

Wokingham Post Office

Yesterday again in Wokingham the Post Office was busy, demonstrating insufficient counters and the need to open up the other part of the current building to provide more service. Instead the plans to close it and slim it down in W H Smith continues as if this demand did not exist.

I at last have a meeting with the Minister to put the case against closure again to the government. On Tuesday I will meet her at the Department. I will take that opportunity to present the Petition against closure. I thank the local Labour party who did a lot of the work organising it and collecting signatures during inclement weather in the Town Centre, and to the Conservative Councillors who also supported it.

The petition has over 6000 signatures. It says

“We oppose the plan to close Wokingham Post Office and to franchise the service to WH Smith. The move will damage the provision of services to customers, with a less accessible building, longer queues and waiting times, the loss of experienced staff and will be another blow to Wokingham’s historic character”.

I will explain to the Minister my own views of the problems this plan causes, and set it in the context of an expanding town with more demand for services from the new residents who will soon be moving in.

Should Labour do a deal with Mrs May?

The two main parties in Parliament who commanded 82.5% of the vote in the summer of 2017 managed to get just 56% in the local elections. Both have to think about this amazing fall from grace and what they are going to do about it.

Some of it was brought about by voters who blame the two big parties for failing to sort out Brexit. Leave voters are scandalised that 3 years on the wishes of the people have still not been implemented. Most Leave voters now just want to leave without the Agreement. Some Remain voters see the Agreement as obviously worse than staying in, and want a second referendum or simple cancellation of our notice to quit. Mrs May’s dreadful Agreement with the EU has united most Leave and most Remain voters against it, though of course the two sides want a different outcome without the Agreement.

The Labour party is unable to reach friendly unity on what to make its new EU policy. The Leader is understandably reluctant to commit himself to a second referendum. The many Labour MPs representing heavily pro Leave areas in the

Midlands and North would find such a policy particularly difficult to support. Meanwhile pro Remain London is urging the party to do all it can to undermine the Brexit vote and to retreat back to some kind of surrogate membership of much of the current EU. The noisy minority who want a second vote still have to say what the question is, or want to ask a pro Remain question, offering two different ways of staying in.

The Conservative party says it wants us to leave as soon as possible, and clearly does not want a second referendum. So far, however, it refuses to just leave and has created the conditions where European elections seem likely. It struggles to explain why the delay was needed and how soon we can get out, and on what terms. Just saying we will leave having signed the Withdrawal Agreement requires an answer to the question why will the Agreement go through after the elections when it didn't go through before them? How does the PM answer the criticism that the Agreement is an Agreement for delay or to stay in the customs union and many other features of the current EU? If all the Eurosceptic Conservatives voted for the Agreement in a fourth vote – which they are not going to do -it would still be defeated without a deal with Labour. The Irish backstop means it continues to weaken the DUP confidence and supply arrangement. The DUP cannot vote for the Agreement as drafted, and the government and EU refuse to renegotiate the Agreement.

So far Labour has shown willing to talk to the government, but is unwilling to simply sign up to the Withdrawal Agreement, understanding how toxic it is with the voters. They have played around with the details of the Political declaration where the EU has said there is some more flexibility. They have not yet come to a view of changes from a possible EU negotiations that Mrs May can accept. The negotiations to get out of the EU with an agreement only start once the Withdrawal Agreement lock in is signed, and would require an agreed common position on all the main issues between Mrs May and Mr Corbyn with a formal pledge that Mr Corbyn will place a 3 line whip on Labour MPs to push through the necessary legislation.

The big danger for Labour is that Mrs May, now desperate to secure the Agreement, will offer staying in the customs union and keeping the UK under single markets rules and laws as a negotiating aim for the next talks. Were Labour to accept, Labour too becomes responsible for the Withdrawal Agreement. If and when Parliament is shown the legislation to implement that in UK law it will discover how long, complex and binding the provisions of the Agreement are, extending the EU's tentacles back into so many features of UK life and government. It will remind all Labour's Leave voters that it is not in any sense leaving. It will stir up their Remain voters who will stress the superiority of current EU Treaty arrangements over the new arrangements in the new Treaty where we would have no vote or voice over all the laws and regulations the EU will enact for us.

The continent has a tradition now of so called grand coalitions between the main centre left and centre right parties as they no longer have the support to form a government individually. They usually depress the popularity of the junior party still further without adding to the support of the major partner. Quite often they presage a collapse in support for one or both such

parties, ushering in new political forces to government at the next election. Labour should study the tragic history of the collapse of the SDP in Germany as the grand coalition partner to Mrs Merkel. They now languish on 16% of the vote.

Signing the Agreement would be part of a joint Conservative/Labour wish to be more European. It might well succeed in making the UK more European with more parties and much lower support for the traditional parties that bend their knee to Brussels.

More trees please

I have always liked trees. I was brought up on the romance of the English forests – the adventure of Robin Hood in Sherwood, the lovers in Shakespeare's Arden, the beauty of local mixed deciduous tree woods, the walks to see primroses or to retrieve a conker from the forest floor. The landscape looks magnificent when the varied greens of the tree canopy in a wood or the mixed leaves in a coppice or hedgerow punctuate the landscape.

So I welcome the conclusion of the recent Report of the Climate Change Committee that urges us to plant more trees. I am glad the government is pressing ahead anyway with an expanded national forest. I trust also it will find ways to stimulate more tree plantations to deliver the wood we need. It makes little sense to import so much wood from Scandinavia, Canada and elsewhere. It seems particularly absurd to claim it is a green idea to burn so much wood at Drax that has come across the Atlantic in fuel burning ships. We need more faster growing timber for basic uses and for energy, and some good quality slower growing hardwoods for furniture and construction. The heart of English architecture and shipbuilding was always English oak. We could grow more and use more English oak for a variety of enduring purposes.

I am all in favour of a greener policy than we follow in many respects. I want us to get rid of VAT on green products like insulation, heating controls and draught excluders as soon as we are allowed to out of the EU. I am a strong advocate of more fuel efficiency and better home insulation. I want us to keep more green spaces and gaps between settlements. In my own part of the world the pace of housebuilding and the erosion of countryside is too fast. I want a future plan that is gentler on the landscape. I want more food production at home to cut food miles. I want a fishing policy that is kinder to our fish and to local fishermen and women.

The Climate Change Report contains some important figures. It reminds us that the UK has done more than most to cut CO₂ output, now down by 44% from 1990 levels. The UK consumes 7 tonnes of carbon a head a year compared to the EU's 9, China's 10 and the USA's 20. If we carry on with current targets the UK will increase the average global temperature according to their models by 0.005 degrees C by 2070. They want us to go further so the increase the UK

contributes is just 0.001 degrees C.

I want to concentrate on greening the landscape and reducing migration levels to cut the pressure of development on our countryside.

[The message of the local elections](#)

Both main national parties in Parliament lost votes and seats in the Council elections. The failure to get through Brexit as promised annoyed a lot of voters who wished to vote for anyone other than the two main parties as a result. The Conservatives were blamed for promising an exit with or without an Agreement by 29 March 2019 and then delaying. Leave voters were annoyed we are not out, and firm Remainers worried that nonetheless the party still says it wants to leave. Labour were punished for changing their Manifesto position of 2017 with a view to watering down or delaying Brexit by Leave voters, and by Remain voters for not being clearly in favour of revocation or a second referendum.

The Council elections were not a second referendum on Brexit, as the Brexit party did not stand, and as the switchers away from Labour and Conservative were both Leave and Remain supporters. There was a mood to vote for anyone who was not a candidate for Labour or the Conservatives in quite a few cases. Independents did well, without expressing a particular viewpoint on the EU referendum.

There were various local issues Council by Council, where some incumbent Councils were unpopular for perceived failings on their local decisions. Many of the doorstep conversations I had in the Wokingham and West Berkshire contests were about local issues.

[Message to Councillors in Wokingham Borough](#)

I would like to thank all Councillors who stood for re election but who lost their seats yesterday. I am grateful to you for all the hard work you put into your roles and for your service to the local community.

Many electors wanted change, both national and local. Much of the criticism of the Conservative party was about the failure to resolve the Brexit issue in a timely way. The government was criticised by both Leave and Remain voters for their draft Agreement and for the failure to secure a deal more

could accept. Labour too suffered from criticism of its changed stance on Brexit compared to the General election and its role in the current impasse in Parliament.

There were also a number of important local concerns. Many relate to congestion, the disruption of our streets by utility works and the construction of new homes, and to the cumulative impact of substantial development on services and facilities. I am willing to work with the Council to help shape a new Plan for the future based around lower housing targets, and to help the Council resist extra development over current plans. I am also keen for the Council to do more to improve junctions, upgrade our road network, help provide more school places and surgery capacity for the NHS and promote the new Town Centre in Wokingham.

I also congratulate all the new Councillors elected and look forward to working with them in the interests of our shared constituents. There is an important role for an informed opposition to criticise where things can be improved and to support where common cause is in the interests of our community.