

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 45 Monday 17th February 2020

Summary

Do we now have a clearer vision as to the direction of the new Government policies?

The view of the group was that change was certainly happening but the underlying strategy and direction remain unclear.

Discussion

In respect to national policies, the fact of leaving the EU seems clear. What leaving means in practice remains obscure.

The question was raised as to which of the EU rules and regulations could now be diverged from to bring benefits to the UK. One suggestion was the Working Time Directive in relation to the impact on hospital doctors' hours in the National Health Service. However there was no enthusiasm for the return to 80 hour weeks for junior doctors due to the risk to the professional performance from exhaustion. No other rules were cited as being priorities for divergence. Regaining of sovereignty was cited as a benefit, described as freedom for the UK to make rules and regulations to suit its own needs. Other than the notion itself, no tangible benefits were identified.

Some of the group welcomed the fact that the government could now "do" things, after the years of weak governments unable to execute their policies. Others were concerned at the apparent concentration of power on a single personage and the erosion of established checks and balances.

Concentrating on the pressing national issues of social care and housing;

With respect to social care there are no clear policies; there seems to be a commitment to not forcing the sale of an owned house to fund social care, but no indications as to how this policy might be implemented.

With respect to housing, policies seemed uncoordinated. Policies to discourage landlords in the rental sector are reported to be reducing the supply of rented property, incentives to purchasers of new homes seem to boost the profits of house builders without significantly increasing the availability of homes to buy, conversion of unwanted offices to substandard social housing seems to be a less than ideal solution for those in need. There seems little dispute that more houses are needed and that current levels of new house building are inadequate. Whether ensuring provision of reasonable housing for all of its citizens is accepted in some sense as the responsibility of the government seems questionable.

The end of austerity seems to have been signalled by the new government, presumably meaning that expenditure will be allowed to increase but which and what is meant is unclear. There seem to be commitments to substantial infrastructure investment particularly in respect of the North with no clarity as to how these plans are to be financed.

With respect to the Union and the EU; though the problem of the Northern Ireland border with Eire and the EU seems resolved in the sense that it is expected to remain open, but the consequences for the border between UK and Northern Ireland remain opaque. Both Ministers and officials now seem to be saying that there will be border checks despite previous statements to the contrary.

Immigration policy announcements were expected in the next few days. Opening positions for the trade negotiations with the EU similarly were imminent

The concern was expressed that a consequence of leaving the EU would be a significant reduction in exports to the EU not offset by increased exports to other countries, without balancing reductions in imports leading to balance of payments difficulties for the UK..

International policies similarly remain opaque.