

Stoke and the ceramic industry

When I was first elected to the Commons I was Chairman of a large quoted industrial group of companies. In our ownership was an important part of the UK's ceramic tile industry. The Group owned Johnsons Tiles, and Maws. We manufactured wall and floor tile. Even then we had competitive problems with the rest of the EU. Italian gas was considerably cheaper than UK gas, I was told, giving the successful Italian competitors an edge. In more recent years the extra costs of ever dearer energy has become a bigger problem for the UK ceramics industry, like other heavy energy using businesses.

It was also true then, and now, that there was one thing even more important to a successful ceramics company than affordable energy to fire the kilns. A growing business needs great designers, great commercial artists, great marketing to put before the architects, the house specifiers, domestic consumers and the design consultants styles, colours and finishes they want to buy. UK ceramics has numerous great names and brands from the past. Maws were famous for their Victorian encaustic tiles which graced many a home and grand public building. Wedgwood was perhaps the greatest potter of all time, with his long career of new glazes, shapes and textures, and his ability to recreate the best of the past in a modern idiom. In the last century Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper and others launched homeware ranges that excited the imagination and became classics in their turn.

When I worked with managers over how to extend and improve our tiling range, my first reaction was to fall back on the old pattern books which we still had amidst the company's intellectual property. All those Georgian, Victorian and early twentieth century homes might want modern versions of the tiles the factories had made when the homes were first new. Some of the glazes, shapes and designs from the Victorian, Art Nouveau and Art deco periods were particularly fine. I also asked the business to contact design Colleges to see what was stirring and if they wanted to collaborate.

The UK industry needed to automate more of its plants, drive down kiln transit times, and get better at recycling and controlling heat use. Over the years since I left much of this has come to pass.

Today, in the wake of the Stoke by election, the government should ask itself what more can be done to encourage a larger and more vibrant ceramics industry in the Potteries. Emma Bridgewater has shown that a modern entrepreneur with design flair can still establish a decent business here. Moorcroft, Waterford Wedgwood, Wade and Steelite also show what can still be done. Government does need to address the issue of dear energy for this industry and others. It can also help establish the talent pool and the possible collaborations between our Commercial Design schools and the industries that need those skills.

What is professionalism?

It is sometimes said there are only two professions, the law and medicine. By this people have meant that these two skills or arts require long study of the past corpus of knowledge, stiff professional exams, continuous professional development once qualified, and supervision by a professional regulatory body.

In practice today many other skills have come to be seen in the same light as these professions. Accountants, Investment experts, property specialists, opticians, architects, structural engineers and many others have a similar pattern to their lives. They too need to learn, pass exams and then accept some continuous professional training and supervision. You could widen the definition further to include gas heating engineers, plumbers and other important skilled trades where there is now a system of learning, exams, and regulatory expectations.

There is a general trend to add professions to the list under this definition, and to upgrade the level of qualifications people need to practice. Investment specialists now, for example, typically have a degree level qualification where a decade ago they may have held an A level equivalent, and thirty years ago may have been unqualified or have just passed the Stock Exchange exam.

There should, however, be something more to a profession than passing some exams and ticking boxes for the regulator as the individual seeks to keep up with any requirements for Continuous Professional development or regulatory checks on his or her actions. A true professional is someone who has genuine skill or knowledge that he or she takes pride in. They keep it up to date not because they have to but because it is part of being professional and doing the job well. A professional does not work a 9 to 5 day, but does the hours necessary to meet the demands of his patients or clients. If the person is employed they will be on a good salary and expected to work longer hours or at week-ends when needed. Military officers, for example, have to be available for duty as needed. Investment bankers pursuing deals may work all week-end to see it through to time. A professional goes the extra distance, strives for continuous improvement, and upholds high standards of integrity and honesty. A bent lawyer or a dangerous doctor should be struck off.

Today there is a bit of reappraisal underway over these ideals or standards. At the same time as the Regulators and law makers trust the professionals less, there is a danger the professionals respond by being less professional in some ways. If the Regulator checks up on how much professional development someone undertakes, some so called professionals respond by gaming the Continuous Professional Development system. If the regulator sets minimum hours for such additional study there is the danger the minimum becomes the maximum. As the professional standards become more and more codified, so more and more professionals just implement the protocols or standards whether they are optimal or not, as it is the safe thing from the career point of view to do. It can cramp challenge and reform of the standards which may be needed

for overall improvement. As the concept of work life balance becomes more entrenched, so more professionals want to go part time or limit their commitment to their discipline. How big a limit can you place on your profession before you are no longer sufficiently professional?

I would be interested in your thoughts. Do you think the tightening of requirements on professionals mean modern professionals are better than before these changes? Or are the professions becoming too bureaucratic, gripped by group think, to the detriment of their clients and patients?

The NHS and social care

Today Parliament will debate social care and the NHS. Although it will not come across like this, in practice all the main parties are in agreement. All want a high quality free at the point of use NHS. All want extended and caring support for frail and elderly people to live at home or in well run care homes. All agree the amount spent on these services needs to carry on increasing, as it has been doing under successive governments.

So what is the row about? The disagreements come about over the amount of the increase in money, and whether any kind of reform or better management is needed to ensure the spending is well made. Traditionally governments seek reform and try to impose some limit on the amount of the increase in cost, whilst Oppositions demand more money and criticise reforms. It is always easy to criticise past reforms, as it is very difficult for any group of Ministers and senior officials to achieve major change in the NHS, whilst social care is supervised by a wide range of Councils with varying degrees of competence, and widely differing views.

I Agree with those who say we do need to spend more on the NHS and social care. I also think the government and Councils responsible do need to work closely with the senior staff to try to get better value for money and to raise the quality of what is being achieved where it is not good enough. Quality and value for money need not be a variance with one another. Doing things right first time, and avoiding mistakes, saves a lot of money as well as providing a much better outcome for the patient. Jeremy Hunt's mantra of putting patients first and having full transparency on what hospitals achieve is part of the solution.

There are many ways more efficiency can reduce the strain on resources. Collecting all the fees owing from overseas visitors and foreign governments would provide useful additional revenue. Controlling the release of supplies could cut down on waste. Requiring the return of robust longer term medical equipment for cleaning and reuse would reduce costs. Having more permanent staff and fewer temps and locums would also cut the bills. Putting together prompt and decent social care packages would allow freeing beds in hospitals for others and would cut the costs of caring for the patient discharged from

hospital. .

All these things are easy to see from the outside and easy to write down. We also need to ask why have good people managing the NHS seen this and not done them? There needs to be leadership from the official heads of the NHS that all these things matter, with follow up where they do not occur. Managers also need to work with doctors and nurses over their terms and conditions, to try to reduce the perceived advantage in working as a contractor, locum or temp rather than as a full time member of the team on the permanent staff.

The EU's unemployment problem

EU has come to mean European Unemployment. The Euro seems to stand for European Unemployment and Recession Organisation. One of the main reasons the Euro and the Euro elite are under attack in so many Euro countries by new political forces challenging the project is their insouciance to the economic problems created by or co-existing with their single currency and single market.

If the Euro and the single market were all they are cracked up to be by the EU elite governing parties and senior officials they would have banished high youth unemployment and general unemployment in Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and others by now. They would have boosted the zone's growth rate up at least to that in the USA, UK, and the other leading non Euro advanced western countries. Instead Greece remains mired in a long recession punctuated by the odd quarter or two of slow growth. Italy languishes well below the levels of GDP achieved before the 2008 banking crash. They have no convincing explanation of why half the young people in Greece are out of work, or why one fifth of the Spaniards are still out of work after a year or so of recovery.

I first realised that the single market was not going to add jobs and incomes to the UK or anywhere else when I became the UK's single market Minister. I had accepted the verdict of the referendum in 1975 that UK voters wanted to be in a common market free trade area, though I had cast one of my first votes against, as the Treaty did not say it was going to be a free trade area. It looked in those early years like a Customs Union, with asymmetric relaxation of trade in goods where the UK was relatively weak and little or no relaxation in services where the UK was strong.

So it proved, with our big balance of payments deficit with the EU becoming a permanent feature based on the continental car industry and others outcompeting the UK. I tried to make it more like the free trade common market people had been promised. With so many matters settled by majority vote it became more and more difficult for the UK to stop measures which simply added to costs and made the EU less able to create jobs.

Instead the single market became the method by which large multinationals based in the EU lobbied to secure rules, laws and regulations that suited their existing way of doing business, and made market entry for competitors dearer and more difficult. The Common Agricultural Policy was well protected by heavy tariffs against cheaper food from poorer countries, and the Common Fishing Policy turned the UK with one of the richest fisheries in the world into an importer of fish. The single market was invoked as a reason for the EU to undertake wide ranging legislation on the environment, movement of people, transport, research and much else. The UK growth rate slowed after we joined the EEC and slowed again after the completion of the single market. The EU's Exchange Rate Mechanism did particular damage to our economy, costing us many jobs and lost output. The Euro crisis more recently hit the Euro badly and had some knock on effect to us.

The EU elite tell all those who are unhappy about Euro area growth rates, unemployment and wage levels that it works fine for Germany so the others just need to get their national governments to cut wages more and get on with competing. They've been trying this for years and it doesn't work economically. They may be about to find out it does not work politically for them either. The future of Euro and the zone's economic policy is now effectively on the ballot paper in national elections in several countries.

Stop the exaggerations about Brexit

Most days I hear or read a news item that tells me something has happened because of Brexit, or something has happened despite Brexit. Usually the item has nothing to do with Brexit whatsoever, would have happened without the Brexit vote and would have been given a different explanation then.

Some of the media and political spin post Brexit were classic examples of fake news. The commentators, forecasters and journalists put on their dark Brexit glasses, and decided that anything bad which happened happened because of Brexit, and anything good which happened happened despite Brexit. They went out looking for negative stories. The property commentators and some of the valuers wanted to show commercial property was down 15-20%. The only problem was there were plenty of buyers and no sellers at such discounts. They wanted to show housebuilding declined and home prices fell. Apart from top end prices which had been in freefall ever since Mr Osborne's anti Non Dom anti dear property budget in April, home prices stayed up. Housebuilders, often gloomy themselves, had to report good levels of sales and expand their production to cater with rising demand. There were plenty of large company executives prepared to say they were worried and reviewing their investment in the immediate aftermath of the vote, but when actual news came out about investment it was of new investment being made in the UK to reflect the good levels of consumer and business demand.

So here's a thought for the gloomy commentators. Most of what is happening on jobs, inflation, investment, car buying, homeownership is nothing to do with Brexit. The price rises we have seen come from higher oil and commodity prices and are in line with similar rises in the USA and Germany which are not undertaking an exit from the EU. Just as joining the EEC did not lead to any increase in UK GDP, just as completing the single market did not lead to any increase in GDP, leaving it should not lead to any fall in GDP. I think leaving the EU is a most important political and constitutional event, but it is not for the UK much of an economic event. It is a bit bigger economic event for the rest of the EU, as they are the ones who will lose our contributions and need to secure their favourable access to our market which they use to such good effect at the moment.