

Globalists versus little Europeans

How many more times do we have to debate staying in the Customs union? The Commons has twice had important lively debates, and has twice voted decisively to leave the Customs Union in accordance with the views of both the Remain and Leave campaigns in the referendum that we would have to or want to. The amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill in the Commons to keep us in the customs union was defeated by 322 votes to 99. The proposed amendment to the Queen's speech debate along similar lines was rejected by a similar margin. The whole Bill without customs union membership was approved by 324 to 295.

Remain always wanted to make the referendum a debate just about trade. Leave countered that it was a debate about something much bigger. It was a debate about democracy itself, and who is in charge. We voted leave to take back control of our money, our borders, our laws, and yes also our trade policy. In the referendum debates I always stressed both that it was in the EU's interest to accept the UK's likely offer of a free trade deal, and that they might nonetheless decide to self harm. Given the imbalance in trade and the fact that tariffs are only high on agriculture, the UK could do just fine on WTO terms.

The trade debate itself is one between Little Europeans and Globalists. The Remain case was always contradictory. They say that WTO terms on UK/ EU trade would be deeply damaging to the UK, but our bigger trade with the faster growing rest of the world on WTO terms was just fine! Remain decided to grossly exaggerate possible adverse effects of agricultural tariffs on the UK, a net importer, and ignore them on the rest of the EU, the net exporter! During our membership of the CAP and CFP we have lost market share and ended up as heavy importers. Meanwhile we are banned from buying cheaper imports from non EU sources, where they make us impose large tariffs.

We globalists constantly pointed out in the referendum that the EU Customs Union was a nasty set of restrictions on our trade with the rest of the world. They are especially damaging to poorer countries who would like to sell us their food at good prices but face large tariff walls. The Leave side had its own debate between those who think like me we should bargain away some of these tariffs for free trade deals with many countries, and those who wished unilaterally to sweep away many of the food tariffs and go for cheaper food straight away.

I find it difficult to accept another Groundhog day where the Remain politicians and media wish to relaunch their incoherent Little European approach to trade, and wish to reinforce the EU's aggressive stance against food producing poor countries. Giving a bit more aid is no substitute for trade which could help lift the incomes of poorer countries more quickly.

I am a globalist in this debate. It is better for the emerging countries. It is also better for UK farms and fishermen, who will recapture market share from the continent when we leave properly.

Money for Wokingham schools

I have been pressing for more cash for local schools. I have argued for a better national formula, and for more money for schools in total. I am still pressing for further improvement as I am well aware that schools would like more money.

I have just received the latest figures from Wokingham Borough Council comparing schools budgets for 2018/19 with their budgets for 2017/18. These budgets are still locally determined, though clearly national financial provision is an important determinant as it settled the totals for local schools.

The figures are for Wokingham Borough as a whole, so they stretch beyond just my constituency. They show that in total the schools budgets for 2017/18 of £94.45 m have gone up by 4.5% or £4.291 to a total for 2018/19 of £98.742 m. This is a useful increase. I am urging the government to provide further increases next year. I want more from a better national formula which gives relatively more to schools in areas like Wokingham which tend to be at the lower end of the national tables for cash. I am also seeking an increase in the general national totals for English schools.

The local distribution of the money by school does leave a few schools with less cash. This is because they have experienced a substantial loss of pupils. As a large part of the money is provided as a per pupil payment to cover individual pupil costs of teaching and provision, loss of pupils clearly does result in less grant. Bohunt is the school that gets the largest increase to reflect its rapid growth.

Shopping and parking

There seems to be virtual unanimity on this site that high charges for parking, and difficulty in parking in or near Town Centres is an important contributory cause to the decline in use of High Street shops. It is true that out of town centres and retail parks with plenty of free parking near to the shops have a distinct advantage, as does the internet. I will have another go at making this case as part of the debate on how to revive or improve town centres.

Solving the Irish border

The EU has long decided to use the Irish border issue as one to try to force the UK to stay in the Customs Union, keep all EU rules and make the exit payment they want which is not a legal requirement on the UK. It is most important that the UK civil service negotiators understand this is a silly ruse, and robustly put the alternative case. Let me remind them what it is.

The border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, part of the UK, is already a complex one. It is a currency, VAT, Excise and criminal law jurisdiction border. This means there are already so called hard border arrangements to ensure any goods moving across the border pay the right amount of VAT to the right authorities, and pay the relevant Excise duties. There are anti smuggling systems in place as there is obviously current scope to exploit differences of VAT and Excise by criminals. There are ways of handling movement of criminals across the frontier, and electronic systems for trade through TIR, registered economic operators and the rest.

If we also need to levy customs duties when we leave because the EU refuses the UK offer of tariff free trade, so be it. The same methods used for Vat and Excise can be used for the customs levies. It can be done electronically away from the border as it is today.

Before we entered the EU we had a free travel area with the Republic and all involved in the negotiations wish this to continue, so it is difficult to see new problems concerning movement of people. When the UK legislates its new borders system for movement of people it is likely to seek to reduce migrant numbers into the UK by changing benefit rules and requiring work permits, not by imposing new controls at the frontier. We already have external border checks on illegals and on criminals seeking to cross. We will continue to welcome as many tourists, visitors and people who pay their own bills who wish to come.

I trust the UK will give a robust defence of this approach and demonstrate that the Irish border is a put up job by the EU to push us back into conformity.

Retail growth and shop distress

In the USA and in the UK there has been great growth in internet retailing, overall growth in retail sales, and some hard knocks for some traditional retailers. In the US levels of distressed debt for retail companies, and the rate of bankruptcies is high against a background of an expanding economy and growing disposable incomes. In the UK too there have been some recent casualties, traditional High Street shop sales overall are disappointing,

and internet sales are growing well.

Some say the playing field is not level. The traditional retailers of course need shop property and plenty of in store staff which the web retailers do not need. That is their choice, and they are trying to persuade shoppers that works for them as well. It also means they have to pay more tax, incurring substantial property taxes on top of their additional cost base. Critics of the success stories of the digital age often allege the main companies do not pay a high enough tax charge.

The EU is saying it wants to make internet shopping dearer by imposing a turnover tax on digital companies on top of other taxes. Some say the internet companies need to pay some additional levy to allow for the property taxes they do not have to pay because they are on a different business model. Some traditional shop groups would just like some rate relief, to make it a bit easier for them.

I am inviting contributors to say what they think should be done, if anything? Is it just a case that the internet model has many attractions which will continue to win market share? Why do some large shopping centres attract more footfall than High Streets? What is the role of parking charges, access and the attitude of local government in settling which types of shops and shopping are popular, and which are in retreat?