

Mrs May's non EU policies



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Mrs May set out a strong vision of a fairer and more prosperous UK in her initial statement of beliefs as she became Prime Minister. It hangs on the wall in 10 Downing Street as a reminder to visitors of what she intended. Unfortunately in office she was unable to make progress with it.

One of her mistakes was to appoint as Chancellor someone who did not buy into her vision, and who had no wish to use more public money to achieve some of the objectives she wished to set where state intervention was seen as part of the answer. The Chancellor did not conceal his wish to dilute and delay Brexit. He used Brexit as an excuse to withhold cash from public services or tax cuts on the grounds he wanted a “war chest” against a possible exit from the EU which he always wrongly thought of as damaging. The PM wanted more money for schools to help raise standards and give people a better start in life. She wanted more money for the NHS, which was eventually extracted after a long battle. She probably wanted or needed more money for social care, though that remains a series of problems in search of a policy.

She saw social care as a major issue. I remember being sounded out by the Downing Street Policy Unit on possible reform prior to the 2017 election. I advised a careful approach and suggested that first the government should issue a general document describing current policy and outlining the problems as they saw them, to invite responses and to trigger a national debate before trying to formulate answers. They said they were interested in how Margaret Thatcher had run things, and I reminded them I had helped Margaret approach welfare reform in this way with a big public conversation and enquiry before offering change. I was very aware from my work as a constituency MP that some people with no direct family experience of care homes did not know that the elderly person's home had to be sold to pay the bills in many cases, and this needed to be more widely understood to have a conversation on care.

Unfortunately advisers decided they could invent and land a major reform of social care using a General election as a brief period to sell their ideas to the voters. Mrs May accepted a scheme for the 2017 election Manifesto that sounded like the old death tax that Conservatives had rejected under Labour. It turned out to be a predictable disaster which the PM had to reject during the election campaign itself, as criticism of the social care policy drowned out other matters and came from many potential Conservative voters.

She was keen to encourage more housebuilding and put in place various schemes and directions to do so. There was progress in increasing the build rate as she hoped. She saw the need for improved standards in schools, building on the reform work of the previous government. It was not a smooth path given the antipathy of teachers to the Gove reforms, and the shortage of cash for the lower funded schools around the country. She continued to develop and promote her agenda to curb modern slavery and to tackle discrimination.

The bold aim to narrow the north-south divide, one shared with many previous governments, made some progress with welcome acceleration of investment and modernisation in some of the great northern and Midlands cities.

The aim to develop a modern industrial strategy made little progress. The industrial strategy was damaged by the ever dearer energy which made it difficult to keep or expand energy using industries in the UK. The car industry strategy was damaged by the Chancellor's higher taxes on cars and the general government assault on modern diesel vehicles. The Business Secretary, like the Chancellor, was downbeat throughout about the opportunities and prospects after Brexit. The various car factory closures in the UK and rest of the EU and current state of the UK steel industry shows the failure of their so called industrial strategy.