

Government accountability

Recent events have turned the spotlight on Ministerial accountability, leading some to explore what responsibility if any unelected officials have for mistakes in government. The failure over some ten years to send out the right reminders for breast cancer screening follows hard on the heels of a longer time period of failure to equip Windrush arrivals with proper papers as British citizens. We have seen rail franchises collapse, and other contractors of government get into financial trouble after bidding for government contracts.

Under our system Ministers take responsibility for anything government does wrongly or fails to do. This is based on ultimate policy authority resting with them, and the fact that they are the public voice and face of their departments. Officials are not normally allowed public voice and can usually expect Ministers to take the rap, in return for sharing with Ministers what is happening and seeking Ministerial approval for policies.

This traditional model has been subject to amendments in recent decades. The idea behind the Next Steps Agencies and their Labour successors was to split policy from implementation. Executive Agencies to implement environmental controls or to build and maintain highways were established, with accountable officials as CEOs. They directly answer to Parliamentary Committees and are responsible for spending money, reporting to the PAC where necessary. The idea was to make the professionals and experts responsible for executing policy, and to distance Ministers from writing and letting contracts and from judging complex technical issues like railway safety features or highways design.

There was always in the traditional model a separate line of accountability and responsibility for proper spending through the Permanent Secretary as Accounting Officer to the PAC, in parallel to the Minister's responsibility for budget choices and overall adequacy.

These latest debates do require further exploration of how much the Minister is to blame for problems that go back years, and for matters which have rested entirely or largely with officials. Ministers had always said the Windrush arrivals were British, and had said they wanted women up to 70 to have breast screening. The policy was the one Parliament wanted. The issue is why was it not seen through?

More difficult is the situation over Brexit customs policy. I read that some officials think we cannot be ready for 2019 or 2021 for exit with smooth operation of the borders. yet Ministers have asked the civil service to make sure we are ready, and Ministers and senior officials who have been asked by Parliamentary Committees have assured us they will be ready for any eventuality over the talks. This kind of noise off, and selective leaks of official papers that Ministers do not agree with, is not part of the deal between Ministers and officials. If Ministers are to defend officials, they should expect officials to put their concerns to Ministers and then to stick

to the agreed line when decisions are made.

Questions on cars for Greg Clark

I share the Business Secretary's concern for the health of the UK car production industry. I do not share his view that without an enhanced Customs partnership with the EU complex supply chains will slow down too much. Complex supply chains work just fine today into the UK from outside the EU, demonstrating you do not need to be in the Customs Union to run them successfully. We will control access to our markets once we leave the EU so why would we want to slow down important components coming in?

What I want Mr Clark to do is to stand up for the UK car industry today. Over the last year there has been a sharp decline in sales and output, led by a big fall in diesel cars. This followed a nine month period of great growth after the Referendum vote, and dates from the March 2017 budget. So will Mr Clark now intervene, as he likes to do, to stop the output fall and job losses?

Will he challenge the Chancellor about the impact of the higher rates of VED introduced in 2017?

Will he seek some easing of policies which have been restricting car loans on new vehicles?

Will he reduce the attacks on diesel cars? Surely if he wants to see big switch away from diesel cars over the next twenty years or so he needs to pace the change so it does not damage existing investments and output. Modern diesel cars are about as clean as petrol vehicles and meet much higher standards on emissions than previous generations of cars. The UK worked hard to attract inward investment into car diesel engine production, only now to turn round against the products.

Mr Clark says he is running an industrial policy to promote more business. He needs to revisit the government's policies towards cars where output has been hit. As we are still in the EU this fall has nothing to do with Brexit.

Aircraft noise

I am meeting the Aviation Minister on 9 May in Westminster to see what more can be done to abate the excessive noise from planes over Wokingham. Anyone with strong views and points to make should send them to me in advance, as

this could help the case I am going to put.

An alternative to the Communist party Manifesto

1. Everyone one an owner – widen ownership of property and shares
2. Lower rates of tax to encourage work and reward employees
3. Breaking up state ownership and returning it to families – sale of Council houses and sales of shares in state enterprises
4. Encouraging individual ension savings, backed by a system of National Insurance
5. Abolition of exchange controls and conduct of a supportive money policy, with competing commercial banks
6. Denationalisation and promotion of competition in industry
7. Introducing broader freer markets to allow choice and fair exchange. Encourage easy small business formation.
8. Attack high state debt levels through debt reduction and debt swap programmes
9. Define the state's role in providing for law and order, welfare and defence
10. Free education and health care for all

This was the outline of my Popular Capitalist Manifesto. It was taken up by some of the Eastern European countries when they broke from the Soviet Union, and was translated for re publication.

It appears we need to win these arguments all over again given the relentless drift of the Labour party towards nationalisation, punitive taxation and a dislike of ownership and choice.

Germany and China celebrate Marx's 200th birthday

Germany accepted the gift of a large statue to Marx from China to commemorate 200 years since Marx's birth. Their were very mixed views in Germany we read about accepting this gift, and even more mixed views of the legacy of the political philosopher.

There is no doubt of his influence. Some of the teachers and lecturers I heard were heavily influenced by what they thought Marx had said, though

most of them also thought you could adapt Marxism to a social democrat framework. They were not normally willing to defend Marxism as practised in the USSR at the time. I read some of Marx's works to find out how a long dead intellectual could cast such a shadow over societies that we ended up with the tyrannies of Marxist states. They were all much poorer than the west, and so obviously lacked the personal freedoms we took for granted.

One of my earlier political publications was a rebuttal of the Communist party Manifesto. That slim document was far more influential than Das Capital, as it was so much more accessible, with a strong ten point political programme which informed the ultra socialist agendas of Marxist revolutionaries and tyrants around the world. The irony of the document was that its central attack on inequality and privilege led directly to a worse kind of privilege, the privilege that accrued to the political leaders of communist states and to communist party members which was then enforced with violence against anyone who questioned their rule.

So I wrote the Popular Capitalist Manifesto. It proposed doing the opposite in nine of the ten policies recommended by Marx. The one I agreed with was universal free education with no child factory labour..

To remind you what Marx proposed:

The abolition of all private property

A heavy progressive income tax

The abolition of all inheritance rights

Confiscation of all property of rebels and emigrants

A monopoly state bank

Centralisation of all transport and communications in state hands

Wholesale nationalisation of means of production and state planned farming

Establishment of industrial armies with equal requirement of all to labour

Shift of people into towns with erosion of distinction between town and country

Free education for all with abolition of child factory labour

In a future post I will set out my alternative to this Manifesto.