

Remembrance week-end

I will be laying wreaths at St Mary's Church Burghfield at 11am on Sunday and at the War Memorial in Wokingham Town Hall after the service in All Saints on Sunday afternoon.

5 November

Today we remember the Gunpowder plot. This planned terrorist attack on the British establishment 413 years ago was fortunately thwarted, unlike the one in 1984 which I lived through. It is curious that we still commemorate the former.

What was it about 1605 that causes it still to resonate today? I suppose it is because the outrage was planned on such a huge scale, aiming to blow up the King, his government, and all other people of whatever opinion in Lords and Commons. It left the establishment shaken, but also relieved that their intelligence networks picked up the mistakes of the terrorist group in time. The country had just got through the potentially difficult business of passing government from Queen Elizabeth to King James, when there was no clear single heir with uncontested title. Elizabeth died with no son or daughter, brother or sister to take over. It was a reminder that there was a strong minority in the kingdom that could not accept a Protestant succession and would murder on a mass scale to overturn it.

The other reason is probably that the combination of a bonfire and fireworks makes a great evening out for many. It is seasonal, with colder dark evenings a suitable backdrop for a great warming fire and for a colourful display. Some now find the idea of burning a Guy in effigy distasteful, as we remember the best known criminal of the plot. Others worry about the noise of fireworks affecting animals, or fret about the safety risks of so much modern gunpowder. The trend to more large displays makes sense. You can pool the costs to get better fireworks, and more care can be taken in setting up the show and letting it off. You can hold them away from homes, with strong emphasis on avoiding fire hazard.

I think it is a tradition that fulfils a need for a November event. We can all come together to be glad that different strands of Christianity now live in tolerance of each other, and to celebrate that on this occasion in 1605 terrorism was thwarted. It is a good reminder that settling political difference by arguments and votes is a much better approach.

Bad deals

Versions of a possible deal for the UK with the EU have today been denied by the government. That's sensible of them. All the versions I have seen are not Brexit. Let's just leave, spend our own money, and negotiate a free trade deal once the EU has realised we are out. There's nothing on offer worth £39bn.

In praise of good experts

When I criticised so called economic and business experts on the BBC someone wrote in here to say if I were ill I would want an expert doctor to help. Yes, of course. I am all in favour of genuine expertise. I have spent a lot of my life reading and listening to people with expertise to widen my understanding. I admire learned people who improve our knowledge and make accurate predictions and diagnosis.

Were I ill I would of course turn to well educated qualified doctors who know far more than me about illness and treatment. I would however want an expert who was likely to get both diagnosis and treatment right. The first instruction for any expert must be, do no harm. The second must be to know the limits of your knowledge and craft, and learn each day from experience. I do not usually write here with critical comments about modern medicine as I am not qualified to do so.

I am qualified in matters financial, and have studied economies and public policy for many years. That is why I feel confident enough to criticise and disagree with so called experts in these areas who lack basic knowledge and with experts whose judgement is faulty. In the recent Today programme case both so called experts were commenting on the simple question of what the Bank of England was going to do on interest rates. Both wrongly stated the current interest rate, thinking it was one third lower than it is. Why should we then value their opinion?

An apologist for the BBC said it was just a simple mistake. I of course accept we can all make mistakes. I go to considerable lengths to check facts and figures for this blog, but agree I could make a mistake. If I did I would move rapidly to amend it. I have not heard Today amend this mistake. Whilst I could accept one of them could make a mistake I find it difficult to believe two genuinely independent experts could both make such an elementary mistake on the same occasion. Surely the outside expert is used by the BBC to avoid just that sort of error or lack of knowledge by the in house expert? The

outside expert did correct the BBC man when she thought he was wrong to say the Bank was forecasting a recession on a WTO exit from the EU. She quoted the wrong interest rate as well as the BBC man.

I am returning to this because the Today Business correspondent regularly turns one of the few decent business slots on the mainstream media into an anti Brexit story. Following the interest rate howler he rushed on to try to explore how and why a no deal Brexit might cause a recession. His guest helped him, by agreeing that there were unnamed forecasters who hold this view though she did not think that included the Bank of England.

He asked her why these nameless forecasters thought that. It was surely a factual question which you could only answer as an expert if you had read these forecasts and could name them. If you answer speculatively and in general terms, as she seemed to do, you should as an expert balance the answer with why others presumably in her view including the Bank of England do not think there will be a recession just from a no deal exit.

The following morning a different BBC person introduced the business slot. This time we were told – with support from another “expert” interview” – that the pound had risen owing to rumours of a financial services deal between the UK and the EU. They made heavy weather of explaining this would be a one sided affair with the EU in the driving seat, without mentioning that the EU wants access to London and has more passports into London than London has into the continent. The government had denied there was any such agreement, and there is no official draft or agreed text allowing an expert to tell us what they have in mind. More importantly during this section of the business slot there was no mention of the fact that the Governor of the Bank of England had added another possible two interest rate rises to his forecast, which most people think was the main reason the pound went up! They got around to mentioning this as an also ran possibility after this story about Brexit.

This is not serious journalism based on texts, statements and sources. Most days this section of the Today programme is just used as a way of attacking WTO Brexit.

[Italy and the EU – what is the point in Euro countries debating economics in General Elections?](#)

The biggest items in the Italian election were economic. Did the economy need a stimulus? Does Italy need lower taxes? Should it reverse some of the big cuts in spending made at the EU’s request earlier this decade? Do people want a basic income from the state?

Voters answered clearly. In the north they wanted tax cuts and a boost. In the south they wanted better benefits and a boost. All across Italy they wanted to roll back the pensions cuts of 2011. They elected a Lega/Five Star government who set out to carry through their wishes.

To make the government more palatable to the EU they appointed a PM and a Finance Minister more to the EU's liking, with the two winning party leaders accepting Deputy Premierhips. They constructed quite a modest budget by their standards, limiting how far they could go on tax, benefits and pension reform. The EU decided nonetheless to reject it and to tell them to produce a tougher one.

The EU argues that Italy has borrowed far too much in the past. The underlying reality it has also been borrowing too much recently, drawing down large sums at zero interest from the European Central Bank to keep its banking system liquid and to allow the state and companies to go on borrowing from banks. The custodians of the Euro are worried by the scale of this, now at Euro 500bn, and want to call a halt to it. They insist that if you are in the Euro the EU tells you how much you can borrow, as it is a matter of common interest. If a state does not comply the EU sends detailed proposals on taxes and spending to try to get a compliant budget. If the state still does not comply it will be fined. The ECB could also take action to make things very uncomfortable for Italian banks and the wider economy, as it did to Greece and Cyprus.

Greece went through this argument and lost. The radical Syriza government desperate to lift Euro austerity buckled when pressure was applied to the banking system. The absence of ECB support meant the banks had to close for some of the time and limit people's access to their own money. This makes carrying on normal business very difficult. They discovered that if you want to stay in the Euro the EU decides your budget. Italy says she wants to stay in the Euro, so she will be told the rules do apply for her.

What should the leaders of the Italian government do in this situation? They have a General Election mandate which the EU intends to veto. What is the point in General elections debating big economic issues, if the national government is not in charge? Who is and who should be accountable for Italy's budget? When will the EU complete the architecture of its political union, to make its power more accountable somehow?