime Minister's apology and do not wish to see a leadership election now given the need for clear leadership over Ukraine and the cost of living issues.

Two lobbied me against the plans for a new approach to try to stop the trade in dangerous small boat journeys across the Channel. My email box is more balanced on this issue with some writing in wanting the new approach or questioning whether it will be sufficient to end the people trafficking, as well as some sending in a campaign email against the proposals.

[Le Pen and Macron battle for different futures of the EU](#)

I do not interfere in elections in foreign countries. I do not express preferences between candidates. I am interested in the debates they hold and in the possible outcomes.

On current polling Macron will narrowly defeat Le Pen on Sunday week. The

contest is much closer than many thought a few weeks ago and looks certain to be much closer than in 2017 when they last fought each other for the Presidency. Macron entered the contest late using the advantages of incumbency to dominate the political news by acting as President and concentrating on Ukraine, the main news of the moment. Le Pen campaigned around the country on cost of living issues and narrowed the gap with Macron. Now Macron the candidate is shifting position on a number of domestic issues and campaigning intensely. The one big debate between them could be important and swing votes.

Macron wants a more integrated EU with a strong foreign policy and a beefed up military force to back its approach to world affairs. He sees an opportunity to increase French leadership at a time of German weakness following a shift to a new and difficult three party coalition and problems from depending too much on Russian gas. He will claim Le Pen's proposals to ease financial pressures on people are unaffordable.

Le Pen wishes to stay in the EU and Euro but wants at best a semi detached relationship with the supranational body. She sees Hungary and Poland as potential allies for a renegotiation to take back more powers for national determination. She also wishes to cut French financial contributions. She would not welcome the more integrated and more powerful EU Macron seeks.

Le Pen offers a major cut in VAT on fuel and other measures to ease the squeeze.

Whichever wins they will prove France is fairly evenly split between two wildly different views of the EU. It will be interesting to see how much ground Macron changes on domestic economic issues at a time of severe income squeeze.

Controlling the borders

The Home Secretary has been trying to get legislation through Parliament. She has made clear that the government wishes to stop the cruel and exploitative trade in bringing people illegally across the Channel risking their lives. The lawyers and courts have made it difficult for the government to enforce the law against illegal migrants, so the Home Secretary is trying to toughen it in a way which will make it more difficult for them to thwart the policy aim. Border Force apparently need even clearer instructions in legislation to stop this trade.

We need further developments. The Home Secretary recognises the current situation should not continue. It is wrong to allow a lot of people to get here by illegal means and then to keep them here at great expense unable to work. It would be much better if economic migrants applied before they came and only came if they get permission to come.

Your thoughts on how Ministers can get the system to deliver would be interesting.