

Better railways?

The proposed reorganisation of the railways has at its centre a wholly admirable concentration on the passenger. We are told there will be a new accent on

- 1, Punctuality.
2. Cleanliness.
3. More comfortable seats – also a campaign of mine given the way GWR substituted less comfortable seats for more comfortable ones when it switched from the 125s to the new Hitachi sets.
4. Good wi fi availability

The aim is to allow the reconnection of places where closure of lines and stations by the former nationalised industry left places without service, and to encourage service quality improvements in areas like catering.

The issue is can the new structure deliver these straightforward and desirable requirements? Great British Rail, a public sector body, will have ultimate control of trains and track, timetables and service levels. They can use and harness a wide range of local community groups, local government partnerships and private sector companies to bid to provide and manage services.

I asked for some assurance that Great British Railways will have the powers and the will to innovate and accept challengers to the status quo. We do not want them delivering existing timetables and clinging to them when it would be possible to change them for the better. We do not want them delivering current levels and standards of catering or wifi or other on board services when we want new and better.

The government made several good arguments about the way rail travel shrank badly under nationalisation, with high fares, line and station closures, poor catering and poor punctuality. The Secretary of State reminded us how the privatised railway doubled passenger miles travelled after years of decline. Now we want something better that can adapt to part week commuting, new patterns of leisure travel and a more tempting offer to displace the car.

Mayor making

It was a pleasure to be able to attend a civic service and ceremony in person after a year of lockdown. On Sunday I joined others at St Paul's to

wish the Mayor of Wokingham well in his second year in office. Numbers were very limited, so it was a hybrid event with well wishers also following the service on Zoom.

Social care

The cry has gone up from the Opposition parties that the government should reform social care. Labour in office promised to do so but found it too difficult and abandoned the idea. Mrs May in office made proposals which proved to be very unpopular and was unable to find a compromise reform which the Opposition parties liked. It turned out there are as many variants of social care reform as there are political parties. I have never personally pledged to campaign for social care financial reform, and have always been cautious about the subject having studied various plans and seen the degree of disagreement there is about both the objectives and the shape of reform.

Today I am inviting those interested to write in with their thoughts again on this vexed topic. I am particularly interested in what people think the aim of reform should be, as well as in the more normal question of who pays for the care people need?

I have championed changes to social care to improve the service for those who need it. This seems to be the forgotten issue amongst many reform plans. The government does need to set out again clear rules governing the relative responsibilities of care homes and the NHS. Care homes whether private or public sector need to work closely with GPs and the local hospitals to ensure elderly residents have good access to free NHS care as they are entitled to. The NHS should not send patients back to a care home prematurely as some did during the pandemic with bad consequences for the patients and other residents at the Care home. GPs might like to offer – as some do -surgery times at established Care Homes to cover the residents needs as well as making on line consultations and prescription renewal accessible. The local hospital needs good links and understanding with Care Home Managers. There is a temptation by Care Homes to send residents to the local hospital on a precautionary basis where better understanding and contact might allow the resident to stay with GP supervision in the Care Home.

I also wish to see decent standards of accommodation and catering. Where someone is supported by taxpayer money for the living costs in a Care Home the budget should be sufficiently generous to provide a decent standard and good pay for the Care workers. The sums involved may well need to vary around the country as property cost is an important part of total cost and property costs are very variable. A property based supplement to amounts should reflect objective property cost figures by area.

It is also important for Homes to have good programmes of activities for residents for those who wish to join in with them in public rooms or on

outings. There must be quality of life as well as security and protection.

It has been a longstanding policy of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties when in government that whilst all healthcare is free living costs are not free for those who have private income or surplus capital. Surplus capital includes the value of their own former home if they no longer need it as they are on their own or are going to live out their remaining days in a Care home with their partner. I accepted this policy when my own parents had to go into a care home. I helped them choose a good one and helped them sell their flat to pay the bills. Some now argue that there should be a higher permitted amount of capital that people can pass on to the beneficiaries of their wills. I think most accept that a rich person on a large pension or with substantial wealth should continue to pay their living costs in old age. If the state does opt for a higher permitted capital amount then there will be the need for extra taxes on the rest of us to pay for this alteration to allow the inheritance. Should this line be redrawn?

Back the Australian trade deal

The UK has now rolled over the EU deals with other countries as promised in the referendum. The draft Australian Free Trade Agreement could be the first of the new UK negotiated deals, which will go much further than the EU went in opening up opportunities for more trade and business activity. The Australian one will go some way to restore the losses we experienced with Australia thanks to EU protectionism against them. Australia is a key ally and partner, a fellow member of the 5 Eyes Group and a willing collaborator. For example, Australia is buying the rights and support to build 9 Type 26 UK designed frigates.

The Agreement will sweep away tariffs and quotas, and open up services. It will provide great opportunities for the UK dairy industry to sell more UK cheeses, the whisky industry to sell more drink and the car industry to sell more vehicles. UK consumers will have access to some great Australian products at cheaper prices, with a likely rise in interest in Australian wines as one of the consumer wins.

Some now say we need to offer protection to our beef and sheep meat sectors through tariff quotas to limit the amount of product Australia can sell us at better prices. To argue in this way is to seek to wreck the agreement. Australia has rightly not signed Free Trade Agreements with any country whilst accepting tariff rate quotas. The people who think the UK needs this protection from food produced on the other side of the world did not of course offer any such protection from EU food products, where we have tariff and quota free food trade and plenty of EU imports. It is difficult to believe our beef and sheep meat sectors will lose out to Australia given the distances involved and the relative costs. Australia has high standards of

animal welfare and husbandry. UK beef and sheep meat are quality products with plenty of scope for us to export more and to sell more at home.

We owe it to ourselves and to Australia to do this deal. When we joined the EEC we turned our backs on Australia and other Commonwealth allies, placing heavy barriers in the way of their exports to us to give a big advantage to European product. Australia is a willing friend keen to promote our joint interests by freer trade. Doing a deal with Australia also gets us closer and sooner to a deal with CPTPP, the Pacific partnership countries. That is another large prize, a free trade deal with the fastest growing part of the world.

Sort out the GB/Northern Ireland trade

It is wrong that many GB businesses now find they cannot send their goods to willing buyers in Northern Ireland without a large amount of extra paperwork or even EU inspired bans. Both sides to the UK/EU Agreement opposed a hard border on the island of Ireland. Both wished to protect the EU single market and the UK internal market, and allow NI easy access to both. That is what the Protocol says.

The EU has decided to use the Protocol to create a hard border in Northern Ireland against Great Britain. This border is not in the Irish Sea but is enforced against containers, vans and trucks on arrival in Northern Ireland. The EU seems to think a North-south border has to be open but an east-west border needs to be tightly controlled by them. They should try reading the Good Friday Agreement which is about looking after the interests of both the Protestant and the Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. This heavy handed approach by the EU violates the Good Friday Agreement as far as the loyalist community in Northern Ireland is concerned.

Lord Frost's recent article is right in tone and content. He now needs to be careful in negotiations not to allow the EU to insert its controls in the way of GB/Northern Ireland trade. That trade should be regulated and policed by the UK and NI authorities. Of course they should make sure people are not using easy access to NI to then send things onto the Republic which are not EU compliant. There is no evidence this is happening. The UK authorities have every interest in not allowing that. There is no need to submit trucks taking supermarket produce from GB to named stores in Northern Ireland to special checks in case they were planning to go on to the Republic, because they are not. In an age of computer manifests, truck tracking, pre filed journey and stock schedules trade should be allowed to flow. Any checks or audits that are needed in NI should be for the UK to carry out, and any needed in the Republic for the EU. There have been smuggling problems on the UK/Republic border during our time in the EU which were always sorted out by co-operation from each side whilst respecting the different jurisdictions. .

Either the EU agrees sensible mutual enforcement with each jurisdiction taking responsibility on its own territory or the UK must simply impose that on the UK side. It is the best and most practical way of implementing the stated aims of the Protocol.