

Wokingham Choral Society at All Saints

Yesterday I enjoyed the concert put on by Wokingham Choral Society in All Saints Church. Patrick Allies conducted the choir well as they sang a number of pieces about evening. The music included soothing lullabies and Evening service music, with works by Rachmaninov, Benjamin Britten, Herbert Howells, Elgar, Holst and others.

I would like to thank all involved in organising the evening and in performing. The singing was great, and the organ pieces were well played by Benedict Lewis-Smith.

Chancellor agrees with government policy on Brexit

As forecast here, the Chancellor does support the Lancaster House Speech and White Paper, approved by Parliament, which he helped compose.

The BBC, of course, cannot bring themselves to make that the headline, having forecast the opposite. So they are now trying to suggest the Chancellor disagrees that No deal is better than a bad deal. Yet he clearly stated that a punishment deal would be unacceptable and worse than no deal!

Come on BBC, accept you lost on this one.

Blog postings

I am extremely busy this week-end as there is a lot going on that matters to Wokingham and the wider nation. If people persist in offering multiple postings and long postings it may take time to moderate them. I am not slowing them down to censor them but slowing them down because I do not have the time to moderate them. The dreadful inferno at the flats needs proper attention. The Brexit talks tomorrow are an important and fast moving story.

Surely the Chancellor does not want to mar Brexit?

I have been reading strange stories this week that the Chancellor is going on to the Marr show this morning to seek to change government policy on Brexit. I find this difficult to believe. The Chancellor is a senior member of the Cabinet and Brexit Committee, so he would have put his point of view strongly when the Brexit policy was decided. The government deliberated long and hard, and then produced a White Paper, several statements to Parliament, and the Article 50 letter and Act. These all made it clear the UK would be leaving the EU and its single market and Customs Union, but would be negotiating for a business friendly comprehensive free trade agreement with the rest of the EU. This approach received overwhelming support from MPs in the last Parliament who voted through the Article 50 Act on that basis. The Chancellor was in full support.

I also find it difficult to believe the stories because the policy the unnamed briefers say we need to change to is stupid. I would be surprised if the Chancellor wanted to sign up to such a policy. It is said we need to seek associate membership of the Customs Union, with an opt out of its strict rule that a member cannot negotiate free trade deals of its own for certain UK trade in services. How on earth could that work? The main gains from negotiating free trade agreements with other countries will come from those where the present tariff barriers are highest. These are the lower income countries with a big export industry in farm products and basic industry. In order to get access for our services we will of course have to offer zero tariffs and reduced barriers on things like tropical and Mediterranean agricultural products which currently are made dearer by EU impositions. If we can't negotiate on non service trade we have no leverage.

It is also foolish because it creates the impression with the rest of the EU that the UK is constantly changing her mind and is too busy negotiating with herself to be able to negotiate seriously with them. Such a change at this late stage would send the wrong signal, and would not leave the government with the strong position accepted by Parliament that we have at the moment. The General election saw 85% of the voters vote for parties that stated we will leave the EU and the single market and negotiate our own trade deals. That is incompatible with any kind of membership of the Customs Union which would prevent us feeling our trade with others.

That's why I think it unlikely the Chancellor will oppose government policy on the Marr show. Doubtless he will say he wants a business friendly Brexit. On that I agree with him. That much is agreed by Labour and the Conservatives. The way to achieve it is through maximum access to the EU market, and through much better trade deals with the rest of the world.

The Grenfell Tower inferno

As feared all too many people died in the fire. The government has rightly set up an Inquiry. We need to know what caused the fire, why the fire spread so fiercely and rapidly, and what differences in the building could have prevented it or lessened the impact. We need to know if people were given the right advice on what to do on that fateful night. It is harrowing to hear of what happened and to learn that even now we do not know who died and where they died. Relatives live with dreadful uncertainty and are now warned that if their loved ones have died they may not be able to identify the bodies. We all are grieving for those lost and are appalled by the extent of the losses.

A full independent Judge Inquiry is needed and has been agreed between government and Opposition. However, these take time and do not satisfy the immediate need for some answers and urgent action elsewhere if other blocks are at risk. We will need statements from the government, Councils and housing management companies about the safety of all the blocks in the country. The government needs to advise Parliament if it wants to change fire regulations or issue any new guidance to Councils. Individual Councils need to review their housing and debate the matter in each locality. They are the main owners and purchasers of social housing with planning and building control functions that go to heart of this matter. Management organisations need to talk to tenants and review their homes, so they can either reassure or improve their safety.

I am glad the government has said it is now reviewing urgently all tower blocks and will report back. It has said it will make sure all those who have lost their homes from the fire will be housed by the government. It has made emergency money available to the local Council and has helped set up a local co-ordinating committee to deal with all problems. It has made money and other assistance available to those who have lost their homes.

Many say the new cladding put in to improve thermal insulation, cut tenant heating bills and improve the appearance of the block for residents and the wider neighbourhood may have speeded the progress of the fire. If this is so it follows that other buildings with the same system need safety improvements, and future improvement schemes need reviewing. It looks as if fire alarms and response systems were not good enough or did not exist. It would be prudent for all other public sector landlords to review their estates – and private sector ones as well for that matter.

Ensuring the safety of tenants or leaseholders should be the overriding priority. Local and national government needs to work hard and swiftly with that in mind.