

WESTMINSTER DIARY

SIR ROGER GALE



Après moi, le déluge...

The Easter “break”

The House rose for the Easter Recess at the end of March and did not sit again until Monday 15th April so in Parliamentary terms this has been a short month but the world does not stop turning and the clock does not stop ticking just because the House of Commons is not sitting. In fact the clocks sprang forward on the last day of last month at the same time that the clocks did likewise in Europe and so we are subjected once again to the ludicrous pantomime that, to satisfy the sleeping hours of farmers in the far north of Scotland, Great Britain remains an hour behind our largest trading and business partner. I had thought that within my lifetime we might have brought this nonsense to an end but that appears to be increasingly unlikely and notwithstanding the fact that the Prime Meridian runs through Greenwich we seem consigned to remain out of kilter with much of the developed world for the foreseeable future.

Our own clocks changed twice as having navigated the Easter getaway queues of traffic at the Dover border post. We caught a delayed ferry and motored south across France. As we drove down through Rouen, Le Mans, Tours, Poitiers and Angouleme Suzy and I reminded ourselves of two things: first that France is geographically twice the size of Great Britain and very largely agricultural (they are not smothering their prime farmland with houses) and second that huge swathes of the country was under water. You can deny climate change if you wish but much of the land around our French base was flooded, rivers had burst their banks, and the fields were impossible to plough or plant. Crops will be very late this year and I am not surprised that our friendly French farmers are revolting. Aside from the occasional ray of sunshine La Paque (Easter) was cold, and wet but I read a book (Diana Rigg’s No Turn Unstoned) and caught up on several hundred emails on a daily basis while Suzy also waded through mud and emails and slept.

Boundary changes

The Boundary Commission, which is independent of Government, has determined that at the General Election the constituency Boundaries will change.

The new Herne Bay & Sandwich (with West Thanet) constituency (currently mostly represented by Sir Roger Gale) will include:

Herne Bay (Heron Ward & Beltinge Ward), Reculver, Broomfield, West Bay, Greenhill, Herne Village, Marshside, Westbere, Hoath, Chislet, Upstreet, & Hersden, (from North Thanet)

Sturry and Fordwich (from Canterbury)

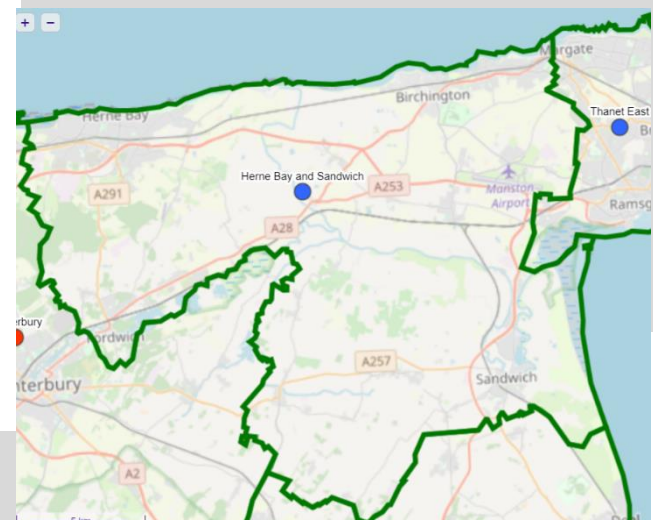
Sandwich, Little Stour and Ashstone (from South Thanet)

Westbrook, Westgate on Sea, Garlinge, Birchington on Sea, Minnis Bay, Manston, Minster, Monkton, Acol, Sarre and St Nicholas at Wade (also from North Thanet).

The new East Thanet seat (currently mostly represented by Craig Mackinlay) will include:

Margate Town, Dane Valley and Salmestone (from North Thanet),

Cliftonville East, Cliftonville West, Broadstairs (all) Ramsgate (all) and Cliffsend (from South Thanet).





Speaking in support of Ukraine at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

The Parliamentary Assesmbly of the Council of Europe

On the last day of our break the sun, inevitably, offered a hint of Spring and we enjoyed a glorious six-hundred-mile drive right across France from Riberac through the forests and the volcanic mountains of the Auvergne and the plains of Alsace to Strasbourg. In the margins of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe I was pleased to be able to meet with the United Kingdom's Permanent Representative (Ambassador) Sandy Moss, to be invited to address the whole of the delegation from Ukraine and to endeavour to offer them further reassurance of the support that they continue to receive from the Government and Parliament of the United Kingdom. Sadly, not all European governments are as staunch and it is shameful that some member states of the Council of Europe are allowing, in clear breach of sanctions, the supply of chemicals used in the manufacture of munitions

and high-value private cars, to Russia. This clandestine contribution to the neo-Soviet war effort gives comfort to our enemies and undermines the valiant efforts of President Zelensky's administration while lining the pockets of those who make it their business to profit from conflict.

Thankfully and of course coincidentally almost within minutes of my return to the UK the Prime Minister announced a further and significant package of financial and materiel support for the Ukrainian war effort as well as an increased expenditure on domestic defence while Joe Biden finally secured Congressional approval for the multi-billion-dollar programme of aid to Ukraine.

The free world failed Hungary and Imre Nagy, the Leader of their revolution against the Soviet Union, in 1956 and failed again when Russia crushed Aleksander Dubcek's Czechoslovakian uprising in 1968. Understanding that congressional grasp of geography is pitiful it nevertheless has to be a disgrace that the Republican Party with its once-proud history took so long to do the right thing and to recognise that Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine was not a 'domestic' issue or a 'European' issue but a war in defence of freedom and democracy that involves us all. Ukraine is committing blood and treasure on our behalf and we and the United States need to remember that.

Extinction...

The Upper Waiting Hall in the House of Commons is used to mount occasional exhibitions in support of a variety of causes and one such, which I visited was "Explorers Against Extinction" which was an impressive display combining fossilised artefacts – including a tusk from a woolly mammoth recovered from the East Coast shores of Britain - and especially commissioned artwork depicting more current species under threat. As Joni Mitchell once sang "You don't know what you got till it's gone.....". But we do know and the future of our grandchildren is in our hands.

Talking with the NFU



Which leads me to an early-morning meeting in the constituency with my local NFU representatives and some farmers. I have been saying for years that there is no joined-up policy shared between the Department for Levelling Up responsible for housing and what used to be called the Ministry for Agriculture, now "The Department for Food and Rural Affairs" Setting aside the thought that the latter sounds like something out of a steamy Archers' script and that "food" does not necessarily mean "Grown In Britain" the fact is that we are losing far too much farmland to development and the twin curse of 'solar farms' which are not farms at all and ought to be sited, as they are in France, on the rooves of agricultural and public buildings and car parks.

There used to be a saying in rural Dorset where I grew up that you should "Live as if you are going to die tomorrow and farm as if you are going to live forever". Given the loss of farmland to development and the inability for our local farmers to make a fair living and I understand entirely why they feel that they are faced with a daily battle for survival rather pursuing than the long-term stewardship of The Garden of England. If we seriously believe in sustainability and the need to produce more foodstuffs at home and import far less - and I do - then we have to redress this imbalance and reflect that requirement in planning and economic policy immediately. Tomorrow will be too late.



Some images of what Sir Roger did this month

In the Chair and Constituency office

In the Chair I have presided over some of the further proceedings on what became known as “The Rwanda Bill”, which is now an Act of Parliament, and of the long-awaited Renters (Reform) Bill. The Minister, Jacob Young, described the latter measure as “the culmination of years of work in a sector that has not seen meaningful change for three decades” and added that “the Bill delivers for landlords and tenants”. Whether it will make it through all of its remaining Commons stages and then through the House of Lords before a General Election only time will tell. If not, then it might be another three decades before the sector sees reform!

In the constituency I have, in the course of all normal `surgery` and other duties met with Uwe Derksen and those others behind the splendid Margate (Arts) Schools to discuss exciting plans for their future, attended the annual Scouts` St. George`s Day Parade in Dreamland which, in spite of inclement weather, was an uplifting experience ,enjoyed a quiz night hosted by Horace Strubb and held in aid of Animals Worldwide and celebrated the centenary of the Band Stand in Herne Bay . And no, I was not there when it first opened!

It was also a great pleasure to welcome the Emeritus Prime Minister Lady (Theresa) May to Thanet.



Sir Colin Shepherd

While I have parked the `valet` element of this column I cannot ignore the passing of a very dear parliamentary colleague, Sir Colin Shepherd, who served as the Member of Parliament for Hereford from 1974 for twenty-three years to 1997. When I first entered the House of Commons in 1983, wet behind the ears in parliamentary matters, I was foisted upon Colin who found himself having to share his attic office on the Upper Committee corridor with me.

Until he became the Chairman of a Committee that carried with it rather more spacious surroundings and bequeathed the sole occupancy of his attic to me. Colin mentored me, tried to steer me away from elephant traps and tolerated my ingenuite enthusiasms and obsessions with good humour. The packed congregation in St. Mary`s church in Ross on Wye where his memorial service was held was testimony to a highly effective, eternally courteous, politically courageous and hugely well-loved English gentleman. Sail on into your well-earned sunset, old friend.

Tracey Crouch

I am now going to cheat slightly – you would expect no less from a politician – as the `Easter Honours List` was published after I had penned the March diary but just before Easter. This list is a novel creation of the Prime Minister and of course gave rise to speculation that he was clearing the decks and

dishing out `gongs` before calling a General Election for the same day as the local government elections on May 2nd. That dissolution did not materialise, and it is still not clear why this in-between list was published but that does not detract from the fact that my young friend and parliamentary colleague Tracey Crouch, The Member of Parliament for Chatham and Aylesford, has been made a Dame of the British Empire. Not before time. Tracey`s well-publicised battle with breast cancer and her demonstrable courage in setting an example and acting as a role model for other women going through the same process might in itself have warranted recognition but her work in becoming the voice of football supporters and the publication of her `grass roots fans report` which has led, this month, to legislation, should have been recognised months ago. Better late than never and a pleasing full-time result.

And finally, it has been determined that, barring unforeseen demands, my writ as a Deputy Speaker will come to an end with the rising of the House in July if not pre-empted by a General Election. I understand that the Whips have been warned!