

Too many people

The latest immigration figures show the government should have listened to those of us who said they needed to tighten the rules over inviting in economic migrants and students. Last year to June 2023 1.2 million came to stay in the UK, with 508,000 leaving. All the people coming need housing, health care, schools for the children. The 508,000 leaving free some housing, but not necessarily the right type in the right places for those arriving.

The costs of all this are very large for taxpayers. There is a growing danger we cannot offer enough decent housing and public services for our new arrivals. The government needs urgently to raise the income level for a job that qualifies for a work permit, and to enforce new rules over students' dependants whose numbers have shot up.

In 2016 Commissioner Timmermans, today in the news contesting the Netherlands election for the left/Greens alliance, made proposals about burden sharing for EU migrants. He told the EU that member states should make a payment of 250,000 Euro for every migrant a country did not want to take under its quota for sharing the influx of migrants around the Union. That was probably a fair assessment then of the capital costs of providing new homes and public service provision, along with the early running costs borne by the state.

I think the UK should produce an updated figure for us today. It may well be that around £250,000 is a fair guess. A new social home costs around £300,000 to provide, but much of that is family not single person housing. A new school place costs say £20,000 to provide the building, averaging primaries and secondaries. The annual cost of a secondary school place is above £6000 and of a primary place above £4600. Adding an additional 600,00-700,000 people a year probably needs a couple of new District General hospitals at say £500m each as well as new surgeries. The annual cost per person of NHS provision is now more than £4000.

This shows that the so called cheap labour we invite in may help employers but creates a headache for public spending. The bogus figures that say a low paid incoming worker profits the state leave out all the extra capital provision to provide the services and homes, and leaves out the running costs of the public services they need. If one extra person comes in we can find an empty home and a spare school place. If a million come in we need to build two or three new cities to provide for them.

So government, change policy. The Treasury says adding more people adds to economic growth and adds to total tax revenue. They do not tell us how much it adds to public spending or what it does to GDP per head. The Health department says it means we can staff our care homes and social work settings with new people. We also though need to recruit a lot more of them to provide all the extra healthcare for all the new arrivals. There is a lot to be said for fewer invitations and better pay for people already here to fill the posts.

Autumn Statement

Glad to see the government now start to cut taxes and set out their intent to bring them down more. I am also pleased that they wish to assist the self employed, the small businesses and the larger companies that can make major investments. As I have long argued you need tax cuts for growth and you need more capacity to make things and provide services at home. The balance of trade deficit remains too large and supply shortages help fuel the inflation Bank policy unleashed.

I raised the questions again with the Chancellor about the need to change IR 35 and raise the VAT threshold for small business. He responded more favourably to a question about reinstating VAT free shopping for foreign visitors now we are losing business to Milan and Paris from our imposition of it.

I am writing today in the Telegraph about the wildly swinging forecasts of the OBR. They have changed the forecast for GDP by 3% between March and October portraying now an economy that had grown and was above pre pandemic levels instead of an economy that was performing badly and had fallen in output. The OBR had to make major revisions to its March forecasts of migration numbers, interest rates, inflation and the deficit. It had been too pessimistic about the deficit by £20bn so far this year. It had expected lower interest rates and lower inflation than we experienced.

These wrong and fluctuating forecasts make economic policy making difficult. The idea of headroom for tax cuts is based on wrong numbers. They never discuss headroom for spending rises where there have been many.

New publication recommends the UK withdraws from the European Convention on human rights

Leading specialist in European laws, Martin Howe KC, has published the case for leaving the European Convention on human rights.

I have not myself argued this case, and have sought to get the government to overcome the potential difficulties of the way the Court interprets and widens the original convention in the vexed case of illegal migration. There I and other MPs have proposed amendments to legislation where Parliament

needs to assert itself against possible ECHR overturns of policy. The wish to end the small boats trade and to send the illegals somewhere else safe for consideration of their cases is one such area. There is an argument going on in government about using such a domestic legal override given the importance of the issue, with the former Home Secretary and the current Migration Minister thinking there does need to be a Notwithstanding clause to ensure the will of Parliament is upheld in the event of someone trying to appeal to a foreign court or under an international convention.

Those of us who favour a limited exemption for a clearly required policy like stopping the small boats can point to Parliament's success in resisting votes for prisoners. The ECHR told us to grant them and the UK parliament voted not to. We stayed in the Convention. Other countries with democracies and decent human rights have disagreed and not accepted verdicts as well and stayed in the overall scheme

The UK was one of the original drafters and instigators of the Convention on human rights. It was aimed at general state policy, to foster more democracies and countries with a rule of law after the horror of Nazi and communist tyrannies in war torn Europe. It was only later the ECHR started to widen the remit to give individuals rights against governments justiciable in that court, instead of it staying at a high level assessment of a country's democracy and civil rights achieved through national democratic process.

Martin Howe argues that a true Parliamentary democracy needs a sovereign people who delegate power between elections to a sovereign Parliament. What the people and Parliament want should be good law and upheld as such. This cannot be true if there is an international external body that can effectively strike down domestic law. He is happy to rely on the UK Parliament and elections to determine our civil liberties and rights, and thinks there can be no guarantee that we can stop the small boats or carry through other desirable policies all the time we stay in the Convention which has changed and grown in power a lot since we first helped invent it.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts on these two different approaches.

[Visit to Bohunt School](#)

On Friday 16th November I visited Bohunt School at Arborfield. I was given a tour of the classrooms and then had a conversation with the pupils on the School Council.

It was good to see the school with plenty of motivational phrases on the walls urging young people to try things out, to contribute, to have views and to get involved. The pupils were working from iPads with teachers having access to individual iPads to help, to see how they are getting on and to

mark.

The School Council said their big issue had been the wish to have flexibility over the wearing of ties and jumpers with their uniform. They had sounded out the pupils through on line questionnaires, had presented a case for reform and reached agreement with teachers.

I asked them about the use of artificial intelligence in learning. I argued that trying to get AI to do the work for you cheats yourself, as you need to master the material and know how to provide an answer. I also argued that good use of computers can help with learning as it does with subsequent work. It appeared there was not much use of CHAT GPT or the equivalent.

I asked about outings, overnight trips, sports and the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. There was engagement with reports of how these additional activities enrich the school experience.

I wish them all well and was pleased to see positive approaches to what their school offers.



Remodel the bureaucracy

The Chief Secretary needs to come forward urgently with a good plan to raise productivity in the public services, at least back up to 2019 levels. Setting this an immediate task should not be threatening or should it require large amounts of new capital investment to bring it about, as four years ago we are at the levels we should wish to regain.

Central to this task must be reviews with the 4000 senior managers at Director level and above and their equivalents in the quangos. This is a good job for junior Ministers to lead or review. What has changed for the worse? What immediate steps can be taken to boost output. There should be a comprehensive freeze on new staff from outside, and a review process to amalgamate or remove jobs as people leave by natural wastage. External recruitment should only be allowed where there is a clear need approved by a Minister.

The reviews should encompass use of external consultants. Staff should be encouraged to replace some of the consultancy contracts that come up for renewal by offering cheaper in house routes of doing the work using present staff.

There can also be plans to get above older levels. After all, the private sector has exceeded pre covid levels of productivity, in services as well as in manufactures. One thing to do is to eliminate some of the duplication and overlap between central government departments and quangos. More work should be taken into the department under proper Ministerial supervision. Ministers in many cases will be blamed when the quango makes a mistake or gets it wrong, so better to have more control where there is accountability. Employees in the civil service should be allowed or encouraged to bid to take over areas of work to run as contracted out activities where they turn themselves into contractors and can use their skills to win work from others. This would not apply to matters relating to national security, policy and other sensitive matters. I led such changes to the old Property Services Agency, the direct labour organisation within the civil service that maintained public sector properties.

The application of more computing power through AI and related technologies can also produce plenty of productivity gains. Much of government is processing data, awarding grants and benefits, answering similar queries from the public, handling applications and ensuring access to public services. This is eminently suitable for more automation.