

Old, new and Conservatism

One critic remarked that he could not support the Conservatives because they had never held up change or progress for a single day. He revealed a misunderstanding of Conservatism. Conservatives accept the past, and are happy to adapt and conserve all that is best from it. That does not mean we wish to go back in time, freeze the status quo or resist positive improvements to people's lives. We like the new as well.

Radical parties of the left favour more revolutionary action, Conservatives favour more evolutionary action. Both often seek the same high level aims. The main parties in the UK if challenged would say they wish to promote greater prosperity and freedom for everyone in our society. The disagreements come over how you do that, and over how far you should go in sweeping aside or remodelling the past. There are also some issues of definition over freedom, with Conservatives thinking more of freeing people to do things for themselves, and socialists thinking of ways the state can enable some people to do things within government control. This distinction is a matter of emphasis or degree, not an absolute.

Curiously today the parties of the left are more conservative than the Conservatives when it comes to the big issue of constitutional reform and our withdrawal from the EU. They are more radical when it comes to wanting a much bigger role for the state in our lives, in the hope that will create greater equality of outcomes. They fight every inch of the way to try to avoid decisions passing from the EU to the UK people and Parliament. They seek new ways to mimic the controls, spending, taxes and requirements that come from the EU. At the same time they recommend spending far more on state service provision, without discussing whether they could do this within the tight guidelines of the Maastricht budget criteria that the EU requires of its members.

Conservatives and socialists both want good quality public services, with healthcare and education delivered free at the point of use. Both want to spend more on developing those services, with disagreements about how much of this extra spending can and should come from the proceeds of economic growth and how much if any should come from tax rises.

Meanwhile the mood of the country is for the EU to get on with Brexit and tell us what if any barriers they wish to impose on their trade with us. The government should seek to up the tempo and remind them nothing is agreed until all is agreed, and no deal is better than a bad deal.

The plight of the coal industry

The third of the commanding heights of the 1940s economy to be nationalised alongside steel and rail was the coal industry. It employed 700,000 employees in the later 1940s, producing around 200 million tonnes of coal a year. The number of employees slumped to just 235,000 by 1979. Many of the employees lost their jobs under Labour governments, who accepted a large number of pit closures as the industry struggled with costs and falling demand. More job losses followed in the 1980s and 1990s, along with a bitter strike about whether individual pits could be economic or were exhausted.

Today there is no deep mined coal produced in the UK, and a very small opencast coal industry. We now import most of the reduced amount of coal we do need. An industry employing well over 700,000 at peak has all but disappeared. It was nationalised for most of the post war period, but this did nothing to arrest the long term decline. Indeed, there were occasions when the nationalised management took too pessimistic a view of the economic prospects for individual pits. I remember helping the miners at Tower Colliery take over their mine from the NCB when the NCB said it had to shut for economic reasons, and go on to make a success of mining more coal from it for many years.

The nationalised concern did have substantial investment programmes from time to time, developing a range of new super pits with better machinery and operating at larger scale. None of this arrested the long term decline in coal use and coal output. More recently governments have turned anti coal on environmental grounds.

No foxhunting vote

Before the last election a number of voters contacted me and asked for my view on foxhunting. I explained that I was not pressing for any change in the current law and regarded the matter as settled. I was not seeking a new vote on it.

It was a surprise to find one proposed in the Conservative Manifesto but that did not alter my view. I am pleased to report that the government, on reflection, has decided there is no need for a new vote and that they are happy too with the settlement arrived at in the previous legislation.

Housebuilding in UK advances

Yesterday the construction figures came out . They showed total output up 1.6% over the last year (3 months on 3 months average) . Within that total private sector housebuilding was well ahead. Private commercial work was down. Overall construction output was 27.6% higher than in January 2013, the five year low point. Those who point out the three month on previous three month figure was down are giving a misleading impression, as there is always a seasonal impact during the winter.

Persimmon, a leading housebuilder, on Tuesday announced it had increased its forward sales of homes by 10% in December, rounding off a year of growth. Other UK housebuilders too have reported increased build rates and sales. Persimmon's completions for the year were up 6% at 16043 new homes. The long recovery from the pre banking crash levels is now well advanced.

At the same time as the building industry steps up its output there needs to be increased capacity for building materials. The UK is importing too much, when these products have high transport costs and can be well made nearer the point of use. Persimmon has just put in a new brick plant at Harworth to produce 80 m bricks a year. Ibstock, one of the UK's leading brick makers, has also built a new factory to make 100m bricks a year and is expanding the output at its Lodge Lane facility in Cannock as well. These investments will expand UK brick output by around 10%.

There are import substitution and growing market opportunities in concrete blocks, cement, prefabricated timber sections and roof tiles, as well as in the interior fitting out with kitchen and bathroom units, plumbing and electrical systems. The strength of the underlying market to buy a new home can underpin a wider recovery in the building industry.

Are reshuffles a good idea?

Good management in companies works hard on succession planning, mentoring, supporting people in jobs, offering training, and talking to employees about their career development. There are regular appraisals which provide a chance for senior managers to explain again what they are looking for and for employees to comment on the workplace, support and direction. If an employee does need removing from post it should not come as a surprise, as it will follow a process of warnings, reviews and attempts to sort out the issues that worry the management.

Governments of all persuasions have handled Ministerial jobs rather differently. Ministers may not have not been told whether they are doing well or badly. They have often not been offered support, training,

guidance or mentoring on how to carry out difficult and complex roles. When it comes to reshuffle time quite a lot of Ministers stay near a phone with no idea of whether they are likely to be left where they are, promoted, moved sideways or fired.

There is plenty of talent in the Commons, and plenty of get up and go by individual MPs who want to make a contribution or take a special interest in a cause, department or area of work. Somehow governments need to find a better system of mapping the talent, understanding the knowledge and enthusiasms of those who are elected, and deploying it in the right places within government and the wider public space. Of course the high degree of accountability and public engagement required of a Minister makes it a bit different from senior management positions in many businesses, but there are still things to learn from the higher professional standards now being expected of those in the better companies. Meanwhile the private sector can learn from the public sector more about the need to listen carefully and respond well to the public who are the ultimate paymasters and judges of both sectors.