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Making myself unpopular [1]

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I was a guest on BBC 1 West's *Politics Show* yesterday, discussing post office closures and housing development - both emotive issues in the West Country, I imagine.

Post office closures were first up. I argued that we needed to put aside emotional attachments to the post office and put things in context. Firstly, 95 percent of people will still be within one mile of a post office after the closures. Secondly, the only reason the post offices are being closed is because not enough people use them - despite taxpayer subsidies to the tune of £150m a year, the post office network still loses more than £100m per annum. If people want to save their post office they should spend more money there, not expect the taxpayer to keep an uneconomic business going. In any case, the services provided by post office counters can easily be offered in more cost-effective ways. The mail functions could provided by other shops - just as you can buy a lottery ticket anywhere, why shouldn't you be able to pay for postage? Bills can be paid over the phone or online, and pensions and benefits can almost always be paid directly into people's bank accounts. Where they cannot, it would be much cheaper to send 'mobile post offices' out to rural areas on a regular basis, rather than keep the post offices open.

In the second half of the show we talked about the planning system. I was asked whether I agreed with the government's new target for house building. My reply was that the very fact the government has a housing target is the problem. Development should be led by demand, and not government dictat. Certainly, areas of outstanding natural beauty can be protected, but that still leaves plenty of space for development in the UK. More than 90 percent of the population currently lives on just 8 percent of the land. The only reason it feels cramped is that the government artificially restricts the supply of land, and then imposes density requirements on the land that is available. This also explains much of the objection to new development - government regulations often prevent developers from building houses in a way that 'fits in' (precisely the opposite of what the planning system was meant to achieve). The truth is that government cannot plan land-use any better than it can plan the rest of the economy, and the sooner it gives up trying the better. That wouldn't mean a free-for-all, as most people assume: Bath and Edinburgh were both privately planned cities, and they are much more attractive than anything the government has ever managed.

You can watch the show here [3] via the BBC website.

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