

What I learn from contributors here

Remain supporters get very angry when I write careful moderate independent analysis of EU policy and progress. They write in to say no one is interested and that now we have left I should stay out of EU matters. Meanwhile site visits and comments offered usually go up. This reflects the stark absence of informed comment, factual explanation or debate about the politics of the EU and its member states on the U.K. media. We are given ring side seats for Trump/Biden but kept out of Laschet versus Baerbock or Macron / Le Pen. I will continue to read about the important decisions being made by our near neighbours and may strengthen my coverage given the need.

The main aim of Remain journalists and campaigners seems to be to try to block any of the many Brexit benefits including FTAs with the rest of the world to try to vindicate a pessimistic view of our leaving the EU. They ally this to trying to suppress any of the bad news about the EU which makes up the normal diet of media presented news on other countries in the U.K. media. They much prefer bad news about the U.K.

Leave supporters are keen on comment about the evolution of our free trade policies and the obstacles posed by the Northern Ireland protocol. There is a strong view the U.K. government must assert the primacy of the Good Friday Agreement and the defence of the U.K. internal market in the Protocol. There is enthusiasm to get on with Free Trade Agreements with the rest of the world.

There is a tendency by contributors to see conspiracies where often there is merely incompetence, herd thinking or institutional inertia. I decline to publish the most elaborate conspiracy theories. I recommend people who hold them to concentrate on campaigning against the policies and actions they dislike, as it is still possible to change policies which they think are rigged invisibly behind the democratic facade. If they have evidence of wrong doing by powerful people they need to go to the authorities with evidence. This site is not equipped or financed to take on vendettas against named individuals.

There is considerable interest in green issues, where I am striving to set out a popular and practical agenda whilst highlighting the costs and dangers of some of the top down government knows best proposals.

There is usually least interest in the bits of economic analysis I offer. This is a pity as I have more ability to deliver original ideas, analysis and good forecasts in this area. Once again the EU divide gets in the way as Remain people resent my correct past opposition to the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and to U.K. membership of the Euro. It leads them to contradict whatever I say about current economic policy and theory. I would urge them to move on and engage on the merits of the contemporary arguments and data.

I would be interested in readers views on the balance of topics and viewpoints.

The EU falls out over the pace and cost of net zero

The EU intends to improve its offer to the world for its progress to net zero. It plans a 55% reduction in output of carbon dioxide compared to 1990 levels which will require tough action to cut fossil fuel use in transport, homes and industry.

It has led to various disputes. Should the lower income countries be allowed laxer targets than the richer ones, who arguably are better able to pay for a fast transition? Will there be substantial solidarity funds to help pay the costs of change from EU funds for the poorer countries?

Should the EU carbon trading scheme be extended from electricity and general industry to cover personal transport and home heating? If so how high would the carbon price go, cutting the living standards of all who were hit by the new carbon penalties? Are the voters of EU states now ready to pay more directly for car and boiler use, on top of the extra indirect costs already imposed through electricity and general industrial product prices?

German opinion is getting more and more concerned about the possible expansion of a transfer Union, where Germany will be expected to pay more to help countries like Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy. It is also worried about the extent of ECB buy up of the bonds of the weaker countries of the Union to keep interest costs down. The next ECB meeting and the next EU Council in June are going to be important meetings about far the EU plans to go down the road of fuller financial integration, binding Germany in to accept more the debts and obligations of poorer countries and more of the high costs of the road to net zero. Germany is also unwilling to phase out its coal industry and coal power stations this decade.

State trading monopolies often serve us badly

Choice, innovation and competitive challenge drive higher living standards and better goods and services. Private monopolies can wallow in complacency, knowing they can charge enough to suit them and not feeling any great need to improve or change. State monopolies seek to persuade us that their pursuit of the public sector ethos allows them to rise above the complacency and poor quality of monopoly, yet so often as with British Rail or the nationalised

energy and water utilities they did not do so. Nationalised industries often charged a lot , passed inefficiencies on in ever higher prices, sacked employees instead of finding new jobs for them from growth and innovation, and sent big bills to taxpayers as well.

One of the worst features of nationalised industries or of heavily state regulated utilities is the way they fail to supply enough of what they are meant to provide. The nationalised water industry used to introduce water rationing in any hot dry summer. They saw no duty to supply water to us to keep our vegetable plot alive or to support the flowers in a good July. The regulated utilities we now have are prevented from providing comfortable extra capacity by controls over the amount of permitted investment spending, so we remain on a knife edge of supply should we ever have the joy of a long hot dry summer again like 1976. They are not even encouraged to add to capacity to deal with the large rise in migrant numbers in the last two decades.

The nationalised railway specialised in cutting back track and routes. The Beeching cuts were the worst example, but the process of retreat in services and slimming the workforce was remorseless. It always argued it could not make sufficient capacity available for the crucial commuting demand that was its passenger mainstay, condemning generations of commuters to standing room only, to crowded trains and poor services. The regulated partly private industry of recent years has allowed some good growth, but prior to the big change of the pandemic measures there was still inadequate capacity on many important commuter lines at peak.

The worst example of deliberate shortage of supply is the monopoly provision of roadspace. Local and national highways management has persevered with ancient narrow streets and been slow to build a comprehensive network of motorways, by passes and trunk roads to keep more of the traffic away from homes and High Streets. Some argue this is the green option, yet it means many more vehicles stuck in traffic jams, more pollution near where people live and less fuel economy. It is also a lot less safe, encouraging more tensions between vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians on mixed narrow roads.

The telephone industry was way behind US technology and coverage when it was privatised and opened to some competition. It caught up well, and has shown considerable ability to handle vast increases in data and download demands in recent months, though there is still need for more fibre into homes. The highly regulated electricity industry now leaves our country short of power and dangerously dependent on imports for no good reason. Given the government's ambitions for an electrical revolution putting in a lot more power capacity into generation and distribution must be a crucial priority.

As the government seeks to interpret its version of the fashionable Build back better mantra it should make substantial increases in capacity in our main networks and utility provision central to that task.

My speech during the Third Reading of the Environment Bill, 26 May 2021

I welcome cleaner air and cleaner water, and I wish the Bill well as it completes its passage. I hope that we will be nicer to nature and better to the other species we share our islands with.

I would like briefly to make a few points to the Secretary of State and the ministerial team, who have worked hard to get this far. The first point is on water. I urge them to work with the water industry and the regulators to put in more reservoir capacity. We have had many homes and new families coming into my area of Wokingham and West Berkshire, but there has been no increase in potential water supply. Nationwide, we still have a rising population, and they will need good provision of clean water.

There are two great natural advantages of having more reservoir capacity. First, when we have long periods of excessive rainfall—we seem to be having one at the moment—and there is the danger of the rivers overtopping and causing flood damage, we need more good places to park the water, and we could then recharge the extra reservoir capacity. Secondly, were we once again to have one of those long, hot summers with long dry spells, as we have had from time to time in the past, we would be able to draw down in more comfort, knowing that we had adequate reservoir capacity, without having to run the streams and rivers too low or draw excessively on the natural aquifers.

On Report, I talked about the excellent news that there will be many more trees and urged Ministers to ensure that they help to build a much bigger forestry and timber industry. We import far too much and need to replace it with home production and fewer wood miles. I also urge the Secretary of State to bring forward those great schemes to promote more food production here at home. We lost too much market share, particularly in areas such as vegetables and fruit, in our CAP days. I do not think it is morally right to be drawing so much of that food from a country such as Spain, which is parched and in great difficulties eking out its inadequate water supplies, when we have plenty of water at home and could do so much more to promote a good domestic industry, cutting the food miles and giving confidence in the environmental benefits of having the home product.

I would also like to draw Ministers' attention to the unresolved business that they have promised to work on as we complete this piece of legislation: the possible conflict between the Office for Environmental Protection and the Climate Change Committee. I urge Ministers to recognise that they need to supervise both bodies and give them clear public guidance on their remits. The Government will need to bring forward that piece of work to explain what the relative roles of the two are and how the different sets of targets—the natural UK targets on the one hand and the climate change targets on the other—will knit together and be compatible, rather than cause tensions.

For example, we need to know what the thinking is about the pace of carbon dioxide reduction and transition and how that impacts on our natural landscape, because if we are going to accelerate the move to electric vehicles or from gas boilers or both, there will need to be massive investment. That investment includes the production of a lot of steel, glass and batteries. Mining activity somewhere is required to produce those raw materials and fashion them into something that can then be part of an electric product. We need to know whether we will be doing any of that in the UK, or whether the idea is that we should import much of it because we do not wish to husband our own natural resources for this purpose.

If we are going to import, we should properly account for it, because it is not helping the planet if we say, "Well, we're not putting the mine here or burning the coal to smelt the steel here," but it is happening somewhere else. Indeed, it may be happening somewhere else where environmental concerns are taken much less seriously and the environmental damage of producing that product is far greater than if we had done it at home.

I hope that more work will be published on the pace and cost of transition. Again, the Bill seems to point us more in the direction of repair, maintenance, recycling and reuse, and not wanting a throwaway society but reckoning that, if we make good things, they could last for rather longer. How is that reconciled with the idea that we want a rapid transition to get rid of our existing fleet of petrol and diesel vehicles and to rip out all our gas boilers and solid fuel heating systems? Has there been proper carbon accounting on all that, and how is that reconciled with the very good aim in this Bill that we must consider the impact on our earth and the amount that we take out of our earth in order to fashion the things we may need?

There is a lot of work ahead for Ministers, who have already been very busy. As others have said, the Bill is only the first step, and it will then need to be fashioned into popular products and feasible programmes: things that business will want to collaborate with and things that people will want to do. There is an educational process involved. We also need to ensure that we know what the costs are and that they are realistic, that they are phased and that they fall fairly. I would still like to hear more from the Government on the total cost of all this work, because we need to ensure that it is realistic, that it does not get in the way of levelling up and greater prosperity, and that it reinforces our prime agenda, which is the health and welfare of the British people.

[My speech during the Report Stage of the Environment Bill, 26 May 2021](#)

There is much to welcome in the Government's aims. Like most MPs, I look

forward to cleaner water and cleaner air. It is right that we take more care of the other species that we share our islands with, and I look forward to those greener and pleasanter lands having more protection and more support. I also welcome the idea that we should plant many more trees. However, at this point in our deliberations, we should ask the Minister to give us a bit more background and information about the costs of this transformation so that we can know that it is realistic and that it will be properly shared.

When we look at the legislation itself and at the impact assessments, we see that there is very little by way of hard information about how much cost may be entailed and who should primarily bear that. There are wide-ranging powers to introduce more waste charges, for example, but the statements in the impact materials say that an impact cannot be assessed and that it will depend, in due course, on what actual charges are brought in. When we look at the very expensive rules on producer responsibility—taking more responsibility for packaging, batteries, waste, electrical equipment and end-of-life vehicles—we are told that a partial cost of the first item is about £1 billion a year, but there is no information on the full cost and there is no information on the others. There is a bit of information on the cost on housebuilders for the habitat provisions, and there is not a lot of worked-through financial information on the deposit return scheme.

I think that there are ways forward where we can make sure both that we have a better environment and that we are earning more revenue from suitable and sustainable exploitation of nature's abundance. I hope that the Government will work hard on finding ways that enable livelihoods to be increased and improved, just as we are also doing the right things by the environment.

Let us take the case of trees, for example. I do hope that, as we plant many more trees, there will be more sustainable forestry. I always thought it quite wrong that we import so much wood from across the Atlantic to burn in the Drax power station, when surely we should be looking for sustainable sources at home. It is also quite wrong that we import so much of the timber that we need for our big house building projects, when, again, this is a good climate for growing softwood. Surely we can go about our task of finding sustainable ways. We need to cut the wood miles and to have that sustainable forestry here, as well as having the beautiful and diverse trees in our landscape in suitable places where the Government will offer their own taxpayer-based financial support.

Let us hear a little more about the livelihoods and the opportunities. Let us show how we can have both a beautiful countryside and a working countryside, so that we can cut the wood miles and the food miles. We should ensure more buy-in from business and individuals to these great aims of having a better natural environment because of the opportunities to do more at home, and have that happy conjunction of success in business, harnessing nature's abundance and the beauty of nature's abundance, while respecting all the other species that share our islands with us.