

House of Commons

8.28 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to join the throng of those making their maiden speeches this evening. I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson) on jumping that particular hurdle shortly before me.

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From my constituency, I can produce not just a living example of that, but a living French example. Two weeks ago, Mr. Olivier Cadic moved his business from France to Ashford. His reasons, as quoted in the local paper, were that he moved

"his printed circuit board and computer software company from Paris to Ashford to escape crippling taxes and employment laws.

He believes the other EU countries will face economic disaster if"--

they--

"do not alter their taxation and employment laws in line with Britain's. If they do not their firms will want to move to Britain."

That is a lesson for us all: do not watch what they say, watch what they do. French businesses are moving to this country--not, in Mr. Cadic's case, because he is targeting the British market, but because it is easier for him to sell to France from Britain than to sell to France from France.

We all know about the big multinational companies that have moved to this country because they have found it such a congenial place for inward investment over the past 18 years. What is significant is that small business men with no immediate ambitions to become Europe-wide or global players are now moving to Britain because of the employment and taxation laws that have been established over the past 18 years. I would argue that that is more convincing than the various league tables and comparative economic statistics with which we can all have fun. The case that I have cited is that of a real business man taking a real decision and--most importantly--creating real jobs in this country, in Ashford rather than in Paris.

That is surely the heart of the economic debate that we as a country need to have. How can we best create more jobs? We all know that prosperity is not only a goal in itself, but that jobs are the best welfare policy that one can have. A party which poses as compassionate while organising the economy in a way that will make job creation more difficult will not only disappoint its supporters but let down the country.

In the spirit of non-controversy that one is expected to observe in a maiden speech, however, I will merely ask the Government to apply a simple test to each of the measures in the Chancellor's forthcoming Budget and ask, "Does this measure make it easier to create jobs?"

I ask the Government to apply that test to the minimum wage, about which we have heard a great deal in today's debate. If it means anything and is set at a realistic level, it will make it

more difficult for unskilled people to find work and it will make it especially difficult for young people to find the first jobs which are vital to getting them into lifetime employment.

I ask the Government to apply that test to the windfall tax. However and to whomsoever it is applied, it is designed to take money away from companies. Some of that money might have gone on dividends, and a small proportion might even have gone to fat cats, but the vast bulk would have been spent on investment which would have created jobs. A windfall tax will make it more difficult to create jobs.

It is important for Conservative Members to recognise the mandate that the Government have been given, at least for those policies in their manifesto. However, I would argue that it is even more important for the Government to recognise that they have gained such an enviable economic inheritance that they should pause to consider what is going right in this country before rushing to change everything.

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On Europe, it is clear that we should engage in constructive dialogue and preserve a full trading relationship, but it would be mad to say that being positive about Europe means being positive about the unemployment levels prevalent in too many continental countries and even madder to sign up to the very policies that have made their unemployment higher than ours.

I hope fervently that the new-found prosperity, both in my constituency and in the country as a whole, will not be put at risk. As a country we have huge potential, symbolised by the opportunities available to the people of Ashford. As a patriot, I hope that the new Government will not throw away those opportunities. This House and the British people will judge whether or not they do so.