

The Conservative Manifesto and drivers

We are told to expect action to make it more difficult for Councils to introduce low traffic neighbourhoods and 20 mph zones. We are promised the end of the much disliked ULEZ zone in outer London.

There have been big strides to tax and regulate drivers off the roads in Wales and London in recent years, and in other parts of England with anti driver Councils. Getting the right balance between local needs for clean air and safety, and combined local and national needs for a good road system that get people to work and goods to market is not easy. Here are some thoughts of how to get a better balance.

1. National highways should be for road vehicles. They are our safest and fastest roads. The network needs completing to at least 4 lane dual carriageway standard, preferably with grade separated junctions. These are U.K. government controlled.
- 2 A strategic network of major local roads. Whilst under the control of local Highways authorities they should have national limits placed on how far they can go in restricting them . Government could lead cross Authority larger improvement schemes. These roads would normally be a minimum of 30 mph in urban areas and faster permitted speeds elsewhere.
3. Other roads under local control. Residential roads should be regulated against excess speed and inappropriate parking.
4. It is a good idea to promote more walking and cycling. This should be done by installing better footpaths, greenways and cycle ways apart from main roads. We need more and safer capacity, not cycleways carved out of an inadequate main road adding to tensions and conflicts between different types of road user.
5. Review extent of pavement capacity in London where it is in places excessive. I walk a lot in London. Along the Embankment and in the City pavement space is well above our needs whilst east-west road capacity has been strangled.

Drivers are being taxed and regulated off the roads by Lib Dem , Green and Labour Councils

In Wokingham a Lib Dem led Borough Council embarked on a £5.5 m waste of

money to worsen a crucial roundabout junction of two important B roads in Finchampstead. The junction also gave access to a public car park and retail car parks for local shops and a garage. The aim was to narrow the roads, replace normal pavements with Lib Dem yellow brick ones which quickly discolour and become uneven, and to persuade more people to shop and take children to the local school on foot or by bike.

The long period of works and road closures has slashed shop and garage turnover badly. It has driven vehicles into adjacent residential roads seeking rat runs. The Council has littered the area with road closure and diversion signs and bollards to narrow these routes. I had to travel 5 miles yesterday to complete a one mile journey. The alternative route also included a closure of half that main road with three way lights and four minute waiting time. Locals have been up in arms about the disruption and cost. Lib Dems lost all 3 of the local seats in the village as a result of this crazy scheme in the May election. They tried to blame the previous Council who refused to vote the scheme through, realising what bad value it was and how unpopular it would be. There has been no compensation to the shops and garage for lost turnover.

Flushed with their success in making the lives of those of us who drive to work, drive to the shops or to drop off children such a misery, the Lib Dems now want to repeat this anti driver policy in other parts of the Borough and send taxpayers the bill. They are about to embark on the battle of the Woosehill roundabout. This is one of Wokingham's best junctions. It is crucial to all who live on Woosehill as it is the main route in and out of this delightful residential area. Anyone needing to drive to work, to the Wokingham shops and to local schools needs to rely on this usually free flowing roundabout. The Lib Dems want to make that very difficult during prolonged roadworks. They want to reduce the carriageways for vehicles and create traffic jams where none exist. The California Crossroads experience should make them think again, but they are motivated by a wish to hit the drivers.

Interest rates

The Bank of England is independent when it comes to forecasting inflation and the economy. It has the sole right to fix the Base rate, the crucial short term interest rate that affects the returns of savers and the costs of borrowers,

All the time I was an MP I respected their Base rate power and did not advise on changes. I was critical of their forecasts of inflation when they were obviously wrong.

Now I can write and speak as I like about interest rates. The European Central Bank and the US Fed made similar mistakes to the Bank of England

delivering inflations several times target level in 2022. The Japanese, Swiss and Chinese Central Banks did not make the same mistakes and their inflation stayed low, showing the inflation was not the result of lockdowns and the Ukraine war.

Over the last year the ECB has followed a better policy to correct past mistakes than the Bank of England. This week they rightly cut interest rates recognising sluggish growth and tight money and credit. The Bank of England should do the same.

The Bank will probably hold rates claiming it should not move them in an election period. That implies it suspends its own independence. The Bank needs to be seen to be independent on rates. Otherwise not cutting them now will be seen as pro Labour and cutting them now seen as pro Conservative. I think most people do believe the Bank is the independent setter of rates and I have not seen any Conservative government pressures on the Bank over rates.

The U.K. economy has been badly slowed by the Bank's very tough money policy 2023-4. Inflation will come down as a result. The Bank should cut, especially given its obstinate refusal to change its very damaging policy of over the top bond sales.

What do people want their candidates and MPs to do?

Some contributors here love running down politicians, pointing out their mistakes and inadequacies. Today you can lodge your papers to run yourself if you know how to do it better.

Many people are searching the perfect party or the faultless candidate. Realists accept the task of the voter is to choose from a range of candidates and parties who are fallible, or fall short of our ideal. Our democracy offers plenty of opportunity to lobby, criticise, brief and engage with those who get elected.

Opinion polls tell us of the current dislike of the Conservatives by an important bloc of former Conservative voters. I can understand their frustration at the long COVID lockdown, the Bank's inflationary money printing, the disruption of energy markets by war in Ukraine and the big expansion of the state to micro manage our lives and the economy as a result. It has meant taxes too high, state services losing productivity and quality, and too much borrowing.

What I also remember was Labour, SNP and Lib Dem wanting longer lockdowns, more handouts, and higher taxes. They wanted an economic policy driven by the Bank of England and the OBR who turned to austerity policies after their big

inflationary mistake.

Labour and Lib Dem are short on detail on how to pay for their plans for expanding the NHS and social care. They are agreed on keeping the austerity framework of current economic policy. Neither talk about how they would get productivity back to 2019 levels in public services, let alone get on with raising it. Without an answer to this crucial question they could not deliver their improved services. They would spend and tax more with little to show for it.

D day

Imagine the fear and the adrenaline rush for those young men in 1944 as the landing craft beached and opened them to German fire for the first time. There were many who had to brave the privations and dangers of the soldiers life as the largest amphibious landing was underway against Germany's brutal fortress Europe. We owe them all so much, that for 79 years now many European peoples have been able to live in democracies freed from Nazi tyranny and mass murder.

The US and U.K. had to bring together a huge army, massive supplies, and a large seaborne force to ferry them. The airforces had to control the skies, drop troops behind enemy lines and bomb enemy defences. There were innovations including floating harbours, a pipeline under the ocean, adaptations of fighting vehicles to tackle mine strewn beaches. There was superior Intelligence and carefully placed disinformation to allow some surprise.

It should serve as a reminder that we need to keep strong defences and use diplomacy backed by lethal force to deter and prevent evil triumphing again in the way it did in 1940 s Europe. It is a worry that war stalks Europe again in Ukraine, with continuing tensions in countries near Russia's borders and in the Balkans. The foundations of NATO emerged from the Allied victory in 1945. With the emergence of a modern Italy and Germany pledged to democracy and Western values they too came to join the Alliance.

NATO was tested by the Cold War against the USSR. The Alliance allowed Russia to dominate countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland that wished to revolt against Soviet rule, whilst preventing and deterring any further expansion of the USSR westwards. The tensions over Russian missiles going to Cuba with US missiles in Turkey brought war close, narrowly avoided by diplomatic exchanges.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gorbachev reforms gave us the opportunity of a new and improved relationship between a Russia shedding reluctant USSR member states and a NATO with no territorial claims of its own. Unfortunately in recent years the opportunity has slipped away, with a

mutual suspicion bringing back a new kind of Cold War. Mr Putin's wish to recreate a wider Russian zone of influence has spread to invasion creating challenges for NATO.

1944 can remind us that the resolve of the democracies, slow to rouse, can bring victory over tyrannies. It should make both sides to the current tensions and both combatants in the Ukraine war want to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.