

The Post Office systems scandal

It has taken many years, much suffering and plenty of legal bills for the Postmasters to get justice over the Horizon scandal. MPs including myself told past Ministers there was no sudden outbreak of mass criminality by Postmasters, but there was a systems and accounting problem created by new computers. This has at last been admitted by the Post Office and the government.

Yesterday in the House the Minister made a statement about how the Post Office and government intend to proceed following the Court decision to quash past convictions for fraud, false accounting and theft by some of the Postmasters. They plan an Inquiry and a compensation scheme. There was widespread anger in the House about what has happened and how long it has taken the Post Office to accept its errors. I stressed to the Minister that they should as a matter of urgency grant compensation to all those falsely accused and many falsely convicted. The compensation should cover the Horizon losses themselves, but also the extensive legal fees to right the wrongs and the lost earnings and business revenue caused by these false actions. People have lost their livelihoods and seen their reputations savaged. The least the Post Office should do is offer generous compensation along with their belated apology.

My Question during the Urgent Question on the Overseas Development Aid Budget, 26 April 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is the UK now stopping making overseas aid payments through the EU, given the way it has been spending money on a country such as China, which has \$3.2 trillion in reserves?

Is this not an opportunity for the UK to express its own moral priorities, and secure better value for money by making more of its own direct choices and payments? Can that include being very generous in response to the current Indian crisis?

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (Mr James Cleverly): My right hon. Friend makes the important point that, having left the European Union, the United Kingdom can now make its own decisions. In many instances—not in all cases—the positions that we take now are similar to those that we took as members of the European Union.

He will note that we have significantly—almost completely—reduced our aid

support to China; the only expenditure now is in support of human rights and open societies. As I said in response to an earlier question, we will be focused very much on how we can support our friends around the world in their times of need.

The questions over Scottish independence

I would like Scotland to stay in the UK and note that a majority of Scottish people in the latest polls wish to. I think all should rest with the agreement in 2014 that that was a legal once in a generation vote. As the Scottish election is dominated by arguments about independence, with the SNP wanting another early referendum on the subject to try to reverse the decision made just a few years ago to remain, it is necessary to look at some of the consequences of a theoretical pro independence vote.

Many SNP people and arguments imply they do not want an independent Scotland. Many seem to want devo max. The official party position is now to want so called independence but to assume they will be admitted to the EU. They do not have doubts about how feasible that would be, nor do they think through what a negotiation would be like to try to bring that about. Presumably the EU would want Scotland to be a net contributor to the EU budget, a very different relationship to one they have with the UK budgets that have favoured Scotland. They would also presumably expect Scotland to prepare to enter the single currency. That at least would sort out the strange refusal of the SNP to say which currency they would use were they win a referendum, though there would still be the question of what currency they would adopt between leaving the UK and being admitted as full members of the Euro.

In the last referendum many SNP supporters argued they should stay in the pound. It seemed doubly bizarre to want an independent Scotland to have a foreign Central Bank. There would be no reason for the rest of the UK and the Bank of England to go on taking Scotland's economic needs into account when setting rates and banking policy. Scotland would not be represented on the Board or around the Monetary Policy Committee table. They also believed last time that large and rising oil revenues would bail them out. Today the oil price is much lower and the new Scotland is committed to net zero, so they have to plan the demise of their oil industry.

The issue of debts and deficits would loom large. Of course if leaving the UK Scotland should take her fair share of the collective debt. Her budget deficit would be far too high for the Maastricht EU rules. That is an issue they would need to sort out as part of their membership talks with the EU. Meanwhile they would need to satisfy international debt markets about their plans.

I am not one to go in for Project Fear type projections of what might happen to Scottish economic output, jobs and trade were she to leave the UK. I have seen too many of those exercises be too pessimistic without helping the cause of those trying to keep a Union together. It is however important that the rest of the UK makes clear that were Scotland to hold and win a legal referendum to leave the UK we would respect it, and would proceed to negotiate exit. The UK would need to make fair proposals to share the debt, to allow independent migration and citizenship policies, to provide a means of following different trade and foreign policies, and settling issues over defence amongst other matters. Scotland would need to put up an EU external border with England if she got her way and became an EU member. Would Scotland seek to join NATO and be a committed ally of the UK? How quickly would the UK military bases in Scotland be removed? The rest of the UK should not seek to obstruct a departure following a legal referendum, but nor should it allow exit on Scotland's preferred terms. 300 years of Union has created much common working and interwoven institutions so there would be much to unravel.

Farming and the environment

I am all in favour of defending our landscapes, keeping our water and air clean and being kind to animals. Conservatives believe in conserving what is best in the natural world and working with the grain of Human nature and the environment.

I am in favour of reducing the pressures of development on our green fields and woods by having a more sustainable level of migration than we were allowed by the EU free movement rules. People who do come to live here should be welcomed and have access to decent housing and services. There are limits to how much extra can be supplied.

There are some who wish to re wild large areas. I do not think we have the same obligation to wolves or wild boar or wild cats as yet unborn as we do to allow space and food for all the birds and animals who currently share our land. When we seek places for wild flowers and shrubs we should balance that with the need to grow more of our own food. A field of corn or a pasture of sheep can look beautiful and is as much a part of the natural world as some newly created wild space.

We need to avoid policies which destroy livelihoods and land important to people's lives. The drowning of the Somerset levels was destroying homes and farmland in some strange experiment. The same was not tried in the Fens where they still dredged the ditches and manned the pumps to preserve England's most productive growing land. Why was the Somerset levels selected for different treatment? We also need to defend land subject to attack from the sea where it has been settled and matters to people's lives and livelihoods.

In selective places we should consider as the Dutch do reclaiming land we could use for farms or dwellings.

I will continue to press DEFRA for their policies to promote food production. They seem keener on wilding when we need a proper balance.

Not enough growth

The OBR who got their last year deficit forecast wrong by £91bn estimate that 2023-2025 will see economic growth settle down to 1.7%, 1.6% and 1.7% a year. They assume migration continues with the population expanding by 0.3% a year, a bit down on pre pandemic and pre Brexit levels, to give per capita growth of around just 1.4% a year for the 3 years. These figures are disappointingly low.

It could be that they are simply more forecasting errors. After all they underestimated GDP last year and are usually on the pessimistic side. Or it could be that they expect the Treasury to carry on following austerity, EU alignment and state debt driven policies for the next five years which would deliver similar low levels of growth to our years in the single market under the Maastricht economic rules which drove the Osborne/Hammond debt and deficit austerity policies.

The government should challenge these assumptions and work out a growth strategy to improve these forecasts. We need to put behind us the years of dependence when the UK willingly signed up to rules and systems which exported more and more of our industrial output to continental factories, made us more and more dependent on EU imported food, power and much else besides and left important parts of our economy smaller as a result.

It is high time the Treasury set itself the task of making a good improvement over the UK's performance of the last 28 years in the single market. We now have the freedoms to do better if only we will use them. Tomorrow on Conservative Home I will set out a possible new framework for UK economic policy in response to the government statement that it is looking to change the rules governing economic management.