

Wokingham Town Centre re opens

It is good news that Wokingham Marketplace is now open again. People are welcome to come to enjoy the restaurants, cafes, street life and shops. It is good that the roads near the Town Hall are back in use and you can now get to the shops without detours and pavement restrictions. I look forward to the arrival of additional retailers to fill the new shops that are nearing completion on the old Rose Street car park site.

Do you like the new Town centre? I would welcome feedback for the Council on this matter. Do come and have a look and see how good the shops, restaurants, cafes and facilities are.

The sad costs of death – Improving Tell Us Once.

Tell Us Once is a great idea. It looks as if the government wants to help the relatives of those who have just died, and to be efficient at the same time. I recently suggested it does not work out like that. Today I wish to explain a bit more of the details.

The first odd thing about Tell Us Once is someone registering a death with a Registrar is told about it at the end of the interview. Much of the data needed for Tell Us Once has been collected and accepted by the Registrar, but he or she does not then press a button to save all that in Tell Us Once format, nor help the relative with the Tell Us Once declaration. Instead the person is issued with a website address and a unique access code and told to go home and go through the whole registration process again on their own, telling the computer what they have just told the Registrar and answering some extra questions about whether the person who has died was receiving benefits and a pension. This makes it Tell Us Twice. It can also be difficult for the relative to do, as they may not know the financial details of the deceased. Surely the state, primed with the dead person's National Insurance number, name, address and tax identifier knows what money it is sending the person?

The second odd thing is that not all parts of the government sign up to Tell Us Once. So if, for example, the deceased had a few premium bonds Tell Us Once would not help the relatives as National Savings are not in the system. Why can't all parts of national and local government be in it?

The third odd thing is it may not work. The relative of the deceased may still get separate communications asking for information already supplied from the Tax authorities. Payments may still be made of pensions and benefits

after the state knows the details of the death. Dead patients may stay on GP lists.

I have asked Ministers to look into this. I do so because I think grieving relatives deserve better. I have also done so because the current system is a waste of taxpayers money, sending money to the deceased and then going through a complex process to get it back.

What should a charity do?

Many charities do good work, helping people who need support and assistance. Educational charities provide some great education and assist the many who cannot afford fees where payment is required. Health and wellbeing charities offer the extras beyond those that can be afforded from the NHS and benefits system.

There are some other charities that see part of their role to be as a campaign organisation to press a government to do things. This is a more questionable use of charitable donations and the tax exemptions that go with them. Political parties and political think tanks cannot claim charitable exemption from tax. A think tank that wants tax exemption has to demonstrate party political neutrality and an emphasis on education and independence of view.

There is also a divide over money. Many good and successful charities have built up endowments. This enables them to maintain a decent and usually rising rate of spending, without having to raise money to pay the monthly bills. Other charities live hand to mouth, establishing large support organisations with people drawing salaries that requires continuous fund raising to pay the bills. In some cases it encourages aggressive techniques to get the money to meet the salaries of the staff raising the money. Sometimes well endowed charities get criticised for being "rich" which seems odd. Given that all the money is held as a fund to pay future benefits to qualifying people and causes, surely it is good news that this has been guaranteed for future years by using the endowment model.

There is a growing concern about the charitable model that employs large numbers of well paid staff to fund raise and to demand that the government does something about their chosen area. Charities can attract a lot of volunteer talent or able people who understand rates of pay for a CEO of a charity will be lower than for a CEO of a competitive private sector business.

Charities also have to be careful not to compete using their tax free status as a competitive advantage against struggling private sector smaller businesses.

The missing agenda

The government used conference to announce a few modest policies and spending plans. There was the much promoted ban on employers deducting money from tips, the freeze on fuel duty, £2 m for the Midlands Engine Partnership, a welcome £240 m extra for social care, future guidance on the maximum time young people should spend on social media, a higher rate of stamp duty for foreigners and a statutory duty for employers to consider flexible working for new jobs.

The financial items made no overall difference to a £2trillion economy being slowed by a combined fiscal and monetary squeeze, which went undiscussed. The other big gap in proceedings was the absence of detailed positive plans department by department on how they are going to take advantage of Brexit from next April. We did have a confirmation again that the new migration policy will reduce numbers of people coming to seek low paid work or benefits, and will be fair to the whole world. But where was the detail? Where is the draft legislation so we can have it in law by March?

It was the caution, the refusal of the whole government to engage with the big picture and to show energy in using the new freedoms and the freed money which Brexit will bring which drove delegates from the main conference hall to the fringe. There on the fringe were the bold ideas, the bigger picture, the wish to grasp the opportunities Brexit brings. The irony was not lost on many that the single word slogan was Opportunity for the conference as a whole, but all too many cabinet Ministers chose not to take any of the opportunities on offer for our country as we leave the EU.

So lets have the agenda filled. Lets have a farming policy that promotes home grown food, a fishing policy that puts UK interests first, a borders policy that provides the law to back up the aspirations, spending policies that reflect popular priorities. Above all lets have some tax cuts which can be the best driver of enterprise.

“A once in a generation decision”

The UK government sent every household a leaflet about the EU referendum.

It has as its headline “ A once in a generation decision”. There was no mention of two votes or a second chance to decide. Nor do we need a second ballot.

It said about the decision to stay or leave “This is your decision. The

government will implement what you decide". It also made clear the government strongly recommended staying in, and warned that we could not stay part of the single market whilst leaving the EU.

Many of us voted Leave in good faith that if we won we would leave the EU and its single market, as we wished to do. We also voted secure in the knowledge that the government would implement our wishes and not expect us to vote twice.

We now want to get on with the benefits of leaving. We want the government to energetically pursue new trade deals with non EU countries. We want a new migration system that works for us. We want new fishing and farming policies that boost our home industries.

A Remain oriented Parliament has made heavy weather of honouring these government pledges, but has now reluctantly passed the EU Withdrawal Act. Taken together with the Article 50 letter which Parliament sent by an overwhelming majority, the UK has now done all it needs to do legally to leave on 29 March 2019.

A possible Chequers deal does not implement the wishes of the majority to leave, but looks unlikely to find favour either with the EU or with a significant number of Conservative MPs. Yesterday again at conference members of the party made crystal clear their dislike of Chequers and their wish to get on and leave quickly. There were large crowds for pro Brexit speakers at fringe meetings, and a muted response to Ministers pushing the government line. I urge the government to make clear to the EU that we are currently planning just to leave in accordance with the Acts passed and with the decision of the UK electorate. The sooner the EU believes this is what will happen, the sooner they will want to sort out those things about their continued access to the UK market that some worry about. In practice the UK government is not planning new barriers, but does need to get on with setting out its post 29 March tariff schedule which might provoke a wish to trade tariff free by the EU.