

Government promises increase in per pupil funding

In today's debate on money for schools the Secretary of State promised minimum per pupil amounts for every school under his new formula. I pointed out that this year some schools in Wokingham are still below the minimum thresholds he is proposing, and urged him to speed up the adjustment of cash for them.

School money

I had a meeting with the Schools Minister this week in the House of Commons to push again for more money for Wokingham and West Berkshire schools. I also asked for explanations of some individual schools budgets now that I have the actual figures that Wokingham Borough are sending to the schools, as well as the indicative budget figures which the government had provided. The Minister has promised to get back to me over the detailed queries, so I will keep you posted.

Public borrowing forecasts were far too gloomy

Yesterday we got news that the total net borrowing of the public sector was £42.6bn. This compares with the March 2017 budget forecast of £58.3bn. So the result was £15.7bn or 27% lower than forecast.

This reflects the general gloomy bias of official forecasts. It does matter, because Ministers rely on these forecasts to make spending and tax decisions. If forecasts are unrealistically gloomy they can also adversely affect confidence and outlook.

The public sector net cash requirement was similarly overstated in the Budget estimates.

I understand the difficulty of getting these forecasts exactly right, but they should strive to offer realistic forecasts.

England and St George

Yesterday I was invited to give a short talk at a St George's Day reception in Parliament. Present were representatives of the Royal Society of St George.

I began by commenting that England to many in Parliament is the forgotten country. England is so often unassuming and quiet. It was perhaps fitting that this particular event should take place the day after St George's day as if an afterthought, however much it was uppermost in the minds of its keenest supporters. Events and bookings had conspired to let England take her place a day late.

April 23rd is memorable not just as England's special day, but also as Shakespeare's birthday. The conjunction reminds us of some of the richness of drama and literature that England has shared with the world. Our ancestors have been bold and enterprising, innovative and entertaining. We have given many sports, cultural events and technologies to the world, and have been greatly engaged in exploring and bringing together the trading empires and outposts of our globe.

In recent years Labour did its best to fracture the United Kingdom with its lop sided devolution. England has accepted this settlement, where Scotland has a Parliament, Wales and Northern Ireland have Assemblies, and England has no such recognition. The last government went half way to tackling the injustice in Parliament by preventing the Union Parliament from forcing onto England a law its MPs do not want, but fell short of giving us the complementary power to propose and advance legislation that England wants without needing the consent of the rest of the Union Parliament.

I did not renew my vows on a new English constitutional settlement in the 2017 election, because the priority is Brexit. That is constitutional change enough for one Parliament. The people of England voted for Brexit by a larger majority than the people of the whole Union. England now expects their Union government to deliver.

Trade wars

There is a new misleading Remain argument around at last. They have seized on Mr Trump's push back against China and are claiming this means the UK will become dependent on the WTO just at the point where the USA is undermining the world trading system.

This is another spectacular misunderstanding. Mr Trump is pushing hard bilaterally, and has already secured some relaxations of trade from China as a result of his actions. The USA and China remain members of the WTO and have to put their actions into a WTO legal framework. Mr Trump has so far bypassed WTO just over steel and aluminium, by claiming national security, but is pushing other changes through the usual WTO processes. There is no question of the USA leaving the WTO. Both the EU and the UK will continue to be governed by WTO rules after we have left the EU. The aim of Mr Trump is to end up with more access to China's markets, as he draws attention to the lack of symmetry between China's access to the USA and US access to China. It is highly likely he will secure more access, and thanks to WTO rules that will help us as well as the USA. Whatever China offers the USA she will have to offer the other WTO members.

The EU is now trying to exploit this argument as well. They are telling us that the UK with just 2.5% of world trade will not be as influential in the WTO as the EU with 13% of world trade after the departure of the UK. This too is a misunderstanding of how the WTO works. Small countries as well as large countries are looked after and helped by the WTO as long as they are pushing for freer trade. The WTO looks forward to the UK getting its vote and voice back in the WTO as the UK will be an important voice for freer trade worldwide, and will be seeking bilateral free trade agreements with countries that do not have them with the EU.