

Water management

On a recent visit to environmental and river works in my constituency, I was asked if I knew about total water catchment management. It was presented as some new breakthrough, based on understandings of the patterns of water movement. Apparently it includes the perceptions that you need to manage water on a water basin basis, and that you need to consider what happens to the water if you speed its passage upstream to avoid flooding when that water arrives more quickly downstream.

I expressed surprise at this. Water has always been managed on a water catchment area basis since I have been involved in public policy. Our water companies were designed around water basins. There have been few attempts to transfer water from one catchment to another. The most famous was the decision to supply Birmingham from new reservoirs in Mid Wales, which caused controversy. Debates about creating a national water grid have not resulted in the creation of one.

I would also have thought it had been well understood by past generations of managers that if you solved the problem of flooding by improving capacity to move the water on upstream you could do more damage downstream unless you also made provision there for fast transit or storage of excess.

It is true that much of the rain falls in the more lightly populated parts of the north and west of our country, whilst more people live in the drier south and east. There is some movement of water to those places by the Thames and other rivers, but the south has had to build reservoirs for storage on a considerable scale and has put in desalination capacity as well to have sufficient water. It is important to recognise the need for more water capacity in the south and decide which is the best value and best environmental means of providing that capacity. The UK overall is not short of water and overall gets plenty of rain. There remain important issues about supplying enough drinking quality water during dry periods in the drier heavily populated parts. More water storage is one answer. More water transfer would be another.

Meanwhile water management is crucial to controlling flood risk. Given the extent of building on flood plain, it is becoming ever more necessary to engineer solutions to safe water transport and storage during times of heavy rainfall.

The government needs to press on with

the No Deal option

The result of offering too many compromises with the EU is it will make the Deal option less attractive than the No Deal Option. Paying large sums for a Free Trade deal makes no sense, when tariffs would be a cheaper way where we can give the tariff money back to the UK consumers who paid it. Accepting EU control of our laws, trade policy, migration policy and other matters after March 2019 means we don't take back control.

The PM's speech says considerably less than the versions of commentary that have been built on the back of it. She argues that we want as short a transition as possible, and says we need to be able to run our own affairs from the moment we leave the EU. That is not the same as spending two more years in the EU and calling it transition. She said "I don't believe either the EU or the British people want the UK to stay longer in the existing structure than is necessary", so let's get on with sorting everything out now. It need not be that difficult.

On money she says they might agree to stay in certain programmes where we would agree cash for benefits. I have no problem with that, though there are no programmes which are a must as far as I am concerned, We can replicate the worthwhile ones for ourselves. She also reaffirmed we will "honour commitments we have made during the period of our membership" which some interpret to mean making full contributions up to the end of the present 7 year budget cycle. There is no legal requirement to do that.

It is not possible to have a meaningful conversation about Transition or Interim arrangements without having a Deal agreed, or at least knowing the outlines of what the EU will offer and accept. I wish the PM well in her effort to get meaningful talks going. I am not persuaded that we owe them any money or that we want to stay in for moment longer than our legal requirement up to March 2019.

What the civil service have to grasp is there is no cliff edge. It is quite possible for the UK to have functioning borders and trade arrangements on March 2019 even with no deal. 160 other countries trade daily with the EU and most have no special Trade Agreement. The priority must be to get everything in order for 2019 exit. That will also strengthen our bargaining position for a better deal, showing we are ready and willing to just leave. The EU's response to the speech shows that they will just go on pushing for more and more money to make sure it is bad deal.

Meeting the CAB

I went to see the CAB today after their AGM in Wokingham Town Hall. I thanked

the volunteers there for the work they do to provide advice and support for people with problems in our local area.

They bring dedication and skill to their tasks and make a very important voluntary contribution to our community.

Over the last year cases of debt difficulty have gone down. Benefits have remained the lead issue. I discussed with advisers the transition later this year to Universal Credit.

Employment and personal relationships are the two largest categories of advice needed after benefits and debt.

The CAB is mainly paid for by local Councils, with fundraising and donations providing a little over £5000 out of a £212000 total income. I would like to thank those who have given money, as the budget is quite tight.

[We will leave the EU in March 2019](#)

The Prime Minister made some good things clear. We will leave the EU in March 2019. We will not stay in the single market or customs union. We do not want to be in the EEA. We do need to be free to pass our own laws and to negotiate our own trade deals.

She also made a very generous offer to the rest of the EU. The UK will stay engaged and helpful to EU on security and defence matters come what may. The UK will happily allow continued tariff free access to the UK market on similar terms to today if the EU reciprocates. The UK may stay in various spending programmes and make a continued financial contribution to them if that makes sense to both sides and if the UK will continue to benefit. Programmes like Erasmus and the work of the EIB may be what she has in mind.

More nuanced language was used for the passage on an implementation period. She rightly said this should be as short as possible and must have a final date. It remains difficult to know if we need such a thing, as that will depend on whether there is an Agreement to implement. The issue of money remains sensitive on both sides. The PM made no express offer of cash, and stressed that budgets have to be talked about alongside trade and the future relationship.

I remain of the view that we owe them nothing and we do not have to pay for a free trade deal. That is so much in their interests that there is still the chance they will come round to wanting it. We have always accepted we owe them contributions up to the date of leaving, which will deliver them an additional £30 billion (rough estimate) between June 24 2016 and March 29 2019.

In the meantime the most important thing the PM said was Whitehall is charged with the task of getting everything ready to leave without a deal. There can be no successful negotiation without the EU understanding no deal is a feasible option. What matters now is the response of the EU. The UK needs to stop negotiating with itself and concentrate on selling a good deal to the other side, as the PM sought to do today.

Catalan independence

The Spanish state refuses to allow the Catalans a vote on whether they wish to be independent of Spain. The elected Catalan government is preparing for a referendum at the beginning of October to decide whether to stay or go. The Madrid government argues this is against the Spanish constitution and refuse to sanction such a vote. Polls suggest the independence side is a little behind.

The Spanish state is now arresting and bringing charges against Catalan politicians who are preparing this vote. They are seizing ballot papers, and withdrawing powers and money from the Catalan government to stop the vote taking place.

The EU in its earlier days encouraged regional governments and often appealed over the heads of national governments to them. It created a Committee of the Regions and prefers to run various programmes by sending cash direct to regional administrations. Now it is more nervous of the centrifugal pull of regions, and keener to help member states that face disruptive regions.

The heavy handed approach of the Spanish state may be making more Catalans favour independence. It is strange to see a western democracy going to such lengths to stop a vote which an elected regional government wants. When Scotland wanted something similar the UK state granted it. Its not something to do too often, but when there is a strong head of steam behind such an issue and no vote has taken place for a long time it is a pity opinion can be thwarted. The EU once again backs the anti democratic forces.