

Shop prices down again, disposable income up

Yesterday the BRC published its latest shop prices index. Over the last year prices are down by 1%. This is a smaller fall than recent figures, but shows there is still fierce competition on the High Street and on the internet, with the overall balance of prices under good control.

Asda also published its latest disposable income tracker. This showed disposable income up by 3.5% over the last year. All this has happened at a time when oil prices have risen sharply, with a big effect on domestic fuel and vehicle fuel. Fuels are up 17% over the last year, and are the main force behind the rises in the CPI and the RPI.

I was expecting further rises in inflation as the rise in world commodity prices flows through, and as we get further rises in electricity, services with a large wage component, and the usual local and national government increases in fees and charges. So far UK inflation has been running in parallel to German and US inflation, which have also risen rapidly from a very low base mainly owing to fuel prices.

Lots of forecasters are still refusing to look at the figures that are coming out. Many still say there will be a sharp rise in prices from lower sterling, which they wrongly think has mainly occurred after the referendum vote instead of before. This they think will then remove all real growth in incomes and weaken the economy. They are overdoing the gloom.

The property valuers have some explaining to do. They have been warning of immediate post referendum declines in City offices. Yesterday British Land announced it has sold the Cheesegrater, a large modern well let City office block, for £1.15bn, which is 25% above the September 2016 valuation! The yield is only 3.4% on the good rents signed up. Will we have some apologies over all that red ink they spilled last summer?

UK Airspace Policy Consultation

In light of the problems with aircraft noise and nights flights in the constituency I have lobbied Ministers, Heathrow and the National Air Traffic Services (NATS). Please find below the letter I have written to Department of Transport in response to their consultation on night flights.

I would also strongly encourage residents to contribute to the consultation which ends on 25 May. The link is available here: <http://bit.ly/2m7iTnc>.



THE RT HON JOHN REDWOOD MP

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22 February 2017

UK Airspace Policy Consultation: Formal Response

Dear Sirs

I am writing in regard to the UK Airspace Policy Consultation. Please consider this a formal submission to the consultation.

I welcome the proposal that future flight path changes should be subject to a suitable level of oversight by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) when such alterations would substantially effect communities on the ground. I also support the proposal to establish an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise (ICCAN) to ensure that "noise has been considered and mitigated where possible" when new routes are proposed.

However, I think it is entirely unacceptable that this proposal relates only to future changes. It also only makes reference to improved oversight of flight path changes made by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and not NATS (National Air Traffic Services) which is responsible for directing aircraft across the routes operated by the CAA. NATS has discretion to make unilateral procedural changes to flight path route changes. I believe this is entirely unacceptable and needs to be looked at as part of the consultation.

All easterly flights from Heathrow Airport proceed through the Compton 'gate' which is centred on the town of Wokingham (see the enclosed map). In 2014, without consultation, NATS narrowed the gate from 13 to 11 nautical miles and concentrated easterly flights over Wokingham. NATS contend that this was for safety reasons which is their primary statutory function when planning such routes. However, since this change, noise rates across the flight path have increased significantly. In response, NATS have simply said that noise mitigation does not come within their remit.

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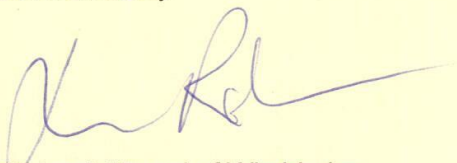
I therefore believe that the improved oversight of flight paths, as suggest in the consultation, should apply to both the CAA and NATS and that decisions by NATS should be subject to the call-in function that it is envisaged will be granted to the Secretary of State. I would also like to see procedural changes made by NATS subject to approval by both the CAA and the ICCAN and public consultation.

As part of this process, I believe that changes previously made without consultation – such as that to the Compton route - should be immediately reversed.

I also believe that the CAA, NATS and the aviation industry should be encouraged to keep more planes away from built up areas, flying more slowly and saving fuel, so they come in to land directly without being in a stack. They should also be encourage to use higher flight paths so planes stay higher for longer, reducing the numbers experiencing noise. Further measures could also be introduced to promote good flying. This might include later dropping of the wheels, less acute turns and aggressive use of power on and the flaps. All these measures save fuel as well as reducing noise.

I welcome the fact that the consultation proposes better processes for the future, but it also needs to take account of decisions that have already been made without due process.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ahmad', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

CC: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

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.