

Deal or no deal?

The government is trying to secure a deal to trigger trade talks with the EU. Today we learn that the EU is now prepared to talk about trade and the future relationship as well as the three special subjects it singled out for discussion so far. That is welcome, and means there can now be serious negotiations about a future Agreement. It was never possible to settle the Northern Ireland border issue without knowing the basis for future trade, for example.

We need to remember that leaving on the WTO option means no additional payments to the EU, whilst taking back control of our borders, our laws and our money. A good deal has to be better than this, otherwise the government's mantra that No deal is better than a bad deal should apply.

Everyone needs to remember that this agreement is not the Agreement on the UK leaving the EU. It is an agreement to talk about all matters, and is still governed by the crucial principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Improving reading in UK schools

This week came the good news that English schools have done well in boosting reading standards in recent years.

The Coalition government spread the teaching of reading by synthetic phonics throughout England's schools. They introduced the Phonics Screening check at 6 to see how well pupils were doing. In 2012 just 58% of pupils aged 6 met the required standard. The most recent tests show 81% of 6 year olds meeting it, with a better figure again for 7 year olds. There are 154,000 more 6 year olds fluent at reading than in 2012.

As a result of this improvement England now ranks 8th out of 50 countries at reading, compared to being 19th out of 45 in 2006. The improvement in reading standards has been fastest for the lower performing pupils, which is also good news.

There are now 1.9m more children in good or outstanding schools as assessed by Ofsted than in 2010. Raising reading standards is an important part of raising educational standards, as so much learning rests on reading and understanding the written word. This is a good base for later educational achievement, as the UK seeks to ensure people achieve more at school so they can get access to better paid and more interesting jobs later.

Christmas message 2019

Christmas began in an unusual style in Wokingham this year. As we gathered for the traditional carols near the Town Hall as part of the Winter Carnival, we clustered on the steps of the building. There was no room for a larger podium as we surveyed the continuing pavement works all around us. There was no carnival parade through closed streets, so we enjoyed a laser light show instead. Wokingham had improvised a good welcome to Christmas despite the works.

It reminded me that Christmas is a time when our great traditions have to adjust to modern realities. What endures is the spirit of Christmas. We look forward to a time of giving, when we think more of those in need and those members of our family and those in the circle of our friends that need some extra mid winter care. It is good to think less of the daily work worries, and more of what we can do to brighten the lives of others.

The Wokingham community has many generous and caring people who do work a little magic for the rest. I have heard great singing from the choral societies, seen the plans for a lively living advent calendar, and know of charitable help being planned for those in need. I would like to thank all involved,. I would also like to thank all who serve the public throughout the year in different ways. There are many who ensure we are kept safe, can be treated when ill, can buy our daily bread and ensure our water and energy comes on at home when we need it.

My hope for this Christmas and the new year as is we can make more progress in putting behind us wars in the Middle East that have so disfigured that part of the world for so long. It is not in our power to stop all the insurrections and civil wars, but it does now seem possible for us to intervene less militarily ourselves, and to work with the UN and other interested nations to promote more dialogue and less bombing. I also look forward to next year when the centre of Wokingham is complete with its new shops and new pavements.

Unemployment continues to fall

UK unemployment fell to 4.3% in November, a new low since 1975.

The economy over the last year continued to generate a large number of additional jobs, enabling more people to find work.

This good result was not the one many forecasters assumed, as they expected a downturn which did not happen.

Rail fares

The recent fare increases have been unwelcome. Rail pricing in the UK stretches the idea that you should pay a lot more for popular routes at popular times and a lot less for the off peak hours and journeys. I have no problem with the general idea that pricing needs to try to fill more seats, and to encourage sensible time shifting for those who have some flexibility over when they travel. What I do not like is to take it out on commuters who have to meet normal business hours for their jobs and who have little or no flexibility over when they get on a train.

The wide range of fares for the same route often combines ultra low fares that make little addition to train revenue net of costs with extremely expensive penalty fares at other times of day. Season tickets are now very expensive over longer commuting distances. It could be time to think again about how the railway can sell more seats, collect more overall revenue, but go a bit easier on the reliable captive passengers who need to commute to work.

There is an advantage in people using trains at peaks for commuting. The road system is totally overloaded at peak times. Trains offer easier and better ways for many to get straight into the centre of a city or large town where more of the jobs are based. Greater adoption of digital signalling and intelligent on board train information systems could make a substantial boost to peak hour capacity without needing extra track. The present artificial scarcity of train seats into our main cities is used as an excuse for high prices for season tickets.