

Meeting with Transport Secretary

I met with Grant Schapps to discuss short term and longer term ways of cutting road congestion. He is working on schemes to let Councils bid for more funds to improve junctions, provide bypasses and resurface roads. He was interested in my proposals to get more utilities away from under a main road, to flex light timings to traffic needs and to strengthen local strategic networks.

More market warnings of recession and slowdowns.

The UK 10 year state borrowing rate fell to 0.43% today. Meanwhile the German share index was one of the worst performers, falling another 4.6% as some in the markets pencilled in a German recession.

Still no new economic actions from western governments or Central Banks.

The Economic establishment's errors

During my adult life so far I have witnessed three major UK recessions which did great damage to businesses and individuals, all from predictable policy errors. I have also lived through the false forecasts of a large rise in unemployment and fall in activity in the first two years after a Leave vote, where despite unhelpful policy the UK economy did not fall into a recession in those two years.

So we need to ask why has the UK economic establishment at the Treasury and Bank had such a bad time of it?

One of the recessions occurred under a Conservative government and two under a Labour government. Clearly none of the Chancellors and PMs involved set a policy to have a recession, and in each case they relied on the professional advice at the time. They were told right up until the recession had started that there would be no recession.

It is the case the Labour Ministers made the 1975-6 crisis worse by insisting on very high levels of spending and borrowing, which led to the run on the pound and the visit to the IMF to force a change of economic policy.

In 2007-9 Labour Ministers seemed to be in lock step with official opinion, with both arguing for the wrong approach to managing banks cash and capital at a time of overextended balance sheets. Conservative Ministers willingly implemented the European Exchange Rate Mechanism policy which led to the humiliation of sterling, basing their case on the official and business advice in favour of membership. Ironically they called the ERM "the golden scenario", stating it would bring low inflation and growth. Instead it brought an expensive spike in inflation and recession.

So we do need to ask if senior officials specialising in economies should be under any pressure to get their forecasts right and to correct their positions if they are going wrong? I do not recall anyone in the Treasury or Bank apart from Ministers losing their job as a result of the disasters which hit the UK economy, though many hundreds of thousands of other people lost their jobs as a result of bad policy.

In each case the errors were mainly monetary. In the 1970s the UK lurched from too fast a build up of credit and bank lending to too hard a landing, leading to a property crash and a general recession. In the ERM again as I predicted the mechanism encouraged too rapid a build up of credit, triggering inflation, and then forced too rapid a correction, bringing the economy down. In the banking crash the same thing happened. Bank policy was too accommodating in the run up, as the Parliamentary opposition and various commentators warned. Then the authorities switched to too fast a correction, causing a great recession as I feared.

Tomorrow I will look at more recent Treasury and Bank thinking on the economy and ask if it is fit for purpose, and question why we have cut ourselves off from what Central Banks in the rest of the world are doing. Meanwhile we are looking at another Establishment error, as they watch and do nothing about the current problems.

UK state debt levels are fine

Some people tell me UK state debt is too high and we need to take tougher and more urgent action to bring it down. I disagree.

According to the ONS at the end of the last financial year UK state borrowing was £1821bn or 84% of GDP. This is well below Japan, Italy, Belgium and some other advanced countries and not very different from the USA and France.

It is not, however, a very meaningful figure. The Bank of England has bought up £435bn of the debt. As the UK state owns the Bank of England and receives dividends from its interest receipts we should deduct this part of the state debt from the total. That brings it down to £1387bn or 64% of GDP actually owed to people and institutions outside the state. This is a perfectly manageable figure.

Today the UK government can borrow at 0.5% for 10 year money and at below 1% for 30 year money. These are very low rates, showing markets think there is little risk in lending to the UK state. In the 1970s when the Labour government was spending and borrowing too much they had to pay more than 15% to borrow. They ignored these warnings and ended up at the IMF begging for a loan. The IMF demanded spending cuts and a lower deficit.

Today's problem worldwide in advanced countries is fighting deflation and economic slowdown. Markets are telling governments, companies and individuals they can borrow more for decent projects. There is too much saving and not enough investment going on.

It would be quite wrong as the rest of the world fights recession and the economic impact of the virus for the UK to tighten fiscal policy hastening a bigger downturn. Yesterday we learned that Hong Kong is offering helicopter money. Every adult citizen will be given HK\$10,000 to spend, to try to fight recession. That is how bad it is in Asia.

Fighting recession

Much of the world is in recession fighting mode. They need to be so, because the advent of the corona virus and the severe responses to it by governments makes recession more likely without action.

The virus has hit international travel and tourism hard, has disrupted Chinese output, slashed the demand for oil and other raw materials, brought freight rates well down and is now disrupting supply chains around the world. It has damaged confidence, and led to investments and orders being put off. Japan had a sharp fall in GDP last quarter thanks to a tax rise, whilst Germany is struggling to grow at all thanks to the anti car policies being followed.

This week the Stock markets of the world have suddenly woken up to the threat that comes from these events. For the first month of serious virus news gold, oil and bonds signalled trouble ahead, and share markets decided it would be short lived and they could look through it. Now they are not so sure.

What can governments and Central Banks do? They can take offsetting action to promote more economic activity, and provide more money to offset cash shortfalls by businesses hit by interruptions to their production and sales.

Taiwan has announced a stimulatory package. China has produced some tax cuts and bank lending at low rates. The Fed, the Peoples Bank of China, the ECB and the Bank of Japan have all put money into markets in various ways to increase liquidity and available funds. China has started to cut interest rates. So far the UK has taken no action to help.

These moves will ease some of the worst features of a slowdown brought on by the virus, but do not deal with the root cause. The best way out is to turn the tide in the battle against the virus by a combination of treatments, vaccinations and reducing the spread. That is not easy and we all wish them well in doing so.

As China is discovering, if you go in for lock down and isolation of whole cities after cases have been found you do not stop the spread as some people will already have carried it out of the area, but you do considerable damage to output and activity.