

Second referendums are not a good idea

When the UK Parliament rightly granted Scotland a referendum on whether to stay or leave the UK I asked the SNP to tell me if they agreed the result should be binding and would settle the matter for at least a generation., They said they did. I agreed.

Had my side of the referendum lost, I would have kept my word. I would not have demanded a second vote, but would have helped get on with the task of organising Scotland's departure. That was the deal. I have always said we only want volunteers in the UK Union, and if a significant bloc of voters in one part or country demand a referendum on exit it is right to arrange that. It is not right to question the verdict of a referendum, or to create a neverendum, with successive votes on the same thing until the losing side get a win. These constitutional referendums do create uncertainty and divert attention from the important day to day management of the public sector and economic policy.

The SNP seem to love referendums but they keep losing them. They lost both the Independence referendum and the EU referendum. They now want re runs of both. The Lib Dems helped win the Independence referendum but lost the EU referendum. Surprise , surprise, they just want a re run of the one they lost. They want that so much, however, they would doubtless do a deal to put Corbyn into power with SNP support to get a second EU referendum. That could include having to accept a second Scottish Independence referendum.

Such a development would make a laughing stock of our democracy, create substantial business uncertainty and weaken our position in foreign negotiations. Jo Swinson did let slip that she would not accept another Leave vote anyway, so she only wants a second EU referendum if it gives her the result she wants. Ironical they still have the word Democrat in their title.

The main reason second referendums do not work is they undermine the point of the first one and so undermine the whole idea of a referendum. If Parliament will not implement the decision once taken despite promises that the people will decide, what is the point of them? If we had a second Indy or EU referendum and it came to the same answer the losers would still complain. If either came to a different answer the new losers would have every right to ask for a third to have the best of three.

I just hope the public want there to be an end to all this in this General election. A majority for a government that will implement the wishes of the first EU referendum and resist a second Scottish referendum is what is needed. More referendums on the same subject would undermine our democracy and good government at home and abroad.

A Wokingham debate?

Near the start of the election I was asked if I would join a five candidates debate to be organised by the Churches Together. I responded swiftly and positively, and offered a choice of dates. The organisers tried to get the other four candidates to agree, but half of them refused to attend.

I said I was still happy to do an all candidates debate and was willing to find a different date or time if that helped. I was told recently that half the other candidates are still refusing to undertake such a debate. I therefore will not be attending a joint platform meeting with just half the other candidates.

The main sensible purpose of any such meeting is to provide undecided voters with the opportunity to hear exchanges between all candidates before deciding how to vote. How can we have a sensible debate for example about the range of options on offer on the very important topic of green policy without the Green party representative present?

Having meetings with a few candidates largely attended by their own supporters is unlikely to help an election. I also would like to know why I am being denied the opportunity to answer the false allegations made about me by the Advance candidate.

Radio Berkshire have said they want to hold an all candidates debate. I would urge the other four to accept this offer as I have done. I have not heard back from Radio Berkshire about where it is happening, though I was told it would be on December 11th.

Trade deals – again

Labour, Lib Dems and Greens continue with their mantra – EU trade deal good, US trade deal bad. It is so silly.

We trade successfully with the USA, China and others today without the benefit of a specific Free Trade deal. Were we to be able to negotiate a Free Trade Deal with countries like them we would be able to improve a bit on the current strong trade flows by cutting tariffs and removing some other barriers.

There would be no need to sign a deal with any third country that did damage to the UK. We trade perfectly well now, so we should only sign a deal which improved on current trading. It is absurd to say we would have to privatise the NHS to have a FTA with the USA. No UK government or Parliament would accept such a proposition, and the President of the USA has already said he

understands that.

This silly attack has now transmuted into some convoluted argument about the terms for importing and exporting drugs. Again, no UK government would sign a deal which harmed our exports of drugs to the USA, or which forced up the prices of imports from the USA. An FTA is only worth doing if things are better afterwards. The idea is to bring prices down by scrapping tariffs where goods currently attract these and where the tariff can be removed with no countervailing negative.

Meanwhile they also say we could not trade successfully or even at all if we do not have a specific agreement with the EU. This is another lie, ignoring the Political declaration signed by the EU which states our future relationship will be based around a Free Trade Agreement. The EU and all its members are also members of the WTO as we are. Our trade will continue to be primarily regulated by WTO controls against trade friction under the Facilitation of Trade Agreement and the tariff agreement that is central to the WTO with its most favoured nation basis. The EU signed the Political declaration for an FTA because it wants one. It is not some gift to the UK that we have to pay more for.

Lack of trust stifles debate

Listening to the interviews on the main media is a frustrating experience. The interviewers assume all politicians are telling fibs, so they keep asking the same questions over and over again. The politicians expecting to be on trial usually play safe and stick to a few sound bites their party wants to get across. No-one is allowed to explain the complexity or nuances of many topics, because to do so would be seen as a weakness, or undermining the clarity of the approved soundbite.

The introduction of so called professional fact checkers is particularly corrosive. These people are often said to be experts. They are also people with their own political views, party preferences and biases, but we are not told about those. They may be an expert in their chosen field, but the point at issue may be one where different experts have different views. They are allowed to present as if their expert view is the only one possible. An expert economist for example is allowed to assert a future growth rate, without having to admit his or her attitude to future political events affecting the growth rate, and without having to explain that many other economists have different forecasts.

It is true that some parties and individuals in election debate wander well from the truth, whilst others believe in their view of the truth knowing they will have to deliver on it if elected. This has always been true, and used to be dealt with by the free flow of debate between the parties. When Labour lie that the Conservatives are going to privatise the NHS, past experience of

Conservative governments and united voices saying No we will not should be sufficient to persuade many voters that this is simply a false accusation. I'm not expecting a BBC Fact checker to clear up that one.

Many of the issues in dispute are matters of judgement more than matters of fact. Many of them relate to the future, so they cannot be a matter of proven fact. Listening to a debate recently about the NHS and trade deals showed what a stupid position the media have got us into. There was no background understanding that the fundamental principle of free at the point of use with health care delivered on the basis of need is shared territory between all the main parties. Nor was there much permitted understanding that for profit companies supply drugs, cleaning, catering and a range of services where that makes sense, and did so under Labour governments. No one is proposing harming the NHS in anyway by a trade deal so why dont the fact checkers guide us on that one?

The future of NATO

Mr Trump has always been sceptical of multi national bodies. His disagreement with Nato has been primarily the feeling that the USA makes a disproportionate financial and military contribution. He points out correctly that most of the European members fail to meet even the minimum 2% of GDP spend on their armed forces that NATO asks members to make. The UK does meet the obligation and agrees with the USA on this matter

There is also a disagreement with Turkey that is getting bigger. Turkey has bought a Russian anti missile system, which has led the USA to deny it US planes given the way Turkey is likely to release security information to Russia. Turkey wishes all of NATO to join its battle against Kurds, when NATO has been in alliance with Kurdish forces in Syria.

The UK as host to this week's 70th anniversary meeting had important work to do. NATO is central to the defence of the West and to our own security. The UK needs to help secure proper financing of the defence capabilities we need from all our allies, and to work to get our allies in more agreement about the importance and aims of NATO. For the last 70 years acceptance of NATO as a central pillar of our defence has been common ground between the main political parties.

Today Labour is unreliable on defence and hostile to the USA which continues to provide the bulk of the military capability of this alliance. Mr Corbyn has in the past been sceptical of NATO, often expressing more support for groups and countries which oppose us. Above all now we need to form a common position on China, on the threats from Iran, and how to respond to the cyber attacks which are now a regular feature of our lives.