

No delay

The referendum result must be fully implemented on 29 March 2019 as the law states. Mrs May lost the support of 200 Conservative MPs when she proposed a delay in Brexit in Parliament last week. The EU can see from that vote she does not even speak for her own governing party when she asks for a delay. She cannot tell us how long a delay or why!

Jobs and pay continue to grow

Contrary to gloomy pundits the start of this year has brought more good news in the jobs market. 222,000 additional jobs were added in the last three months to end January, meaning more people with an income from employment to pay their bills and improve their lives. Pay sustained rises of 3.4%, usefully ahead of price inflation, so the average earner will have a bit more spending power as a result.

Now would be a good time to reinforce these favourable trends. Given the growing weakness of the Euro area economy and the slowdown in China, it would be helpful if the government would tax a bit less and spend a bit more. The figures show higher tax receipts than planned. They also show continuing reductions in taxes like VED and Stamp Duty where the rates have been set too high to maximise the revenue, whilst damaging activity and putting people out of work in the affected areas.

All parties agree that the best way out of low income and poor living standards is to get a job, and the best way to get a decent job is to work up from a lower paid job. Good employers help train an individual to realise their skill levels and therefore raise their pay. As unemployment is now quite low and as some employers are complaining they cannot attract the workers they need, it is even more imperative for companies to work with the people they have got. Value, them, train them, pay them better and get their productivity up. The UK is good at creating lots more jobs, but needs to get better at increasing productivity. The aim must be a higher wage higher productivity economy.

Unemployment is now at a 40 year low and employment at a new high. 76% of all people of working age are in jobs.

Planning for Wokingham

Today I am meeting the Secretary of State for Communities and local government in the Commons to put Wokingham's case for a slower rate of building. Last year the housebuilding rate shot up to more than twice the required amount under the local plan, with obvious strains on our road network and local communities living nearby.

I have two proposals to put to him. The first is Wokingham's large contribution to the national housebuilding effort should be reflected in decisions by Planning Inspectors,. They should not grant more permissions outside the agreed areas in the local plan.

The second is that Wokingham should have a lower build rate for the next local plan period.

Maybe you cannot keep asking the same question in Parliament

The Speaker's ruling was a good one on the government's Withdrawal Agreement. It has twice been decisively rejected. On the second occasion the government tabled additional documents and argued it was a amended proposal, but many in Parliament thought the changes did not amount to much. As I wrote at the time, ask the same question and you probably get the same answer. From this clear ruling it seems the government cannot now table the same Agreement and vote again on it before the end of this week when the PM goes to the European Council.

If she goes to the Council and gets some material change to the Agreement then she could return to the Commons next week and seek another vote. Meanwhile the ruling should also have implications for some other hardy perennials that this Parliament likes to go over and over again. Several times we have voted down staying in the customs union. We have voted down a second referendum. We have voted down the Cooper-Boles-Letwin idea of taking over the Commons agenda to legislate for Brexit delay. Perhaps now these cannot be put again either.

It is also true that the Commons approved a motion against leaving without an Agreement. That however contradicts the legislation the House has passed, where the legislation will take precedence unless amended.

I am urging the Prime Minister to go to the Council at the end of this week and tell them we were leaving without signing the Withdrawal Agreement. I am asking her to table a free trade agreement and to invite them to talks as we

leave the EU in accordance with their timetable. I do not see why the UK would seek an extension to Article 50. So far Ministers have been unable to come up with any plausible reason why the EU should grant us an extension.

Two offers of delay

The Withdrawal Agreement is a deliberate expensive delay. It means we do not take back control of our laws, or our money or our borders for at least 21 months, and probably for 45 months under the extension built into it. That would take us well beyond the next General election, and would mean no Brexit for six and half years from the referendum! Remain forces would then be arguing the referendum was out of date and we have to just accept staying in. It also means trying to negotiate our eventual way out under duress, with the EU pocketing all they want in the Withdrawal Agreement and likely to demand even more sacrifices for little in return. There would also be the backstop, likely to keep us in the customs union in perpetuity.

There is then the nebulous "long delay" of recent briefings. No time limit, no price, no legal basis has been set out, because of course there is no such agreement as yet. Does it come with continuing full membership? If so they would have to fight the European elections, which the two main parties have no wish to do. Or would it come with some new lesser status, in which case it will need elaborate UK legislation and a new Treaty like the Withdrawal Treaty Parliament has twice rejected.?

So there we have it. An actual very expensive long delay which Parliament rejects, or a theoretical long delay which the 188 Conservative MPs who voted against delay could not accept. What a silly idea that we have to choose between a disaster and phantom.

The default option remains leaving without signing the Withdrawal Agreement, which remains the best option. Then we could get on immediately under EU rules with negotiating a free trade agreement with them. The government should table one now to avoid new tariffs and barriers if the EU agrees to negotiate an FTA.