

More lobbyists discovered gaining access to Ministers

I have to reveal today that there are around 250 privileged lobbyists nestling at Westminster who do not get enough scrutiny.

These talented individuals have managed to organise themselves passes to the Palace of Westminster.

They use their passes to loiter and linger around the corridors to get the opportunity of direct private exchanges with Ministers, to propose their plans and causes without officials present.

They even get access to some meetings where Ministers brief them and take their questions in closed sessions.

They often work with private sector companies, trade unions and charities to help them make their case and make it look better based and respectable.

They themselves receive public money, and seek to raise other money to back their campaigns.

Their latest campaign is particularly clever. It is a campaign to stop other lobbyists from access, presumably to enhance their own special access and to cut down lobby competition.

I refer of course to the 250 Opposition MPs who are on the taxpayer payroll and can lobby for much of their active day. If Ministers stopped listening to lobbying I suspect they would have some sharp words to say. Parliament is a system partly for organised lobbying for causes MPs and their constituents back. There is no reason why others cannot see or write to Ministers. There is nothing wrong with charities, Trade Unions and businesses lobbying for policies that help them. That will be obvious and declared when they make their case.

Of course Ministers need to treat all representations properly, and avoid any conflict or avoid acting where they are themselves party to a lobbyists cause or profit.

Too many deaths and injuries on local roads

Motorways are by far our safest roads for a variety of reasons. Separating vehicles going in different directions, and providing high capacity segregated routes onto and off them greatly reduces the capacity for smashes between vehicles travelling in different directions or from drivers misreading each other's conduct at a junction. In addition no cyclist or pedestrian is allowed on them, removing the danger of conflict between a fast

moving vehicle and a vulnerable person. Motorways are more like railways which also have better safety figures thanks to a ban on all pedestrians and cyclists from proximity to the track, and from seeking to keep trains moving in opposite directions on different track.

The main reasons A and B roads are so much more dangerous lies in three main areas. First, pedestrians and cyclists are allowed, and are very vulnerable to mistakes by drivers or by themselves when coming into conflict with vehicles. Second, many junctions lack capacity and are poorly designed, leading to crashes between vehicles seeking to use the same piece of road to go in different directions. Third, there is scope for vehicles to wander or overtake in the lane coming the other way, leading to potentially very dangerous crashes between vehicles travelling in opposite directions. On a 50 mph road this may mean a 100mph crash.

Most of these A and B roads are under the control of Council Highway departments. They have options under national legislation and grant schemes to make improvements in each of these areas to cut accidents. As with motorways the first necessity is to increase overall capacity to reduce tensions and conflicts between vehicles. Pedestrians and cyclists deserve better treatment through the provision of dedicated cycleways and footpaths that avoid main A and B roads to cut conflict with vehicles. Junctions need review. Wherever possible roundabouts should be used rather than traffic lights, as that ensures all vehicles are heading in the same direction of flow and not meeting head on. Where there are signal controlled junctions they should where possible be reconfigured to provide segregated right hand turning lanes with short filter light phases where traffic is sensed by intelligent lights as waiting. Priority should be afforded with plenty of green light phase for the main road which should allow flow in both directions at the same time with right turning traffic held. On straight stretches of potentially fast road there should be consideration to painting a third overtaking lane where there is sufficient width allowing alternate overtaking by vehicles in opposite directions to cut frustration and dangerous overtaking.

Fan power rules

It is good news the sensible views of fans have prevailed in the row about the so called super Euro league. It is also good government need not now look for a power or excuse to intervene. I assumed the league would die a natural death. No club from any European country outside Italy, Spain and U.K. was involved which said a lot about a silly proposal.

Safer roads

A number of people have written to me urging greater road safety. I agree, and have lobbied Ministers with proposals that could help reduce the deaths and serious injuries on our roads. At my recent meeting with the Roads Minister I was impressed by the work she and her department are doing to drive fatalities down further.

In the year to end June 2019 1752 people died on our roads. The figure was considerably reduced by 14% in 2020, but this owes much to the fact that most of us were prevented from driving for pleasure or work for several months of that year. The motorways are the safest roads by far, followed by national strategic routes with dual carriageway capacity and grade separated interchanges. You were 3.5 times more likely to die on an A road than on a motorway. 9 out of the 1752 deaths in 2019 occurred on smart motorways.

The death rate was much lower for car drivers than for most other categories of road user. Car drivers experienced 195 deaths per billion vehicle miles, motorcyclists 5051 deaths, pedestrians 1640 and cyclists 4891 deaths.

Some argue that the new smart motorways are less safe than the older motorways they replace. The Minister assured us the data shows that the smart motorways are one third safer in terms of death rate than the standard motorway. They have far fewer deaths on the hard shoulder or pull ins , which occur on other motorways to a few of the many people who stop for their own comfort or convenience when the hard shoulder is only meant for emergency use. Smart motorways have more capacity which reduces density of traffic and scope for hitting another vehicle. They provide more driver information to warn of motorway conditions to allow reduction of speed where needed. Smart motorways are the safest roads we have, so the more they are rolled out the safer the overall network becomes.

Ministers have agreed to put in more Emergency pull ins in response to public demand, and to improve surveillance to allow early warning of any stopped vehicle. I support more smart motorway capacity to relieve the strains on much less safe A and B roads for through traffic. I will look at A and B roads in a later piece. The M4 one is nearing completion to complement the section of the M3 also converted.

My contribution to the Finance (No. 2) Bill debate, 19 April 2021

Of course, I am not going to vote against this Budget and I wish the Government well with it, but I would like them to pause a little, think

through where we are and recognise that they may need to revisit some of these decisions in the months ahead.

My worry is that they are being too tough in their tax measures and too tough on people's incomes at a time when we need to build confidence and recovery, and they are doing so at a time when it is really impossible for their expert advisers and other economic forecasters to give them a clear steer of what the public finances will look like in two years' time, let alone in three or four years' time.

The Government seem to think that their experts can define a given amount of money that will be a shortfall in order to hit their longer-term Government targets, and therefore say that we need to make these tax changes for the next few years in order to fill the alleged black hole. It may be that they are trying to fill a hole that does not exist. It may be that we will have a much better recovery than the forecasters are thinking.

It may be that the economy responds much better over the next two or three years or, indeed, over the next two or three months, as the relaxations kick in.

We can see the difficulty that the official forecasters have if we look at the numbers they gave us as recently as November 2020. Then, the OBR, forecasting the budget deficit—the amount of extra borrowing—for the year 2020-21, said that it would be £394 billion, an enormous amount.

Bear in mind that it was having to forecast for only four months, as two thirds of the year had already gone. When we got the 11-month figures, up to February, recently, we discovered that they had come in at just £278 billion and so, subject to what happened in March, it may be that the OBR was the best part of £100 billion out on the deficit for the year in question when it tried to forecast, already knowing quite a lot of what had happened. It was, of course, massively too pessimistic. It is great news that we will have borrowed so much less than we feared, although clearly we are still borrowing far too much on an unsustainable basis, which is why we need to promote a strong recovery to get the deficit down.

I therefore say to the Government: let us show a little humility. The experts and advisers are not able to give us anything like accurate figures—I can sympathise with them, because extreme things have happened in response to the pandemic—so are we sure that we need to make these moves over the next three or four years?

There is also a case for showing a bit of humility and thinking ahead about whether we might need to show a bit more flexibility because the Government themselves have rightly said, now that we are out of the European Union and the economic world has been stood on its head, that they want to set out a new framework for guiding the economy.

I encourage them to do that, and I hope it is a framework that promotes growth and considers real issues such as the increase in the number of jobs, the rise in real incomes and the productivity growth that can be achieved.

We need to get away from the Maastricht criteria, which have governed our policy for many years and still seem to be behind the architecture of this Bill. We seem to be driven by the need to get state debt falling as a percentage of our national output by the end of the period that we are talking about today for the tax changes. State debt is now a pretty useless figure to try to target in the way that the Maastricht criteria did.

We now live in this age of monetary experimentation, where great banks such as the Bank of England, as well as the European Central Bank, have bought in very large quantities of state debt—indeed, they still are doing so. Surely, where that happens in a single sovereign country with its own central bank, owned on behalf of the taxpayers by the state, we should treat the debt that we have bought back in rather differently from the debt on which we owe money by way of interest to people outside—some our own citizens, some foreigners—who have been financing the Government.

That makes state debt a very difficult number to use to guide the economy. Of course, the future system must have some control over the build-up of actual interest charges that we have to pay to third parties, but it should concentrate much more on promoting growth.

May we therefore have just a few words from the Government, accepting that these numbers are very difficult and that the current forecasts are likely to be very wrong? No one can say exactly how wrong they are going to be, because so many things will happen over the next two or three years and nobody has been through a bounce back of the kind of pace that is possible from such a big hole in our economy, created by necessary health measures to cure the pandemic.

We need a policy that is very supportive of more jobs, of higher incomes and of encouraging investment, enterprise, saving and, above all, self-employment and more small business activity.

My worry is that the Government are being a bit mean with people and with small businesses in the name of controlling state debt at a time when we have no idea what the state debt will be in two or three years' time, and when the state debt number is now very different because of the purchase of state debt by the state itself.

I would hope that the Government recognise that we may need to revisit all this, and I would want them to be on the side of people keeping more of the money they earn and, above all, of a much better deal for small business and the self-employed, where I think they are too tough.