

Visiting a local primary school and Memory Lane

On my recent visit to a local primary school I asked about progress with teaching reading and writing English. I had on my mind Nick Gibb, Schools Minister for most of the last decade until the reshuffle. He is a tireless campaigner for using synthetic phonics as the best method to teach reading, and has had some success with the profession in getting this more widely adopted with some good outcomes. Standards of reading and writing have been rising. The school confirmed they used the method and were pleased with the results.

When I was preparing for the visit I allowed myself a rare trip down Memory Lane to recall how I thought as a primary school child. I had enjoyed my mother reading to me before I was old enough to go to a state primary. I had puzzled over the shapes of the words and felt frustrated that I could not read them for myself. I often asked for a favourite book and could remember enough to gently complain when my mother skipped a sentence or two because she was so bored with the same story. I still could not read the words I knew were missing.

Being introduced to the sound based alphabet was a revelation. Suddenly as I mastered abc as a set of sounds I held the magic key. I could venture a pronunciation of new words that I had not met before, and could read aloud the words I understood and were part of my personal dictionary of the mind. It was one of a few key gifts or statements during my education that made a huge difference to how I learned and progressed.

It was as big a breakthrough as my first day at primary school, when I was delighted to find a world that was my size. After five years of living in a land of giants where every chair was a mountain climb and every piece of furniture a huge and unmoveable obstacle, I was in a classroom with chairs and tables that fitted me and my classmates and I could move if necessary. Primary schools are gateways to a bigger world. At their best they give children the power to understand so much more and the confidence to go on their own personal journeys.

The need for more UK electricity generation

I was pleased to hear that the government is about to order or plan more nuclear power capacity. They need to. The UK currently generates around 15% of the power we need and around 17% of what we produce at home from some old

nuclear plants. Four of the seven have to close by 2024 and two more by 2030. The very least the government needs to do is to replace these. Only Hinkley C is currently going ahead and will be producing 3GW in a few years time. None of the smaller Rolls Royce plants nor the other large plants now being considered are likely to be available prior to 2030, so we face a drop off in the next few years which should cause concern..

The UK relies on imports for 10% of the electricity we need. We buy imports most days including when demand is well below our domestic capacity. Given the growing tightness of energy supply on the continent, their ambitious decarbonisation plans which could leave them wind dependent and short of power and French threats we should wish to end our reliance on this source of power.

Wind power last year supplied under 16% of our needs and solar under 4%. The aim is to push this higher and more capacity is being added. However, as we have just witnessed, you can have a period of little wind and below average sun, leaving you very short of electricity. There needs to be more back up or allowance for underperformance of these renewables.

Last year biomass added 6% of our needs and gas 36%. Recently three old coal stations have had to be brought back into use and have provided around 4% of our power.

The total demand last year averaged 33.8GW. Peak demand can reach 45GW on a busy cold day. The system has enough power currently for peaks assuming the renewables work well. However, with nuclear about to decline and with domestic demands about to rise a lot were people to buy electric cars and electric heating systems we are going to need an additional 10.4GW of usable capacity. This would take care of the net 2GW loss of nuclear, the 3.4GW imports, and 5.0 GW to allow for a substantial rise in domestic demand for the planned electrical revolution.

The immediate task should be to keep all old power stations available on care and maintenance to be brought on if wind and solar let us down. The government should examine what are the best and cheapest forms of renewables that are not wind or sun dependent, given the priority they accord to decarbonisation. They need to see if expanding biomass makes sense. It may be that for a transition period the UK simply needs more combined cycle gas as the cheapest option.

Energy policy needs to keep enough capacity available to keep the lights on at all times, and needs to worry about the level of bills.

[Buying petrol and diesel](#)

As someone who has kept away from filling stations for the last week as I

still have some diesel in my tank it is worrying to see such long queues of people wanting to fill their tanks earlier than usual and some also wanting to fill extra cans for storage.

Ministers have assured us there is no shortage of fuel in the country, to be met with the reply that nonetheless there are filling station closures and queues. These have been brought on by a large surge in demand which should abate when more people have full tanks and cans and as concern reduces.

Messages by some in the industry started the extra demand by drawing attention to what were limited and local delivery problems. Let us hope the industry can recharge the forecourt tanks and resume supply for more usual levels of demand. Those of us who held back would like to be able to replenish emptier car tanks at our regular times.

Mrs Merkel was no friend of the UK and helped the EU lose our membership

It is true that Mrs Merkel will soon retire from the office of Chancellor after a signal achievement of winning and keeping such a high office for 16 years. No-one else in her era came anywhere near such an achievement. She not only exercised great authority in Germany but also in the EU, where she was the leader of choice amongst the member states that the EU turned to to strike deals and find compromises to keep some momentum to the project. Being the Leader of the largest population, the largest national economy and the biggest financial contributor in the EU of course helped in carving out that niche.

Her diminishing numbers of fans and supporters in Germany will mourn her passing. They saw in her stability and calm, a woman who eschewed political gestures and strong arguments. She worked behind the scenes, sought compromises, changed policies when the wind changed and often sat on things for a long time before venturing into the argument. For most of her time Germany grew more prosperous, and unemployment stayed low following the SPD led contentious labour market and benefit reforms at the opening of the century.

Her legacy however should not be air brushed because she was a survivor. She leaves her party gravely weakened, sitting on around half the vote in recent polls compared with what she achieved in the Federal elections of 2013 (21% in a recent poll versus 41.5%) and facing a difficult election. We will see soon how the party has performed in the actual election.

She has undermined the policies and principles of the conservative party she inherited. She led the party from support for nuclear power to a policy of closing it down. She changed policy from controlling migration to welcoming

in hundreds of thousands of new economic migrants. She claimed to represent German conservative principles in the EU based around low levels of debt and no money printing only to allow or be unable to stop massive Quantitative easing programmes, the issue of EU debt and general large overshoots of the German inspired Maastricht debt and deficit criteria by many countries. She tried to reassure worried Germans that Germany's wealth and tax revenues would not be used to subsidise high deficit countries elsewhere in the EU, only to permit the build up of over Euro 1 trillion of German deposits at zero interest at the ECB which was lent on at zero interest to the deficit countries. She leaves her successor with difficult issues over the transition to net zero, the requirement to close down the German petrol and diesel vehicle industry and the need to get out of coal whilst ending nuclear.

More importantly, her main legacy in the EU is to have greatly assisted in the unintended exit of the UK from the EU. She led Mr Cameron and Mrs May to think that she had power to settle the EU position, which may have been true, and that she might be the helping hand they needed. Instead she was a hawk denying Mr Cameron any negotiating wins to take home to persuade floating voters to stay with the EU. She offered Mrs May no help to shape a deal which more MPs could have accepted. Her enthusiasm to force the UK into a federal project which a majority of the public were never going to accept sealed the fate of two UK Prime Ministers and allowed Leave to win both the referendum and the 2019 General election.

Parliament, the people and Brexit: a rare retrospect

For years on this site I faced a barrage of criticism from some for staying with the Conservative party and not joining UKIP or later the Brexit party. I explained patiently that there could only be a Brexit if the Conservative party gave the people a referendum by using their majority in Parliament to do so. I always thought UKIP and the Brexit party would fail to win a single seat in a General election. I was wrong by just one seat in one election. I always told such lobbyists that we needed to do three very difficult things. The first was to make it Conservative policy to hold a referendum. The second was for the Conservatives to win a majority. The third was to win the referendum. We managed to do all three with all the left of centre opposition parties continuously and resolutely against and with some Eurosceptics decrying us.

I myself stood on a manifesto of wanting to persuade the Conservative party to adopt an EU referendum in the 2010 election, and in support of the national Conservative party Manifesto pledge for a referendum in the 2015 election.

The pressure to give people a vote and to let us make the case for exit began with the David Nuttall proposal for a referendum which Parliament voted down on 24th October 2011. 83 Conservatives supported that motion which was defeated by 483 votes to 111. The extent of rebellion against the Conservative three line whip shocked the government. The inner group advocating the referendum were grateful to David for fronting it. We wanted someone as the first name on the proposal the leadership could not decry as a "usual suspect".

We gathered more support. By the time of the John Baron amendment to the Queen's speech seeking a referendum bill in 2013 we had well over 100 supporters of a referendum and the government itself abstained. The opposition voted the proposal down by 277 to 130. As the PM came to see we were near to having a majority of the backbench party and were intent on a referendum he conceded, knowing his leadership could be challenged by us if he did not grant one. It became official Conservative policy to let the people choose. The offer of a referendum helped the Conservatives to win a majority in 2015. We did not threaten the PM and wanted to help him win the election. He saw for himself the logic of the building support for a referendum.

When Mrs May shifted her stance from wanting to get Brexit done to accepting advice from a UK establishment that was determined to water down or thwart Brexit by negotiating us back in via another Treaty, many Conservatives rebelled. The first Meaningful vote on her bad deal was defeated by a massive 230 votes.

This week I was reminded of the significance of the third so called Meaningful Vote on Mrs May's proposed Withdrawal Agreement. Against great pressure to back the government 28 Conservative MPs rebelled again against a three line whip. The resulting defeat led to Mrs May's resignation, the election of Mr Johnson and the 2019 election needed to bring Parliament's view on Brexit more in line with the public.

None of my Eurosceptic critics on this site have ever acknowledged that we did pull off those three difficult tasks, and did not see that we always needed votes in Parliament to do these things. It is always possible for those who do not share power or need to compromise to shout from the sidelines what is the best answer, but to get something done you need votes in Parliament. The tragedy was it needed a change of leadership and a change of Parliament to get Parliament to do what the public had voted for in the referendum. And Yes, there are still things to do to sort out the NI issue and the fishing.