

Mrs May faces a big defeat

It is true a fortnight is a long time in politics, and people can change their minds. It is also true that on the current arithmetic Mrs May is not just facing the loss of a crucial vote, but she is facing a landslide defeat. So far she has only mustered around 220 Conservative MPs who will probably vote for her proposal, with maybe 10 others from Opposition parties who might defy their party whips to support her. This leaves around 400 MPs of all parties who have said they will vote against. A defeat by around 170 would be a huge blow. The announcement by Sir Michael Fallon on Monday that he was against the Agreement was another big loss for her, as most had him down as a reliable government supporter.

What could she do instead? She could announce she has taken soundings and realises that her attempt to find a set of compromises with the EU has not produced an Agreement that suits either side or any party in the Commons. She will therefore cancel the debate and vote. Instead she would have to go back to the EU and tell them the draft Agreement they like is unacceptable to the UK Parliament. It either needs to be materially amended or the two sides need to agree on the UK leaving in March 2019 followed by free trade talks swiftly afterwards, or preferably starting immediately.

The amendment route looks unlikely to succeed. The EU has a long history of offering the UK too little too late to retain the country in its legal and political system, and will not take kindly to being told they have overdone it again. The rewrite necessary to the 585 page Withdrawal Agreement would be so wide ranging to make sure it can pass the Commons that it seems unlikely it could be achieved, even given lots of goodwill from the EU side.

This leaves us with exit and free trade arrangements, which is what will remain assuming Parliament does vote down Mrs May's motion. Opposition forces in Parliament may want to find a way to delay Brexit or to push the idea of a second referendum, but this would not honour the results of the referendum. It would also require both the consent of each member state of the EU and new legislation in the UK in a Parliament with no government majority for any approach that entails deviating from implementing Brexit. It is no longer possible even if Parliament wanted it to legislate for a referendum and hold one prior to exit day on 29 March 2019.

Public meeting about train whistles

I have taken up the issue of imposing new noisy train whistles in Wokingham with Network Rail. I agree with the residents who think this is a bad change which the railway does not have to make.

Residents are going to hold a meeting on Monday evening at 18.15 at the Salvation Army Hall, Sturges Road Wokingham RG40 2HD. I encourage those who are concerned to attend.

I will not be able to get to the meeting as Parliament is in session until 10 pm on Monday, with votes expected that I need to attend. I look forward to hearing a report of the meeting, and will reinforce any messages from residents to Network Rail.

Futile Project Fear figures

Yesterday in the Urgent Question on the latest round of Project Fear Treasury forecasts I asked them to tell us what the growth rate was in the last 25 years before we joined the European Community, and what the growth rate has been in the last 25 years from 1992 when they established the full single market and customs union. It was obvious we grew faster outside the EU than in it, so the Treasury declined to share these actual historical figures.

As UK GDP data begins in 1948 I have now confirmed that between 1948 and 1972 when we joined the EC, growth amounted to 118%.

In the years from 1993 to 2017, following completion of the single market, growth was just 69%.

In other words, growth inside the EU was 41% lower than before we joined. So using the Treasury way of explaining these things, at today's values the UK economy would be far better off in income and output terms than we are following time in the EU. They should adopt their own negative language and tell us just what a colossal loss of income and output this amounts to.

Those who support the EU will immediately say that the reason for the much slower growth in the EU is not to do with our membership. As soon as they accept this they must therefore acknowledge that the Treasury forecasts for the next fifteen years are wrong, as clearly a wide range of factors can affect economic out turns. Their protestations are, however, wild like their gloomy forecasts. It is the case that membership of the EEC led to a sharpened decline in much of our manufacturing in the early years when we took the hit of tariff free competition. It is also the case the European Exchange Rate Mechanism did great damage to jobs, output and incomes, at just the time when the EU completed its single market.

The Treasury forecasts of lower growth are likely to be well out, and their assumptions are not realistic for the WTO exit where they leave out most of the upside we would expect.

The Bank of England forecasts are just absurd. They assume a fall in output almost as large as all our exports to the EU! Even the Bank can't think we would lose that much and can't ignore all the import substitution we would do

in such extreme and impossible circumstances. How else do they get to such a wildly high fall in output?

Will the Treasury tell us the cost of belonging to the EU – that is fact not fiction

The Treasury want to know the impact of Brexit so they should go back and compare the growth rates we achieved in the EEC/EU with the growth rates we were experiencing post War before we joined. They would find our growth rate fell in the EU, so in their terms that means there was a big cost to belonging to the EU.

How do the whips persuade people to vote their way?

We should expect plenty of stories about how the whips try to reduce the numbers of Conservative MPs planning to vote against the Withdrawal Agreement. I was surprised to be contacted by a journalist on Monday who asked me if I had changed my mind about voting against the Agreement, and who went on to ask what the whips had offered me to change my mind. I was able to say I did not plan to change my vote and I had not been offered anything.

Let me reassure some readers who take a low view of what goes on. I have never been offered an honour or some other gift by the whips on any occasion to get me to change my mind and vote for the party line. There have been various times over the last 8 years when I have not supported the government on EU matters, as I took seriously the promises we made in each Manifesto not to transfer more power to the EU. If anyone in future did suggest I might receive an honour to switch my vote I would say No and explain why that would be an abuse of the system. Honours are not tools for whips to use to secure a vote.

There have been some suggestions in the press that maybe others are being offered honours or inducements. It is difficult to see how this works for the government were they to be susceptible to such bad practice. Once they have announced an honour they cannot withdraw it, and the individual in receipt of it cannot be contracted to behave in a certain way thereafter. There have

been plenty of cases where MPs have received honours, only to be very critical of the government and leadership shortly afterwards, as the two issues are not related and should be unrelated.

I have even seen it claimed some are offered peerages. That sounds ludicrous. If anyone were to be offered an immediate peerage they would of course have to resign from the Commons and create a by election. I can't think of any example when it has been alleged an MP was offered a peerage to get through a particular Commons vote.

So how do whips try to get MPs to vote the party line? The first round is to put the government's case in more detail and more strongly to the MP to consider. This may include inviting the MP to have a meeting with the PM or relevant Minister, to hear directly why they want them to vote a certain way. Junior and ambitious MPs may well be told that their path to Ministerial appointment will be easier and smoother if they travel the loyal road, though history shows some rebels also have to be given jobs to provide some balance in the team and to bring some rebels into line by accepting the discipline of Ministerial office. Then there are arguments about the political consequences for government and party from defeat, use of friends of the MP to try to persuade them, and threats of consequences for the policy/party/government if the proposal is defeated. Good whipping is ad hominem. Different MPs respond to different types of pressure or appeal.

The PM seems to want to try to put pressure on MPs by seeking to persuade the party and the voters to back her deal, over the heads of the MPs. This is a route fraught with difficulty. MPs resent fellow MPs trying to whip up their constituents against them, whilst it looks as if the Conservative party membership is more strongly against the Withdrawal Agreement than the MPs on average.