

Wokingham remembers

The civic service last night at St Pauls was wonderfully crafted. Varied readings from Winnie the Pooh to Revelations were interspersed with great hymns and Psalms. The Bishop of Reading spoke well, reflecting the essence of service and leadership above politics that the Queen personified. I am very grateful to all who organised it and participated.

All led up to the perfectly timed one minute silence at 8 pm, announced by a commanding and tuneful last post. As we bowed our heads together in grief at loss and with happy memories of the Queens's great life our community was united with common feelings. It was good to have those moments of stillness in an otherwise busy and argumentative world.

All those of us who have the privilege of public service to others can learn much from how our late sovereign carried out her duties.

May she rest in peace.

The state funeral

Royal status cannot protect from death. Today we bid our last farewell to a loved and admired Queen. On her passing so the monarchy lives on, passing to her son. She has left a legacy of how to lead a life of service.

The presence of so many Kings and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers from around the world is testimony to the reputation for friendliness and great diplomacy which Elizabeth II enjoyed.

The long procession of so many people to bow their heads to her coffin lying in state in Westminster Hall is proof that her work did not go unmarked or unappreciated.

There is a sense of a passing of an era. She was our national link to the sacrifices and disciplines of life during the Second World War, and a reminder of the hopes she embodied for a peaceful and more prosperous life for many as post war rebuilding got underway. She spoke for us in times of joy and sorrow. Most of us have only known her as our monarch.

She led a Commonwealth that offered support and recognition for countries leaving the Empire. She readily accepted their Heads of State as her equal and made them feel welcome in the special global family of people representing nations.

May her dedication to selfless public service inspire others in public life.

May she rest in peace.

Reflections on Queen Elizabeth II

Tonight I will attend a service of remembrance in Wokingham.

It will bring on again that sense of loss we feel . The only monarch we have ever known, a constant in our changing lives, is to be buried tomorrow. A funeral brings a finality, an ultimate reckoning that someone treasured will not return. Never again will we see her on our tv screens or at an event we attend. There will be no more wise words or amusing encounters with Paddington Bear.

In my mind will flood the poignant images and memories of the short service and opening vigil in Westminster Hall. As I stood there with other Privy Counsellors I was overwhelmed by the sadness, the solemnity, the silence awaiting the arrival of the Gun carriage. No-one spoke. I wanted to think about our late Queen and take in the austere beauty of the Hall awaiting its dead sovereign. The grey stones of the walls and floor needed the explosive colours of the flag draped over the coffin and the gold, yellow and reds of the uniforms of those to guard her to bring it to a stunning magnificence. That mighty room was dominated by its new centrepiece, where all eyes were fixed.

The sun rushed through the yellows of the North window, commemorating her Diamond Jubilee. The tolling bell and the orders of the military occasionally broke the silence. No-one entering that place could be in any doubt that we marked the passing of a great lady, who in death as in life was seen in regal magnificence. No-one stirred, spell bound by the scene and the silence.

A better Treasury orthodoxy

I have looked at how the Treasury needs to take inflation- and deflation – more seriously by considering changes in money and credit in my Telegraph article today which I will publish later. The Treasury also needs to reconsider how to get deficits down. On the revenue side there needs to be much more understanding of the depressing effects of higher and more taxes on activity, and of the growth boosting effects of lowering or removing taxes. In technical language the Treasury and OBR need to include behavioural effects of lower and higher taxes in their models, as many taxes are easily and legally avoidable. They need to create a dynamic picture of deficits, not

a static one based on telling us how much a certain tax rate currently raises.

Whenever the UK has cut the higher rates of Income tax better off people have paid more tax and paid a bigger proportion of the whole, as more rich people come and invest here, do more work and set out more businesses here, and undertake more transactions here. When a country as in Ireland cuts corporation tax to low levels it is inundated with companies wishing to set up their headquarters there and book business there. The way to tax the rich and business more is to set rates of tax they will stay to pay. When the U.K. set an 83% Income tax rate and a 98% rate on dividends we had a brain drain from the UK and the country was a lot poorer. We didn't even keep our pop groups who grew famous with UK fans.

On the spending side there needs to be reappraisal of what the public sector needs to do and what can be left to private sector activity or private capital to provide. Benefits and pensions to individuals account for a large budget. The incentives and support for more people to be in work at a time of many vacancies offers scope for reduced spending and better lives for those who take these opportunities up. The pension age should reflect longevity, balancing the number of years you have to contribute with the number of years you are likely to draw down.

Where we want and vote for important public services as with the NHS and education proper financial provision needs to be mirrored by management leadership that puts quality and value for money in central position. The Treasury argues they do that, but the numbers show there has been no overall public sector productivity gains since 1997, despite the application of large amount of investment in areas like digital processing and on line service. I find it bizarre that the DWP with a large workforce to assess and distribute benefits should have lower productivity today than in 1997, when it must have been a big beneficiary of many switching to digital forms and transfers. I have heard many accounts of the NHS buying badly, wasting stocks, and not controlling spending on external contractors.

I raised the issue of why the NHS paid to take over most private sector hospital capacity during covid but failed to send enough patients to use it, adding to waiting lists. There is the refusal to take back reusable equipment, the waste of stocks through ageing or the overpayment for items and service delivered. There is reported failure to charge some foreign users of the service even though it says it is the NHS, not the World Health Service.

The government says it wants a productivity revolution. It needs to start with its own services. Existing management need to negotiate more stretching targets or give way to those who can deliver.

Travel patterns

The Covid lock down and interruption to normal working lives has had a big impact on travel patterns. It has made people keener on personal transport and on road deliveries at the expense of buses, trains and tube.

The latest figures compared to the travel pattern just before covid struck in March 2020 is a complete recovery in vehicle traffic overall. Use of vans is up by 14% and of heavy goods vehicles by 5% reflecting greater on line ordering and road deliveries to individual addresses which trains cannot manage. Car use is 5% down, probably reflecting more home working and on line ordering.

Rail use is 14% down, tube use 33% down and buses outside London down 15%. Much of the decline in tube and other public transport use is probably brought about through less commuting to work and more office workers staying at home part of the week. The tube has suffered most, reflecting the reluctance of many office workers to resume five days a week commuting given the difficulties and cost of these public transport journeys.

The greens who want to discourage travel altogether will presumably be pleased that more people stay home to work as there is less overall travel. They will however be disappointed that the motor vehicle has once again proved more useful and popular and is increasing in use for deliveries. Green Councils will continue to make it more difficult for these important commercial vehicle journeys to run smoothly and to time. This paradoxically will add to congestion, emissions and fuel use as much needed supplies sit in long traffic jams brought on by traffic mismanagement policies.