

Fairer funding for schools

On Wednesday we debated the government's proposals for fairer funding for schools. The Conservative Manifesto drew attention to the large gap between the best financed and worst financed state schools and promised action to provide fairer and more balanced levels of funding. The scheme includes a higher individual pupil amount that will be the same across the country, with continued additional payments for areas of deprivation, rural areas and other matters increasing the costs of education.

I raised with the Minister the question of how far the rebalancing would go. The Wokingham and West Berkshire schools have been short changed for many years by the old formula and need several years of increments to put things right.

A simple and important Bill

A BILL TO

Confer power on the Prime Minister to notify, under Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union, the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the EU.

Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1 Power to notify withdrawal from the EU

(1) The Prime Minister may notify, under Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union, the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the EU.

(2) This section has effect despite any provision made by or under the European Communities Act 1972 or any other enactment.

2 Short title

This Act may be cited as the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017.

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President Trump pushes on

Some commentators are surprised. The new President is doing exactly what he said he would do. The worldly wise well educated pontificators who confidently predicted Mr Trump would metamorphose in office to someone more like the various well honed expert politicians he defeated are having to change their minds.

Mr Trump told us he did not accept the idea that the US has to place climate change at the centre of its industrial and economic policies. References to that set of policies and beliefs have been taken down from the White House website. Instead Mr Trump has taken executive actions to make it easier to exploit US hydrocarbons and transport oil to market by pipeline. He understands cheap energy is an essential underpinning of an industrial strategy.

He told us he would get US corporations to invest much more in the USA. There has been a procession of business leaders in to see him to be asked to step up their domestic investment. Doubtless they have been told they will get tax cuts and regulatory changes to make the US more competitive. They will also have seen the reputational damage if they do not make suitable statements about their commitment to US manufacture. The car makers are now planning more capacity in the USA.

He has said he wishes to control inward migration, and to tackle the problem of foreign criminals operating in the USA. He has made some executive orders and is investigating his further options over the Mexican frontier.

He expressed hostility to multilateral trading agreements that he thought were not fair on the USA. He has pulled the USA out of the Trans Pacific Partnership, a complex large agreement which was not ratified by Mr Obama. He has begun the process of renegotiating NAFTA where he thinks Mexico has an unfair advantage. As this is ratified he will need to deal with the Congress on how to proceed.

The critical commentators will probably shift their ground from proposing he will change, to arguing the realities of government and the limits on Presidential power will now prevent him doing much of what he promised. It is true his tax cuts require action and goodwill by Republican Congressmen and women. Repeal of Obamacare and changes to existing trade treaties will need the approval of the legislature. Mr Trump is at his most powerful in his early days as President, and all the time there is a Republican majority in the Senate and Congress. He may again surprise his critics by being able to cut deals with the legislators to secure tax cuts, Obamacare change and other important items in his manifesto.

Mr Obama came to office promising to shut Guantanamo, pull out of Afghanistan and press for peace in the Middle East. He got wobbled off all of those and

defined his Presidency by securing a deeply unpopular healthcare reform. Mr Trump needs to make sure when he spends his political capital with the legislators he buys something worth having which makes them and him more popular. Tax cuts might well do just that. The replacement for Obamacare may prove more divisive and difficult.

Flooding

I held a meeting with the Environment Agency and the Minister for preventing floods to ask what more action can be taken to tackle flooding issues along the Emm and Loddon rivers in Wokingham Borough. I was told that they are working on a study of the Loddon to see what additional measures should be taken. I offered suggestions on possible actions, and reminded them of the areas most liable to flood.

CBI business optimism

Surveys of opinion can be unreliable. In July 2016 the CBI survey showed a dreadful minus 47, compared to a minus 4 in January 2016. At the time I thought it an odd reading predicting a downturn we would not experience, as time proved to be the case. Today's survey shows a surge to plus 15 for this January, implying good growth to come. It's a great turn round in sentiment from ultra pessimism last summer.

More reliable order book figures show plus 15 this January, compared to plus 5 last January. This is a better indicator of more growth to come. Why are some forecasters still expecting a big slowdown?