

Money for social care and health

During last week's statement on the winter pressures in the NHS I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social care to look again at the money coming to West Berkshire and Wokingham Councils for social care. The settlements have been tight, with a dispute over our entitlement when the system of calculation changed. He gave a friendly reply, and I will follow up again in writing to see if we can do better in future years. I am glad there should be more co-ordination of social care and health care, given the need to provide good quality care to elderly patients on discharge from hospital.

The Customs Union and the World Trade Organisation

Those who continue to argue that we need to be in the Customs Union of the EU, or need to copy it from outside the Union as we leave, need to answer two very simple questions.

Why do we have a large and persistent trade deficit with the Customs Union, and a trade surplus with the rest of the world trading with them under WTO rules?

Why has our trade been growing faster in recent years with the rest of the world than with the EU Customs Union?

The figures are quite stark. Our trade in goods deficit with the EU widened to £96bn, and our travel deficit to £15bn. Our sales of services were quite unable to offset these large deficits in the way they do for our trade with the rest of the world. Between 2014 and 2016 our exports to the rest of the world grew by 6.7%, whilst our exports to the EU grew by a little over 3%.

The good news is with or without a deal with the EU we will be trading with them under WTO rules, as both the EU and the UK are members of the WTO and accept its rules and its arbitration system for any disputes. The recently enforced Trade Facilitation Agreement that came into effect last spring from the WTO binds us and them to keeping border arrangements friendly to business with smooth procedures for the passage of legal goods.

Germany in 2016 exported £66bn worth of goods to the UK and imported just £33bn back from us. The Netherlands exported £36bn to us, and took just £18.6bn in imports. I will be looking in future postings at what we buy from these large exporters, and what opportunities there are to buy from elsewhere should the EU wish to impose new barriers on their trade with us.

If they want us to go to WTO terms we will be able to find cheaper imports from non EU sources and produce more at home.

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.