

The Malta Summit

Today the EU Heads of state and government will meet in Malta. Their background text will be the pessimistic and alarmist letter from Mr Tusk that we talked about on Wednesday.

The meeting will mainly be concerned with strengthening the EU's external borders, with special emphasis on the problems of Libya. There are in the EU's view too many migrants coming across the sea from Libya. The EU wishes to work with the Libyan authorities – to the extent that there are authorities in charge there – to reduce the flows. The EU may also wish to beef up its naval force, though so far this has been used to offer safe transit to the EU for those who have taken to the seas in dangerous and overloaded boats and got into trouble. The EU will wish to take stronger action against people smugglers, though that too will require co-operation with governments on the African continent.

All this illustrates the cruel dilemma of Mr Tusk's letter. He does not wish the EU to give concessions to people he calls populists or to political parties that challenge the elite view of the EU. Yet he feels the need to hold a summit largely devoted to the populist issue of trying to reduce the flow of migrants and to strengthen the EU's external borders. He is ambiguous about the elite themselves, saying they genuflect too far towards populists, yet saying they are losing faith in the democracy which is driving the populist movements. I guess Mrs Merkel felt the need to change her permissive immigration policy owing to the pressure of public opinion. Does Mr Tusk think this was the wrong thing to do?

Important though Mr Tusk is within the EU, he is but the servant of the Council which is made up of the Heads of state and government. If they say they wish to shift policy in the so called populist direction, he has to allow them an agenda to do so. It will be fascinating to see what emerges from their consideration yet again of migration and borders.

I do hope they take up the UK's request to lift the uncertainty they have created for British citizens living in other EU countries. If they just agree they are all welcome to stay, the UK can confirm the same for all EU citizens legally settled in the UK. It is the right and decent thing to do, so why won't they do it? I am sure Mrs May will ask them again. I thought civilised values were part of their idea of the EU, but they are not showing them on this matter.

The later afternoon session will be for the EU 27 only. They plan to discuss how to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which they think the UK could not help them with. It will be fascinating to see what celebration they want to hold, and what they think are their main achievements to trumpet.

Well done the Bank

I was delighted to read that the Bank now thinks the UK economy will grow by 2% this, year and confirms it did grow by 2% last year after all. I trust the Treasury will now raise their forecasts as well, as they were too pessimistic at the time of the Autumn Statement as pointed out at the time.

I look forward to the comments of various bloggers who wrote in over the past year to tell me I was wrong to argue the UK economy would grow at 2% both years. Do they now think the Bank is wrong, having backed its much lower forecasts so strenuously?

Update from the Environment Agency

I have received the following update from the Environment Agency:

Maintenance programme

- In 2015/16 we carried out river maintenance at 15 locations in your constituency. This work took place along 14.5km of rivers including the Loddon, Swallowfield Ditch, Emm Brook and the Kennet. It included removing obstructions, tree and shrub maintenance and carrying out selective weed and vegetation clearance. In 2016 / 17 we are carrying out a similar maintenance programme. The attached map shows the main locations and types of work we're doing.

Emm Brook and South Wokingham Distributor Road

- We have been engaging with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) over the design of the South Wokingham Distributor Road (SWDR) since the early planning stages, and we will continue to work with WBC as the plans progress. The aim is that the SWDR reduces downstream flood risk from the Emm Brook, notably in locations which have historically been affected by river flooding. The developer anticipates completing the design for the relief road and residential development this calendar year with a view to start construction of the different elements of the scheme in 2018 and 2019.

Planning consultations and permitting

- Since April 2016 we have commented on 78 planning applications within Wokingham. In line with our remit our responses ensured that the layout of development sites, where there is a risk of flooding from rivers, is

appropriate; for example, siting dwellings where there is a low risk. Redevelopment does occur within floodplains and in these situations we provide advice so that floor levels are set above flood levels. In the vast majority of cases the local planning authority will take our advice on any flood risk objections. However if planning permission, for a major application, is given against our advice and the effects of flood risk are significant, we would use a call in process (through the Secretary of State) to reconsider whether planning permission should be granted. We did not call in any applications in 2016 in Wokingham.

Swallowfield Temporary Defence Deployment Plan

- In 2016 the Government funded 32km of additional temporary barriers nationally (bringing our total national stock to 40km) to protect local communities during flooding. We have a draft deployment plan for Swallowfield where our assessments show there is potential to protect the community. We are consulting with partners and the community to finalise the arrangements

Appraisals for future flood risk improvements

- Our future programme for permanent flood defences includes Swallowfield and Lower Earley. We will appraise whether options such as flood walls and embankments are viable in these locations. River modelling is needed to make these assessments and we will test these options once the modelling is available. We will have the outcomes from the appraisal in autumn 2018.

Local Partnership Meetings

- The Berkshire Flood Partnership is made up of all Berkshire Lead Local Flood Authorities, Thames Water and ourselves. The next meeting is on 7 March 2017. The meeting is chaired by Cllr Jesse Grey of Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

We also meet with the Loddon Valley Residents Association and Loddon Basin Flood Action Group



The quiet rise of the pound

When the pound was declining a bit more after the Brexit vote we got daily commentaries from the media on this and how they thought it was caused by the decision of UK voters. Most of the devaluation of the pound actually occurred between July 2016 and April 2016, long before the media thought we would leave the EU. There was a further leg down after June 23rd. Over the

last month the pound has been rising against the dollar and the Euro. We rarely get news of this, and the rise is not attributed to the moves recently taken to press on with Brexit.

If someone believes Brexit was the crucial variable when it was falling, why do they change their view when it is rising? Why didn't the pound fall this month, given the clear indication that the government does now intend to send the Article 50 letter and has Parliamentary support to do so?

Why is the EU isolated?

Mr Tusk's cry of desperation portrays an EU surrounded by hostile forces, and in danger of subversion from within. He sees Russia as an enemy of the EU. He condemns Islamic terrorism and is clearly worried about several states to the south across the Mediterranean. He dislikes the policy of the new President of the USA. He makes no secret of his worries about China. In other words, he sees the EU as a lonely group of states in a largely hostile world, where the world's three largest military powers are not in sympathy with the EU or are hostile to it.

What is his remedy? He wants the EU to arm itself and undertake more common defence, with increased defence spending. There is no mention of NATO, Europe's principal security guarantor. He wants to accelerate European union, to create a more cohesive force in the world with a united foreign policy.

He should ask himself how has the EU got itself into such an impasse with the world's great powers?

The EU has helped create the rift with Russia. The EU claims cause against Russia for Russia's illegal military intervention in Crimea. Russia points out the EU helped destabilise the elected President of Ukraine who was just about keeping Ukraine together, to back a new President with a pro EU agenda that the Russian speakers in the country did not support. At the very least we in the west must concede that the EU helped create the conditions for an opportunistic move into Crimea by Russia. Since then the EU has wished to keep up a tough rhetoric against Russia, and has imposed sanctions. I am no supporter of Russian aggression, but I do want the EU to recognise the need to live alongside Russia and to be careful about the interventions it makes in territories where Russia has influence. Working with Russia in the Middle East is now important given the position Russia has militarily and diplomatically in the region, as successive US Presidents have recognised.

The EU also needs to understand that the surest defence the EU has is from NATO, with the explicit military guarantee for all members.

The EU now seems to want to assert itself against China, though the cause and reason is less clear than with Russia. The EU regularly condemns Islamic terrorism, but is challenged when it comes to defining which rebels and

forces on the ground in the complex Middle Eastern civil and religious wars qualify as terrorists and which can be defeated by EU action. In recent days the EU has been keen to indulge in a war of words against the new Trump Presidency, without listening to the concerns of the new Administration in Washington about trade, currencies and migration.

The overriding pessimism of Mr Tusk is sad to read. The lack of any positive forward looking agenda to engage with our ally the USA, or with the powers of China, Russia and the Middle East goes a long way to explaining the EU's loneliness. If all you offer is fear mixed with the odd threat it is not surprising the EU lacks friends. It was that combination which helped lose the EU one of its major financial contributors, the UK.