Speaker election

As this Parliament struggles its way to a premature close making a further mockery of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act it has decided on one last decision to carry its waning power into the next Parliament. It has decided to persevere with the election of a new Speaker on Monday. Whilst the new Parliament could choose a different Speaker on its first day, this would be unlikely.

The election campaigns of the candidates have not been front page news. On many issues the candidates agree. They all want the role to be less flambuoyant, more referee and less player. They all say they wish to raise standards of behaviour and to show respect for MPs and the institution.

To me the crucial question is how will they wish to redefine the balance in Parliament between allowing strong and telling criticism and investigation of government whilst at the same time allowing a government to govern,

Some reforms of recent years are good and should be kept. More frequent Urgent Questions and topical debates keep Parliament relevant and make governments answer when things are worrying or going wrong. Too many Urgent Questions that are not urgent, have been asked before or are not of wider interest can absorb too much time for no great purpose.

Question Times have been extended informally. The new Speaker should review with interested parties how long Questions should normally last and make arrangements accordingly. Making the PM or Ministers stay long after the appointed time is discourteous to people with busy diaries.

Opening up the House for better public access, and allowing use of Speakers House for charities and other civic institutions has been welcome. The Parliament buildings belong to us all and should serve the wider community.

The more recent constitutional experimentation should stop. Legislation should be proposed by a government, with a Money resolution to show it fits into the budget and Queens consent where needed to show it is compatible with the way the government is using prerogative powers. Parliament rightly has plenty of powers to delay or make difficult the passage of an unwelcome government Bill. It should not create powers to speed through legislation the government opposes on a one day only temporary alliance of MPs against the government.

The next Speaker also needs to come to a view with the Commons on what remedial and improvement works need doing over the next decade to the fabric of the buildings.

Wokingham Tesco fuel

Some time ago I raised with Tesco management the issue of sometimes blocked access to one of the four fuel pumps they put into the car park of the Wokingham store.

I am pleased they did put in a new route which gives fair access to all four pumps with an orderly queue which has improved the facility.

Taxing the rich

I will let you into a well kept secret. Each time Conservatives have cut the top rates of Income Tax or taxes on wealth the rich have paid more tax.

When Margaret Thatcher and Nigel Lawson in budgets cut the top rate of Income Tax from 83% to 40% there were howls of protest from Labour about a loss of revenue and the moral outrage. Instead the better off paid more tax in cash terms. They paid more tax in real terms after allowing for inflation. They paid a bigger percentage of total Income Tax.

How? More rich people came here or stayed here. More kept Income and wealth here to tax. More worked harder to earn more, and more took risks with their money to set up businesses and create more jobs which in turn produced bigger dividends. It was a win win for all.

The same thing happened when George Osborne cut the top rate of tax from 50% to 45%. Lib Dem's in the Coalition blocked more tax raising rate cuts. With labour they want taxes to penalise success and deter risk taking.

Corbyn's UK were he to become PM would be a hostile place for business builders, risk takers and hard workers with good earnings. Jealousy is not a good emotion at the best of times. It is a dreadful basis for an economic policy. We need to get tax rates down.Not only will more people be more successful but there will also be more tax revenue for schools and hospitals. Labour's launch was unusual with its lists of people and roles they want to bash.

The choice in the election

The polls and betting suggest the choice is between a Conservative led

majority government or a Corbyn Labour led minority government. There is a large divide between what Labour is offering and what the Conservatives propose.

Labour's approach is based on large increases in taxes and borrowing, to finance a large expansion of the state. In particular they want to nationalise large swathes of the utility sector with discounted compensation to existing owners, and wish to take 10% stakes in quoted companies.

The Conservative approach is likely to be based on the controlled increases in public spending on heath, education and the police they have announced, with some tax cuts to come. I would like to see the 1% of GDP stimulus from this combination that I have been arguing for.

We know from past experience at home and present experience abroad that the Labour high tax high spend high borrowing strategy will miscarry. Taxing the successful, hard working and prudent more will send some of them abroad and others will be less motivated to grow their businesses and create more jobs. Excessive borrowing by the state can crowd out credit for business and for individuals to buy assets for themselves. The Labour leadership have admired some latin American countries like Venezuela in the past for their generous expansion of welfare and state spending, only to see the misery economic collapse creates. Well intentioned socialism often ends up creating shortages in the shops, a balance of payments and overseas borrowing crisis, and more poverty as businesses pull out and jobs are destroyed.

Conservative and Coalition economic policy since 2010 has stabilised a badly damaged economy and has created conditions for many more jobs including full time and better paid jobs to be created. Inflation has stayed under good control, productivity has been disappointing and real wage growth like much of the rest of the advanced world weak. Banks are now stronger and debts under better control.

The right things to do now are to pursue policies that can help lift productivity and therefore real wages at a faster pace, to ease conditions sensibly without alarming international investors.

Probate Fees

I am pleased that the Government is dropping proposals to raise probate fees, following representations from myself and many others.

Ministry of Justice

The Right Honourable
Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor & Secretary of State for Justice

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

MoJ ref: MC 73644

28th October 2019

Dear John,

PROBATE FEES

Thank you for your letter of 22 October regarding probate fees.

You will be aware that my predecessors laid a Statutory Instrument (SI) before Parliament in November 2018 to amend probate fees from the current flat fee structure, of £155 for applications from professionals or £215 from non-professionals, to one which is based on the value of the deceased's estate. The fees, under this proposal, would be charged above the cost of providing the service, set under the enhanced fee-making powers approved by Parliament in the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, with all additional income contributing to HM Courts and Tribunals Service.

I recognise the concerns raised about the Government proposals to introduce changes to probate fees. I have listened and responded to these concerns and have therefore decided to withdraw the previous proposals. However, as Lord Chancellor, I have a statutory duty to ensure an efficient and effective courts and tribunal system and to provide this it needs to be properly funded. While it was widely felt that the proposed level of fees was too high, I maintain that it is right that those who use the service should contribute to its costs, where they can afford to do so without impeding access to justice.

After assessing the options available and listening to the views of our stakeholders, I made an announcement on Saturday 12 October of my plans to withdraw the SI and to take a closer look at court fees, including probate, as part of a wider review. The outcome of the review will be announced in due course.

Yours ever,
Robert

RT HON ROBERT BUCKLAND QC MP

PS. Thank you for raising this directly with me.

102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ