

Accepting EU ways brings down Conservative leaders

Yesterday Mrs May received plenty of friendly Conservative advice to be firmer in her negotiations with the EU. Conservative leaders who love the EU more than their party have in the past lost their jobs. John Major, David Cameron and to some extent Edward Heath all lost their jobs by being too enthusiastic about the EEC/EU. The overwhelming majority of Conservative members today expect their Leader to stand up to the EU and to get on with leaving the EU as we have agreed to do. Mrs May seems to understand where her party is and acknowledges that we want to take back control of our money, our borders and our laws. She has made a clear red line over a border in the Irish Sea, but needs to dig in behind other red lines as well. She is in danger of being dragged into potential concessions that compromise such a result.

John Major is the best example of a leader whose complete tenure of office as PM was dominated by a bad policy decision which came from the EU. The UK's membership of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism which he had championed with his friends at the CBI did substantial economic damage. It first led to an inflationary credit expansion, then led to a sharp monetary contraction, a big fall in the pound and penal rates of interest which brought on a predictable and damaging recession. It did not just cost John Major his job, but meant the Conservative party was out of office for 13 years and failed to win a majority in the Commons for 18 years. The CBI leadership sought to ignore the damage their recommended policy did to many businesses.

David Cameron too lost his job directly by being too pro EU. He failed to negotiate firmly with them. He then wrongly decided to recommend a so called deal which amounted to very little, only to discover the UK voters wanted to take a much firmer line with an EU that had treated him badly. He rightly saw that his position was untenable when he lost a referendum on the issue of continued membership on his renegotiated terms, having been fully behind staying in. He too trusted the CBI advice, and saw similar advice coupled to wildly inaccurate short term forecasts from the Bank and Treasury look absurd in the year after the vote.

Edward Heath took the Conservatives down to defeat in a General Election mainly owing to the economic problems of the time, part national and part more global. The fact that the UK had just joined the EEC was however a contributory factor to his demise. There was no improvement in output, incomes and living standards when we joined in the way Mr Heath had promised, and many UK manufacturing businesses were hit badly by the tariff free competition EEC membership unleashed in steel, cars, ships and others. Mr Heath had also upset a significant minority in his party, lost friends over the EEC, and diverted enormous amounts of government time and attention to putting us under EEC rules and taxes to try to conform. He did not see the economic disaster coming and when it hit he had few political friends left.

Trafalgar evening

I would like to thank all involved in the local branch event held in the Victory Hall, Farley Hill on Saturday evening. We enjoyed a good meal, and the surroundings of the recently renovated venue. The Hall was originally constructed to commemorate the end of the First World War.

Recruiting and retaining teachers

Last week I attended a reception with Head teachers and Deputies at Westminster.

One of their issues was difficulty in recruiting and retaining the teaching staff they need for their schools. When I asked why they thought it was sometimes difficult, they gave me a complex answer.

They volunteered that it was not just or even mainly a question of money. They suggested that they wanted teaching to be better thought of, for it to be accepted as a profession.

I explained that all the MPs I listened to on the subject did treat teaching as a profession, and most of us say it is an important and worthwhile occupation. So who exactly is not treating teaching seriously? Why do some teachers feel they are not sufficiently appreciated? Part of the answer according to the teachers seemed to be a new (but I assume limited) cadre of aggressive parents who intervene regularly and challenge the judgements of teachers. For some it is a feeling about social attitudes to school and discipline more widely. All those of us who wish schools well and understand the importance of a good education need to rally behind the many good teachers who seek to uphold good values. There are limits to how much teachers can do to remedy problems at home or to tackle things like obesity. Successful education requires consent and support from parents.

It leads us to ask what is a profession? I think the world has moved on from the rather narrow past when some said there were only two professions, law and medicine. If you look at what set them a bit apart, it was a combination of self regulation, examinations to control entry into the profession and to ensure basic competence and knowledge, sometimes allied to special clothes and positions that generally commanded respect and were different from others. The lawyer in court wears a gown to show his or her academic and legal status. The doctor in hospital may wear a white coat to distinguish himself or herself from others.

There has long been an issue of what distinguishes a profession from a trade or mystery. Many trades also impose requirements to gain knowledge, pass exams, maintain standards and belong to a professional or trade body. Gas heating engineers need substantial knowledge, have substantial safety responsibilities, have to maintain their knowledge as systems and products change and belong to an accreditation body. They are no less professional than lawyers.

Teaching and the clergy are closer to the lawyers in the conventional understanding of professional status. Teachers like lawyers have to attain academic qualifications as well as practical teaching qualifications. They may wear gowns in more traditional schools or on special occasions. They have to maintain standards. The Catholic and Anglican clergy make extensive use of special clothes to single themselves out, and also normally have academic qualifications.

I would be interested in your thoughts on what more can be done to make people realise teaching is a worthwhile and rewarding career.

Village Maids cheese

Last night at the Trafalgar evening I was introduced to a local cheese called Waterloo. Made in Riseley it is a tasty product, and reminds us what scope there is to add value to farm products. They use milk from nearby Henley. This local business complements Barkham blue, another cheese which has done well in recent years.

Mrs May's Conservative Manifesto says only sign a Withdrawal Agreement if there is a good Future Partnership Agreement as well

The Conservative Manifesto for the 2017 election made pledges on the matter of the EU, and has never officially been renounced or amended by the Leader. I and many others stood for election on it and supported the Brexit pledges in it. I did not support the elderly care proposals in the same Manifesto as I made clear before the election. The PM subsequently dumped these.

It might be helpful to remind the PM and others of what the Manifesto said:

"We continue to believe no deal is better than a bad deal". The Manifesto proposed a Future Partnership Agreement but accepted it was only worth signing if it was a good one. This remains the PM's stated view.

It also said

"As we leave the EU we will no longer be members of the single market or customs union" This too remains her view, though there is now unwelcome discussion of staying in the Customs Union for longer.

The Manifesto also saw the need for linkage between the EU wish for us to sign a Withdrawal Agreement and the PM's wish to have a Future Partnership Agreement. "We believe it is necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside the withdrawal, reaching agreement on both within the two years allowed by Article 50". Here the PM has proceeded to negotiate mainly on the Withdrawal Agreement, making it impossible to agree a Future Partnership Agreement before we leave in March 2019. This surely means we cannot sign the Withdrawal Agreement they propose.