

The need to make and grow things at home – national resilience

The UK fought two massive and bruising wars in the last century. On both occasions the UK state declared war on Germany without having the military resources in place to be able to defeat German armies on the continent. The story of each war was the same. Initial disasters for the expeditionary forces, skilled and brave but outnumbered, had to be followed by a massive scaling up of commitment. Vast citizens armies had to be recruited and trained. The UK had to rely on and build alliances to assist in victory. On both occasions getting the USA involved was particularly important. On both occasions the government had to transform our economy, turning much production over to a war footing, to make sure we could produce the guns, ships and planes needed to sustain major conflict from our own resources in our own factories, and growing enough food to avoid starvation. In each war the German strategy of trying to cut off our overseas trade by lethal submarine and surface raider attacks proved difficult to contain and threw us back on to more and more domestic self reliance.

The fact that we started each war with a professional military which could expand and change under the need to build a citizen army helped. We could also create, train and equip a much larger airforce, from scratch in 1914 and from a small one in 1939. The fertility and relatively clement climate for growing temperate foods also helped, with flower gardens and parks being tilled for vegetables. The excellence of UK technology, with leads in several fields for both wars also assisted. As we study those events today we should of course redouble our efforts to make sure we do not need to plunge into such vast conflict again. We should also learn the crucial lesson, that you cannot defend your country unless you have sufficient production capacity to supply and replenish a war machine in wartime conditions. It is no good relying on imports, licensed technology controlled by others and basic foods from abroad if you need to win a serious war.

In 1914 and 1939 we had our own coking coal, steel furnaces, tank, gun and ship designs and chemical factories to make explosives. In 1939 we had some great private sector aircraft designs which could be built at speed and scale. Many factories making discretionary consumer items could be flipped to war production. Furniture factories could even make the wooden Mosquito plane to add additional numbers to the airforce capability. In a remarkable drive the UK reached output of 26,000 planes a year in 1943 and outproduced Germany in planes over the war as a whole, whilst the US ramped up from 2141 planes in 1939 to a massive 96,318 in 1944.

Today when planes and ships are more complex and expensive than in the 1940s we struggle to produce more than a handful. Procurement is very dependent on overseas supplies, and NATO action rests on interoperability and shared capacity with allies. The UK needs to have plans for how it would cope were one or more of our allies to fall into hostile or unfriendly hands, and have plans on how the UK would sustain herself in war conditions. That requires

ensuring we have control of the main technologies which we could use for ourselves if needed, and control over sufficient production capacity with raw materials or access to them. It also means remembering it is good to be able to feed yourself to a sufficient standard as part of national resilience.

Having sufficient control over wider technologies, raw materials and skilled labour is also helpful in less stressful times, when the wars are fought with words and laws over trade issues with tariffs, export bans and the like. As the world trends towards more national self reliance, the UK should look more to herself in important areas so we can cope in adverse circumstances.

More urgency needed to rebuild our fishing fleet

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if he will take urgent steps to help expand the UK fishing fleet. (142753)

Tabled on: 25 January 2021

Answer:

Victoria Prentis:

The Government remains committed to supporting the fishing industry and our coastal communities. The Trade and Co-operation Agreement with the EU reflects the UK's new status as an independent coastal state, and we have taken back control of our fishing waters. By the end of the five-and-a-half-year period, the share of fish in our waters which UK boats will catch will rise from half to two thirds.

The Government is supporting the opportunities available to the UK's fishing industry and has committed to providing £100m of investment to rejuvenate the industry and coastal communities across the UK. Further details will be set out in due course.

The answer was submitted on 02 Feb 2021 at 13:07.

Free trade and the retreat from

globalisation

I accept the theory of free trade, that all nations would be richer if they traded freely with each other. Successive rounds of GATT followed by the work of the WTO have boosted world economic activity a bit.

I also agree that for any individual country in theory it could be better off if it went for unilateral free trade, on the grounds that it would benefit from cheaper imports, though would not gain extra opportunity for its exports. I do not however recommend such a policy because it does assume that other countries would not exploit the perceived weakness of a country welcoming more imports without demanding something in return. Were other countries to accept the freedom to sell to that country and at the same time exploit it by making imports from it more difficult it might harm the country making the unilateral offer. It can also lead to strategic weakness by being import dependent on countries that may later become hostile or unhelpful. Trade theory assumes rational economic actions by others, when they may act in a harmful economic way for other reasons.

I am a free trader who believes in offering to remove tariffs and barriers in return for similar offers from trading partners. Today we must recognise that there are strong winds of economic nationalism. President Trump called out China for her trade and IP practises. He moved to ban certain Chinese trade in goods in technologically sensitive areas, and imposed tariffs in an attempt to stem the tide of imports. President Biden is continuing with the same policy albeit with a different choice of diplomatic language. He is reinforcing the idea of making more things in America to replace imports. China retains higher tariffs than the west, controls inward investors through joint ventures and restricts access to some markets.

There have always been cultural and administrative restrictions on free trade and investment in countries claiming to believe in open markets and the free movement of capital. Some UK companies have found it very difficult to invest and work in France and Germany despite being members of the single market for many years. UK retailers for example, reckoned to be world leaders in our early days in the EEC/EU, were unable to build profitable chains of shops on the continent. There have also always been aggressive strategies pursued by some countries to grab market share for their companies and put others at a disadvantage. We have just seen some of this over vaccine production and supply within the EU.

Given the avowed America First, EU first and China first policies being pursued currently, the UK needs to do more work on import substitution and domestic capacity. There is a fixation with marginal changes to export volumes and opportunities, and too little study of how we can become more independent in timber, energy, fish, temperate food, and much else besides. The recent expansion of vaccine production here at home has been a great strength and shows what can be done when there is a concerted effort to use our new freedoms to good effect.

Christianity, the EU and Brexit

This is the article I published on Conservative Home:

It was a revelation to read a tweet from the Archbishop of Canterbury that was critical of recent words and attempted deeds of the EU. The Church he leads has often been identified with the various Lib Dem and Labour Remain campaigns which he and other Bishops have supported in the Lords. These campaigns have always worked from the basis that the EU can do no wrong and the UK can do little right.

His tweet is worth examining, because it explains why he and others like him have been so pro EU before. It turns out to be grounded on some basic misunderstandings of both the nature of the EU and the evolving constitution and nature of the English/UK state.

"The EU was originally inspired by Christian social teaching at the heart of which is solidarity. Seeking to control the export of vaccines undercuts the EU's basic ethics. They need to work together with others" he wrote.

Not exactly, Archbishop.

The EU began life as the EEC, a development of the German Zollverein or customs union. It was neither free trade oriented nor open to the rest of the world, based on protectionist thinking. The early EEC/EU was strictly secular. The first reference to religions in the Treaties was introduced at Lisbon and remains today as Article 17 of the Treaty of the functioning of the EU. That states that the Union respects different religions and different philosophical and non confessional organisations recognised in individual member states. It does not accord any priority to Christianity or any other religion, and merely says the EU will have a dialogue with all these bodies. There is no official Church of the EU. The preamble to the Treaty of Union shows how eclectic the sources of EU thought are by saying "drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe". France, a fiercely secular state fought successfully to avoid any reference to the Christian religion in the EU Treaty or constitution. The EU has sought to define inalienable human rights that come from no particular faith or philosophy.

In contrast there are several states in Europe that do afford a special place or mention to a Christian Church and Christian values in their constitutions. Denmark, England, Greece, Hungary, Malta and Norway for example all have state Churches that are identified and given various special privileges or mentions. England is one of the most generous to its established Church, the Church of England which the Archbishop leads.

I do not hear him talking much about the special status the Church enjoys in English and wider UK life. The Church owns substantial legacy property and

investment wealth courtesy of the UK state and Parliament. MPs do not question this. Parliament moreover allows the Church to collect all rents and dividends free of income tax, take all capital gains free of Gains Tax, and buy assets free of Stamp Duty, to give it maximum scope to build its wealth and grow its income. It would be good to hear more debate on how that is being used. It has its own Parliament, rule making and disciplinary bodies, though they are answerable to the UK Parliament and ultimately governed by UK law. The Archbishops and senior Bishops have seats , votes and voices in the UK legislature. Though they are there as part of the wider governing establishment they are under no duty to support the government, and often during a Conservative government vote and speak in opposition. They also vote on Northern Irish and Scottish matters outside the area of their clerical authority. The Archbishop himself has been a critic of various Brexit measures including the recent Trade Bill and Internal market Bill.

The Church of England benefits from its status as the established Church, gaining a near monopoly over all the main UK national and English civic events from royal weddings and funerals through Remembrance Day services, national anniversaries, civic services for Councils and Mayors, daily prayers in Parliament, to a network of Church schools receiving taxpayer finance. These swell otherwise dwindling congregations. I will explore the nature of solidarity and where that stands in modern politics in a later post. I look forward to the evolution of the Archbishop's thinking on EU matters as he studies more how the EU seeks advantage and augments its power in ways that do not offer friendly co-operation with the rest of the world.

“

Solidarity in modern political parties

Those who use the word solidarity loosely to imply a politics based on the acceptance of mutual obligations where the rich contribute more to the common budget and the poor benefit from it can take comfort from modern democratic parties in the West.

In the UK as elsewhere all mainstream parties believe in three central tenets. They believe that the rich should pay more tax, and favour progressive tax systems. They believe that the poor should receive benefits from the state so no one need go without a roof over their head, food on their table and clothes on their back. They believe that all who can should work to provide for themselves and their families.

Although some on the left try to present the centre right and right as against any such system of social insurance, they are wrong. The debates are not about this central framework which all elected politicians of the main parties accept. The arguments are about the balance between the three tenets

and how you best implement them.

What rates of taxation maximise an appropriate take from the rich ? Or do you wish to tax the rich so hard you drive them out of your country or they cease to be rich?

What level of benefits should you pass to the poor? All agree there has to be a ceiling but there are disagreements about how high it can be, both on grounds of affordability and on grounds of incentive to work.

The third issue raises the same questions. Should low income earners be exempt all tax? At what rate should in work benefit be removed? What are effective as incentives, and what is fair?

Small differences on these matters are often presented as fundamental disagreements, with centre right politicians presented as uncaring as if they wished to remove all support, and centre left politicians presented as wanting to bankrupt the country through inability to see there are limits to what the working population can afford by way of support to others. There is a general drift in democracies to more state spending and more state involvement, with more elected politicians campaigning for government to do things than campaigning for more freedom.