

Improving Universal Credit

I had a meeting with Ministers today about Universal Credit. The transition locally so far has gone fairly smoothly, but there are issues that need sorting out to ensure that claimants do not lose out from change, and to ensure that the benefits sustain those in need whilst providing incentive to those who can work. So far Universal Credit has been a helpful backdrop to a range of policies that have succeeded in stimulating the private sector to create many more jobs and to get many more people into work.

Under the old system people had to claim six different benefits from three different government departments. The marginal rate of tax and benefit withdrawal could be a penal 90%. Under the 1997-2010 government the number of households where no-one was working almost doubled. The single system with a single department should make access easier and distribution costs lower. The government has scrapped the original 7 day waiting period, made advance payments easier for those who need them and are improving benefits for the disabled. This was in response to sensible criticisms of the original scheme which I and others took up at the time.

The roll out of Universal Credit is deliberately slow to try to avoid mistakes and to make improvements as it is brought in. I want it to be generous to those in need, and helpful to those who want to get into work. If there are comments people want taken into account, please let me know.

An MP's surgery

MPs are receiving copies of a lobby email asking us to sign a pledge not to report illegal migrants if they come to our surgeries. Let me explain the nature of an MP's surgery and the legal position to those who send in this email.

The main purposes of an MP's surgery are to take up cases for constituents where government has let them down, treated them badly or failed to apply its own rules fairly, and to listen to constituents who have advice on how laws and government policies should be changed to make life better. Constituents often stray beyond their relations with national government into their relations with Councils and sometimes even their contractual relations with private sector suppliers and employers. The MP has most chance of helping with national government, where more direct access to Ministers can sometimes trigger a review of an action or policy which resolves the problem, or where legal change can sometimes be generated to fix the problem for the future. I work with local Councillors on local matters, as the Councillors have privileged access to local officers that the MP does not have. Just as collectively MPs can change offending national laws, so Councillors

collectively can change offending local policies. Occasionally an MP letter to a private sector company that is misbehaving can help, but as a general rule contractual disputes between constituents and private companies are best worked out in direct dialogue with the company and through the usual complaints processes available.

Attending an MP's surgery does not give the constituent sanctuary from the law. Whilst an MP will handle information carefully, in order to process a complaint or resolve a problem with government the MP will usually have to share the information with the government. I wish to repeat that if someone comes to my surgery they should understand I have no special privilege to give them to protect them from the law, and will normally share their information with the authorities to seek to resolve their issue. If someone is living in Wokingham as an illegal migrant and they wish to seek legal permission to stay then I will assist them if they have a sensible case by contacting the authorities, but I cannot give them some indemnity or help them cover up their illegal status. Similarly if someone comes to me and tells me they have not paid tax I am happy to take up their case with the authorities if they believe they do not have to pay the tax or if they think their assessment is wrong, but I am not in the business of condoning tax evasion and have no blessings to give to tax law breakers.

Quite often an MP has to explain to a constituent that the law is as it is for a good reason, and they like everyone else will just have to accept it even though they do not like it. Sometimes I find advising someone not to pursue a complaint but to accept the world as it is can prove to be good advice which they accept. You can cause yourself a lot of trouble and distress by pursuing complaints that are not going to result in a good outcome. Show me a just cause and a clear unfairness from government and I will fight tenaciously to have the injustice remedied.

[Mrs May damages the Union she wants to defend](#)

Here's an irony. Mrs May says defending the Union of the UK is one of her fundamental principles. Yet in three of her misjudgements over Brexit she puts its future more at risk.

In Northern Ireland the upholders of the Union are the majority community who vote DUP and similar parties. Mrs May instead accepts the analysis of Sinn Fein and the Republic of Ireland, used by the EU to damage Brexit. All of this group wish to end the union of the UK and create an island of Ireland economic area, as a stepping stone to an island of Ireland country. This is proving damaging to Brexit, threatens the end of Mrs May's coalition and is incomprehensible to Unionists in Northern Ireland. Mrs May needs to be on the

side of the Unionists who want to support her.

Most of the people of the Union live in England. Mrs May ignores us. The word England rarely crosses her lips. No one speaks for England in the endless devolution/Brexit talks. The strong pro Brexit vote in England is never mentioned. It is as if Mrs May is forgetful of the voting base that gave her the largest Conservative vote since Margaret Thatcher. It is high time she balanced her view of the Union with recognition of England's needs, to create a more realistic and even union.

The third mistake is in her handling of Scotland. If you want to keep the union together you cannot keep giving concessions to an Independence party called the SNP who do not speak for the majority in Scotland upon the only issue that matters to them. Their understandable habit of turning every issue into one about independence wears thin after they lost a referendum on this very question. The PM has to appeal over the heads of the SNP to the pro Union majority in Scotland, Labour, Conservative and others. She has to say No to anti Union demands by the SNP where these are against the spirit of Brexit. Fortunately the SNP lost two referendums in the right order. They first lost the Scottish independence referendum, so they then had to accept the validity of the UK wide EU referendum. It's no good them saying Scotland voted Remain, as the electorate was the whole UK. Their refusal to accept the UK wide result shows how anti democratic they are. They have become the neverendum party wanting to have more referendums on the same topics until they get a result they like.

Mrs May should try disagreeing with the enemies of our Union more, whilst being more in harmony with its defenders. The defenders of the Union accept Brexit, as that is the will of the majority in the Union referendum. It is central to the future of the Union that Brexit is delivered properly and promptly. England expects. Wales expects. All those Leave voters in Northern Ireland and Scotland expect. We only keep our Union if Union decisions matter and are implemented by the politicians.

[A small win in the battle against waste in the NHS](#)

The Health Minister has announced a welcome drive to get NHS equipment returned after use so it can be used again after cleaning, or recycled. Some NHS Trusts do this, and the Minister is now seeking to extend this to the whole English NHS. Readers of this site will know I have been pressing for this for some time, as an obvious way of saving money and cutting down on waste.

Tax and spend

I read in one newspaper that we will be offered tax cuts in the budget. Just what we need to stimulate an economy being put through a combined monetary and fiscal squeeze. Then I read in another paper that the Chancellor will tear up the promises to raise Income Tax thresholds, and find some more money for Universal Credit. I read elsewhere that the Treasury still thinks it needs to raise a tax or two to pay for the increased NHS spending that has been outlined.

Who knows which of these leaks is informed. They could all be right with a government still trying to make up its mind. What is clear is many of us who will have to vote on the budget when they have decided and announced it want to honour the promise to raise tax thresholds, want to cut taxes to provide a stimulus to enterprise and want to boost spending on crucial public services. We do not however wish to run up excessive debts and do not think there is a magic money tree.

The good news is there is an easy way to do all these things. Make it clear to the EU that we do not owe them money after we leave, and announce we will be leaving on 29 March 2019 with or without agreement to a Free Trade deal. The EU can decide whether they want one or not. It is in their interest to want one and I suspect they would offer one if they were sure we will just leave otherwise.

The government also has the option to review the large spending planned on HS2. There does need to be more spending on better targetted rail investments in the North, but even after allowing for these the cancellation of this vastly expensive project would also free substantial resource to do other things.

The extraordinary thing about current Treasury thinking, as they dither over any increased spending tax cut, is their persistent wish to give £39 bn to the EU. Why cant they transfer some of the toughness they show about desirable UK spending and tax cuts into determined resistance to paying so much money to the EU when there is no legal requirement to do so.

I have one simple piece of advice for the Chancellor. Dig in against more money for the EU and all your money problems for the next three years drop away. Grasp that we will trade just fine on 30 March 2019 if we just leave. That is what we voted for. We want to spend our own money on our own priorities. What part of £39 bn doesn't the Treasury understand?