

Syria

Some of you want to talk about Syria and want to know why I have not written about it. The main purpose of this website is to raise issues I am pursuing for constituents and for the wider nation. The aim is not to mirror the concerns of the media all the time, or to try to repeat what they do. Nor am I going to post items which assert that the main news media have got this story of the missile attack factually wrong.

I aim to present news, not recycle olds in the way so many media journalists do. That is why I have wanted in the last few days to highlight Network Rail's losses on derivatives and foreign currency borrowing, because you cannot see or read that elsewhere. That is why I have sought to provide background and new analysis to the policy work and exchanges underway over Gibraltar, Brexit and Scotland.

I have not so far sought to intervene in the recent debate about Syria. This is mainly a matter for the USA, the country that decided to take limited military action against the Assad regime. It does not look as if Mr Trump wants to get involved in a major way in the Syrian civil war, which is probably wise.

As I have pointed out before I do not back either Sunni or Shia. I have no view on who could best govern Syrian and reunite it around a peaceful governing policy that can bring people together. I have no love of the barbaric attacks on his own people by Assad, but nor do I have any time for one of his main opponents, the terrorist movement ISIL. I am also aware that there are other unpleasant murderous groups at large who also do not deserve our support. I have heard previous UK ministers in the Coalition argue we need to help so called moderate rebels. So far there is no evidence of a powerful enough group who could both defeat ISIL and Assad simultaneously and then rule a peace loving country thereafter. One of the reasons the West's interventions have been sporadic and so far unsuccessful is trying to find a side we want to win the war.

Mr Obama threatened Assad if he used chemical weapons but failed to enforce his threat. Mr Obama allowed Russia to take a much more prominent role in support of Assad, making it more dangerous and difficult for the west to intervene militarily.

I suspect Mr Trump will not wish to extend his military involvement, and will hope Assad will now desist from using chemical ordnance. Presumably were Assad to use chemical weapons again there would be further US attacks. The aim seems to be to try to get more of the protagonists into talks. Recent events will clearly disturb efforts for there to be more collaboration between Russia and the USA to fix world problems. Mr Trump hopes that Russia will now exercise more discipline over Assad, and will see the need to seek a peaceful political solution to Syria's riven factions in conjunction with others around the negotiating table. Let's hope that works out.

The curious case of the Scottish economy

Before the EU referendum the Scottish economy was growing far more slowly than the UK as a whole. From the 2008 crash to 2015 the Scottish economy only advanced by 4% in cash terms, compared to 23% for the UK. Since the referendum the Scottish economy has continued to underperform. On the latest figures the UK is growing around 1.2% real more per annum than Scotland, with the Scottish economy in danger of stalling.

It clearly isn't the EU referendum doing that as a few would suggest. It is a longer term Scottish trend. Part of the reason is the decline in oil output. The North Sea fields are in decline. As oil volumes and revenues tail off, so that has knock on effects to the supply industries and the service sector that has lived off the oil industry where it is strong.

Recent figures show disappointing results for manufacturing as a whole, and a weak balance of payments. Scotland spends more per head in the public sector than England. Scotland borrows more as a percentage of GDP to support public spending than the UK as a whole. If larger deficits and higher public spending made for more growth, Scotland would have a more successful economy than England. It does not seem to.

I would be interested in views on why Scotland has been lagging, and what the Scottish government can and should do about it. The SNP live on the fact that the Scottish average GDP per head is not too bad compared to the UK and European averages, but this relies on the residual advantages of a declining North Sea oil sector and past achievements from pre the 2008 crash. They need to answer more of the questions about the disappointing performance over the last decade when they have been in office, and to explain why so far their approach has not even succeeded in getting Scotland back to the average growth rate for the UK as a whole. The crash of course hit the high value added financial sector whose Investment Bank activities were concentrated in London, but this has not had the same impact on the London economy as the oil decline on the Scottish one.

Rail capacity

The modern railway is based on a cruel paradox. Some of its routes into the main cities are too popular at peak times, with overcrowding. The commuters are made to pay premium prices for what can be an inferior service. Many

other routes have too few passengers, and those who do travel often benefit from heavily discounted or off peak prices well below the costs of running those trains.

We need to solve the problem of too little capacity for some, and too much capacity and too little revenue from others. What should be done? Commuters naturally think it unfair that they have to provide a disproportionate part of the fare revenue in what remains overall a heavily subsidised business. Other travellers often do not appreciate just how large a gap there is between what they pay to travel and the costs of providing the train they use.

The problem of capacity may be easier to solve than many think. According to the railway management they can typically only run 20 mainline trains an hour on any given line. At peaks there are still large gaps between trains on uni direction track. Poor signals, poor brakes and heavy trains mean the safety margin required to stop a train in time leaves much of the track empty. Modern digital signalling could alter that. If a train is equipped with on board signals and sensors, and automatic braking where needed, it is possible according to railway experts to run 30 trains a hour safely. That is a massive increase of 50% in capacity. It also means a service which at best is one train every three minutes becomes one train every two minutes, more like the tube. If new trains are built out of lighter though strong materials, and equipped with better brakes, there could be further improvements.

I have been urging the government and railway to get on with digital signal investment. They have now established a larger fund to tackle the five most overcrowded routes into London. I am asking them to do more, as so many commuter routes into major cities are afflicted.

Getting more people to use the trains off peak and on longer routes does not have such an easy fix. There needs to be more analysis of why people travel and what they want to get out of it. We need timetables that offer good services more geared to the pattern of passenger needs, and sensible pricing which offers a discount for off peak but does not simply dump seats at prices well below marginal costs.

School funding

I am seeking to reinstate the additional meeting with the Secretary of State over money for Wokingham and West Berkshire Schools that was cancelled owing to the terrorist incident recently.

I have also been asked to meet the governors of the Holt school, which I am happy to do. I do need to fit the meetings in with the Parliamentary timetable, which is why I was keen to meet this week or next when Parliament is not in session. I think now they have found a later date. I also offered

dates to visit Forest School who wanted another meeting, but they did not find any of them suitable.

What I am trying to do in conjunction with some other MPs is to get the government to reconsider its new fairer funding scheme to be a bit more generous to the low funded areas like Wokingham and West Berkshire. The government's intent is correct, but the first plan does not level things up enough. I encourage all those concerned to write in to the Department for Education who are working on this issue.

Conspiracy theories and the EU talks

Some are writing in stating that Mrs May is making concessions before the formal talks begin and complaining about this.

The Prime Minister's approach is to make major statements of her position in the form of speeches or press conferences and statements to the Commons. Her position on EU matters is as defined by the Lancaster House Speech and the latest Statement and White Paper at the time of sending the Article 50 letter. The PM does not usually brief the media or press to provide a running commentary on the prospective talks. There will be plenty of wrong stories put round by Remain supporting people and institutions, and much speculation based on conversations with senior officials or Ministers not in the loop, which cannot be relied on.