

Grazeley and housing numbers

One of the issues I am pursuing with the government is the question of how many extra houses we are going to need in the next local plan period. As the government has promised to cut net inward migration, and will have the powers to do so once we have left the EU, I am asking them to revise their future projections. The Housing Minister is currently looking into this issue.

Meanwhile the Council has recalculated its current figure for housing need and discovered it should be lower than the figure they have been using. This is helpful progress. It is most important we do not exaggerate the need or place unreasonable stress on our infrastructure and countryside. There are plenty of housing permissions to build outstanding to meet any sensible view of need for the current plan period. Grazeley and the other options being examined relate to the period of the next local plan which has still to be determined.

Get on with it

There is still a long year to wait before we leave the EU. This is quite enough time to make any changes that are needed. The government assures us we will be ready to leave with No Deal if necessary.

I want the government to get on with the new borders, fishing, farming and trade policies we can enjoy once outside. I also want to hear how we will spend all the money we save. If we are going to delay our effective exit and give them more money in a prolonged transition there will need to be a very good deal to justify the delay. The message from many of us is Get on with it. Brexit will bring substantial benefits and opportunities.

We have a borders and trade system which works for the rest of the world at the moment, so we know how to live outside the EU.

The question of Russia

According to Global Firepower Russia manages to sustain 3794 military aircraft, 20,216 tanks and 63 submarines on the same level of defence spending as the UK. The UK has according to the same source 856 planes, 249 tanks and 11 submarines. The UK economy is twice the size of the Russian one at current exchange rates. Russian wages are lower and a lot of military

output comes from state factories which may well subsidise production costs.

These figures reveal why the West takes Russia seriously. It may lack state of the art technology in a lot of its military hardware, and may have problems getting it all operational, but no-one can deny that Russia has a serious military capability able to operate a long way from home if it needs to. It does also have some smart weapons. Russia has allies throughout the Middle East and is seeking to improve relations with China. NATO led by the USA has plenty of firepower of its own to protect its people and member states. The West has recently shown some resolve following the attempted murders in Salisbury. For her part Russia should understand and accept that NATO is a defensive alliance with no wish to extend territory by force of arms.

When intervening in conflict zones in the Middle East Russia and her allies proceed with less concern for collateral damage, less worry about killing non combatants in the anti ISIS war. Russia has taken over as the main outsider defeating Isis, with the West carefully keeping in touch to avoid mistakes in crowded skies over Syria. Russia also has substantial cyber capability, and uses the world media to pursue its policy aims.

Europe continues to welcome large quantities of Russian gas and to carry on trading, despite the obvious political disagreements. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on what NATO as a whole and the UK in particular should be saying and doing about Russian policy.

Consultation on a Deposit Return Scheme

UK consumers use an estimated 13 billion plastic drinks bottles a year. Three billion are incinerated, sent to landfill or left to pollute our streets, countryside and marine environment.

Today the Government has announced that a deposit return scheme to increase recycling rates and reduce the amount of waste pollution will be introduced subject to consultation later this year.

Options for a deposit return scheme will be considered alongside other policies to improve recycling rates. The Government will only take forward options from the consultation which demonstrate that they offer clear benefits and are resistant to fraud, and that costs on businesses, consumers and the taxpayer are proportionate.

The consultation will take into account views from producers, suppliers and consumers to ensure that any system introduced works across the country.

I would be interested to hear from constituents. Is this a good idea? Which scheme would work best?

Great paintings framed by tragedy

Van Dyck's great portraits of Charles I on display at the RA exhibition show how out of touch with political reality the King was in his prime. Just as Inigo Jones's outstanding Banqueting House was both one of the Stuart triumphs and the stage set for Charles's death, so the large equestrian portraits of the King fixed for ever an image of a would be autocrat with so little understanding of his people.

Charles wished to part of the privileged and cultured elite of royal Europe. He married a well connected French Princess with good links to the Pope, having failed to marry the daughter of the Spanish Catholic King. This was only some thirty years on from the Spanish attempted invasion of England by an Armada out to enforce conversion to Catholicism on a heretic nation. He spent large sums he could ill afford on a grand collection of great art, and commissioned large paintings from the best painters of contemporary Europe. Rubens was persuaded to portray the Apotheosis of James I on the Banqueting House ceiling. The effect was to remind visitors of the newly found imperial power of the united thrones of Scotland and England, with Charles as the heir to the achievement of his father. Van Dyck became the main court painter, producing many images of the King that make him unforgettable to the generations that have followed.

There are several portraits of Charles in armour sitting on horseback. It is these images that would have been unsettling to his Parliamentary critics. A man who probably rightly ended wars with Spain and France early in his reign, was to turn his armour and his military power against his own people in a prolonged civil war. He may have loved Van Dyck's flattering portrayal of him as a powerful King and horesman, armed for a fight, but it turned out to represent a power Parliament did not want him to have and a military endeavour planned against the wrong people. Instead of him coming over as a loved father of the nation, feared by our country's enemies, he increasingly came over as an autocrat who did not understand the growing role of Parliament and the importance of listening to grievances of subjects as voiced by their MPs and peers. His Catholic Queen added to his unpopularity in an age of unpleasant and often violent religious intolerance. England and Scotland were by and large protestant and expected their monarch to represent the majority view.

It is true we see very regal and authoritative images of Henry VIII and Elizabeth, though not usually dressed in armour. Their images come across as representing England. Both of those powerful monarchs allowed Parliament to meet and to argue with them. Henry VIII relied on Parliament to legislate for

his religious revolution to give it greater authority. Elizabeth knew she had to appeal to her Parliaments to grant her the money she needed for the conduct of government. Charles thought for a decade he could rule without Parliament, resorting to ever more annoying ways of raising money without consent to meet his extravagant lifestyle. He was a good connoisseur of art, but it came at a heavy price. The costs of his new Palace buildings and the many paintings increased the strains with his spurned Parliament.

Seeing all these paintings together in one exhibition is a feast of great art. I came away with a reinforced understanding of just how worrying the King's elite lifestyle and sympathy for the authoritarian monarchs on the continent would have been to the Protestant in the street or the puritan in Parliament. It was no wonder he ended his life in such tragedy. Parliament took its dislike of Charles following victory on the battlefield to the extreme and contentious decision to kill the King himself. The painting traditions of the more democratic and commercially successful Netherlands make a stark comparison to Charles's taste. In the Netherlands still life, cameos of the day to day and portraits of many successful merchants and Councillors stood in contrast to the imposing regal portraits and the extensive allegories of the grand canvasses and tapestries favoured in Whitehall, in Madrid and in Paris.