

The Irish border

Attitudes to the Irish border sum up the differences between Leave and Remain.

To Leave there is no problem. The current Irish border is a complex international border, handled with the minimum of fuss. It is a Vat, Excise and currency border. These fiscal and financial requirements are handled away from the border, mostly electronically. If there are to be customs we could do the same with those.

It is a border requiring co-operation against smuggling, which already occurs. It is an anti terrorist border, without the need for border posts. There is action by police on both sides of the border to combat crime. We have a common travel area to ease the movement of people, which will continue after Brexit.

It will become a border for issues of quality and compliance for food and goods. As both sides currently meet the same standards and wish to do so after Brexit to sell to each other, we can continue with compliance checks away from the border with electronic manifests detailing what is on a truck and where it has been or will be tested.

To Remain it is a series of insoluble problems that require Northern Ireland to stay in the single market and customs union. To the Republic of Ireland and the EU it is an opportunity to advance the island of Ireland agenda for government of all matters commercial. They query a series of detailed and sensible proposals using existing technology and practices to avoid a more intrusive police and government presence at the border.

The UK government should repeat that after Brexit it will not impose watch towers and an army of inspectors on the border. It will use existing technology and practices to collect revenue and check goods, and will continue full co-operation with the Republic as now. The Republic can then work with the EU to decide how best to run their side of the border, knowing the UK will be helpful and positive about ensuring a smooth outcome.

The EU talks are not going anywhere – let's table a free trade agreement

It's been good having three days off from Brexit on this blog. Parliament and the UK media need to remember there are many important tasks and debates we need to have about problems in our country that should not be driven out by endless and repetitious arguments about the terms and timing of our departure

from the EU. I seek to make sure my work as an MP is not unbalanced by Brexit which takes up too much Parliamentary time.

Over the last few days there has been little progress with the UK Parliament's wish to see the Withdrawal Agreement renegotiated. The EU appears to rule out removing the backstop from the Agreement, which in turn seems to rule out Parliament approving it. For some of us it is far more than the backstop that is wrong with the Agreement anyway. Why would we want to sign a one sided agreement giving the EU all it wants, without anything firm on the future partnership which might contain things we want? Far from leaving the EU signing the Agreement means delay in taking back control of our money, our laws, and our borders, with genuine issues about whether we would ever be in full control given the backstop and the financial commitments.

The best approach from here is straightforward. The government has to tell the EU there is no chance of passing the current Withdrawal Agreement, whatever might be offered by side letters, reassurance, clarifications or strengthening of the Political Declaration about a possible future agreement. It is also true many MPs do not want to leave with no agreement, so the government should table a comprehensive free trade agreement. Under GATT rules if the EU agrees to talk about this the UK can then leave the EU on 29 March without needing to impose new tariff and non tariff barriers on EU exports to us, and the EU would do the same for our exports to them. There is a period of up to 10 years to agree a final text of a replacement Free Trade Agreement. There is now a private sector draft, but the government itself could scissors and paste EU/Japan and EU/Canada as the starting text.

Any kind of Withdrawal Agreement would leave the UK very exposed. There would be endless more months of rows with the EU, and rows in Parliament over how the talks should be handled by the UK. Meanwhile the EU could legislate any way it wished to damage UK interests as leverage, whilst continuing to charge us large and unspecified sums for the privilege of more talks.

New homes and the changing High Street

In some parts of the country house prices are high and affordable homes for sale are in short supply. Home ownership has been falling as a percentage of all households, as more young people decide they cannot manage the deposit and the interest on the mortgage, or find they cannot borrow enough to get started on the housing ladder.

Despite this home ownership remains the preferred tenure of most people. There are many people in rented accommodation who would like to buy, whilst anyone in a home of their own can sell up and rent if they wanted to. It makes sense for most people to want to own. Over your lifetime it is considerably cheaper to buy than to rent. As you approach retirement if you

own your own home you look forward to the mortgage paid off and no rental payments. You just have to put up with the Council tax. If you are in rented property you know that as a pensioner on a lower income than when at work you will face your highest housing bills of your life, as rents continue their upwards march. If you buy one house and stick with it you might be paying mortgage payments for 20-25 years. If you rent a property you will be paying rent for 60-70 years or more.

If you own you can improve and decorate your home as you like, and you can borrow against its value. It may help you build a business. The only downside of owning is you, not the landlord, are responsible for repairs. Most UK houses are of sturdy brick and tile construction and do not need major structural work over their lives.

So the question is how can we encourage or help more people to help themselves by buying? We need to work on both perceptions and realities. Some think a home is not affordable but maybe it is. Whilst it is true that homes cost a much higher ratio of income today than 40 years ago, interest rates today are a lot lower than they used to be. As a result the early years of mortgage payments are not so different from past experience. Clearly there is a risk if rates went up again, but modern mortgages usually allow a fixed rate period to get you through the early years whilst your pay rises to make it all more affordable. For others in some parts of the country homes are not easily affordable even allowing for lower rates. This requires expansion of supply of sensibly priced homes.

Here the changes in shopping may be of help. We live in a world where there is too much shop space for the amount of retail business transacted through stores. On line purchases are now 30% of all non food retail activity, and growing. Competitive pressures between big chains has boosted the amount of floorspace on offer. There is plenty of evidence that well known retail names are now considering cutting the number of stores they run and reducing their trading area. This represents an opportunity for conversion or replacement of their space with housing.

In some cases it could be the out of town retail park that is surplus to requirements. These would make suitable sites for comprehensive redevelopment as housing. In other cases it will be the end of the old shopping centre that has been bypassed by new space elsewhere at the heart of the town or city. These properties too can be subject to change of use to reflect the altering pattern of demand.

There are many other ways of finding sites for more affordable homes for sale that I might cover in future articles. Meanwhile it will take people to want to transform these older shopping areas to help add to the supply, and imaginative policies to help individuals who want to take on the task themselves of creating a home out of former commercial premises. There are now good examples around the country of blocks of flats springing out from within old commercial buildings. My flat in London started life as an office block.

More money for police and Councils

Yesterday the government presented its budgets for the police service and for local government for the 2019-20 financial year starting in April. The amount of money granted from central government goes up, as does the amount of money they are permitted to spend including local taxation. I was pleased that Wokingham Borough at last got some recognition that it has been receiving very low amounts per person for several years compared to most Councils, and has received some catch up money. West Berkshire too also got an above average increase, reflecting the low budget it has been given in recent years.

The questions to debate are how should this additional money be spent? How much extra should Councils and Police Commissioners raise from local taxation within the limits allowed? How can we be sure that extra cash committed buys us service improvements we want, and helps pay for the staff in these services to be empowered to work smarter and raise productivity?

Councils are gradually equipping themselves for the digital age. Residents are encouraged to pay their Council tax through regular bank transfers rather than through a manual counter service in the Council offices or a postal based system with cheques. Benefits are being moved onto universal credit with scope to make it cheaper as well as easier to work out entitlement and make the necessary payments. Much of government is about taking money off people in taxation and giving it back to people, sometimes the same, sometimes different people, in the form of benefits. This can gradually be more automated to make it more accurate and cheaper to administer.

Residents have three main experiences of their local Council. There is the tax bill, which they want the Council to keep under control, as it can be a large item in family budgets. The second is the refuse collection system, which every house has to use under the Council effective monopoly. People usually want regular weekly collections, and appreciate kerbside collection of recyclable materials as part of the service. The third is the road system which everyone uses to get about. It is essential to get to work, school, shops, leisure activities and social events. People want the roads to be well maintained, have sufficient capacity to avoid traffic jams and sensible designs to minimise accidents.

The education service is very important to those with school age children, and social services can be vital for those in need of assistance with living in their own homes when disabled or elderly. Most of us are happy to help pay for good quality education and social care as part of our contribution to a decent society.

The issue before us is are we spending the right amount, and are these services delivered with the right degree of quality and with sensible cost awareness?

Thames Valley Police settlement

The budget for Thames Valley Police in 2019-20 can rise from £389.7m to £422.4 m assuming the Commissioner sets the permitted amount for local tax revenue. . This is an increase of 8.4%, which means the force will be able to recruit more officers and expand its service to residents. I welcomed the news in the Commons today, and look forward to seeing the Police Commissioners plans. Local priorities include tackling vandalism and violence, and assisting in reducing drug dealing and anti social behaviour.