

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 44 Monday 20th January 2020

Summary

A substantial list of political issues that will require some political resolution in the next decade was identified.

The meeting noted their range and extent and selected two for immediate discussion;

Global warming and the regional imbalance in the UK, particularly with respect to the North.

The group considered that it was no longer possible to deny that current global warming was caused at least in part and probably quite substantially by human activity, particularly CO2 emissions. The technological means to reduce these substantially was in view, if not yet fully available. What was required was political will.

The group recognised the need for infrastructure improvement in the UK regions. Doubts were expressed about whether this alone would be a sufficient catalyst for economic regeneration.

Discussion

Global warming

The fact that climate has changed in the past was recognised in the geological record, exemplified by ice ages and similar. But it is also that clear temperatures have been rising in the last 150 years since detailed records have been maintained; there is scientific confirmation that a cause is CO2 emissions and that the consequences of a continuing rise could be catastrophic for human life in many ways. So there is a necessity to reduce carbon emissions.

The main challenge seems to be to reduce very substantially the use of fossil fuels for energy. Renewables are now contributing substantially to energy provision and nuclear power is now available with substantial improvement anticipated long term through fusion technology; so there are technological developments that could enable rising energy needs to be met without dangerous levels of CO2 emissions.

The challenge is to change behaviour patterns in respect of energy consumption, particularly with respect to transport. As energy consumption is correlated with improved living standards, that it could be reduced by authoritarian measures worldwide was doubted.

The group were reasonably confident that the worst predictions of human catastrophe would be avoided by technology and sensible measures in respect of sources of energy as well as reduction of CO2 levels through natural and other means. Popular sentiment would over time and in different places bring necessary changes, the effectiveness of celebrity conferences was

doubted. For example the recent Australian bush fires could be expected to change the Australian people's view of its fossil fuel industry.

Human progress has consistently been based on harnessing of technology, including dealing with harmful consequences of its use. The group were sanguine that the challenge of climate change would be resolved, gradually.

Regional imbalance (northern power house)

Particularly with respect to transport the inferior infrastructure of the northern regions of the UK as compared with the London and SE is proposed as a contributory cause to the economic imbalance within the UK. It appears to be part of the new Government strategy to address this issue.

Many governments in the UK in recent years have identified the problem and have attempted solutions without conspicuous success. Relocating government departments does not seem necessarily to regenerate a region. Towns in decline have lost relatively high paying jobs requiring significant skills, which in general have not been replaced with similar jobs for the same people.

Decline in technical education, attitudes to work and education, local cultures were all cited as alternative explanations for the relative lack of prosperity in the regions including the North; and similarly in other regions of the UK local industries have declined and not been replaced. Also the effectiveness of London and the SE as a magnet for those offering jobs as well as those wanting them was cited, a reality similar to other major metropolitan areas worldwide.

There is a recent Government proposal being floated that the House of Lords should be relocated to York. The group considered that a reconsideration of its purpose, functions and membership should precede a decision about relocation.

The group were sceptical that infrastructure improvement alone would by itself address regional imbalance.