

Dorling, D. (2104) The Big Questions: Are MPs too rowdy? Should there be sanctions against Ukraine? Are we in the middle of a housing bubble? The Independent, February 21st, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-big-questions-are-mps-too-rowdy-should-there-be-sanctions-against-ukraine-are-we-in-the-middle-of-a-housing-bubble-9144970.html>

Friday 21 February 2014

The Big Questions: Are MPs too rowdy? Should there be sanctions against Ukraine? Are we in the middle of a housing bubble?

This week's questions answered by Oxford Geography professor
Danny Dorling



MPs are too rowdy and bring politics into disrepute, says the Speaker, John Bercow. Do you agree?

Politics has been in disrepute for a long time. I don't think it is MPs' rowdiness that is the main issue but the weakening of the link between politicians and the public. Over time, safe seats have become safer; the intake of new Members of Parliament has been from a progressively narrower social range of people. Even if they were ever so polite at Question Time, that would not alter the increasing separation of our politicians from their public.

Should Europe be imposing sanctions on the Yanukovych government in Ukraine?

Sanctions are slow-working solutions to long-running problems. The best immediate protection from the abuse of power is media attention. The worst atrocities always occur in the fog of war, out of the spotlight of cameras, and are often discovered years later. Often they result from proxy conflicts being fought out in other people's lands and cities. South Africa was in some ways one such conflict, where the US and the UK supported the minority white government. Ukraine will be just as complex. But good journalists can save many lives.

Is Britain in the middle of a housing bubble? How much is the Government's Help to Buy scheme a factor?

Yes it is in a housing bubble, but it is affecting only part of the country. We know it is a bubble in London because last year the average house price (both of flats and houses) rose by more than the median Londoner's salary. Such rises are never sustained indefinitely because it is impossible to sustain them. The Help to Buy scheme and many other government interventions have certainly helped to inflate the London bubble. It may also have helped to stop house prices from collapsing in some poorer areas. What is more important again is all the actions the Government has not taken which it could have done to stabilise housing prices.

Does it matter that some of London's most expensive streets are now mostly foreign-owned?

No, just as it doesn't matter that many streets in Crete or Malta or Spain are now mostly owned by people from the UK, especially in retirement resorts, or in villages in France, or around the world in cities where as many people born in the UK now live as there are people now living in the UK who were born abroad. What does matter is that London's most expensive streets have some of the lowest levels of property taxation in the world. It is a scandal that most people in Britain pay a far higher proportion of their income, or a far higher proportion of the value of their home, through their property taxation than those who live in the most expensive streets. It is akin to having income tax rates that are lower for the rich. These streets are partly so expensive because council tax is negligible in them. A more progressive council tax system would help to stop prices from rising even further. Most people's council tax could be reduced if the rich paid their fair share.

All three main political parties talk warmly about building new towns. Would it help if they did?

Some new towns could help. But building many small new towns in the South-east could result in even more commuting by car between towns and cities. We need to look at where there is the greatest demand for housing, and in London we need to build upwards, urgently. Outside of London, building on the edges of existing towns and cities may be far more effective than building new towns a few miles away. Most European cities are built at higher density, and commuting to work or school in most of Europe involves far shorter journeys than in the UK. We should look to Copenhagen and similar cities for better planning.

Ed Miliband has talked a lot about a standard of living crisis. The Government says that as the economic recovery takes hold, household incomes will start improving again. Who is right?

It is likely that mean arithmetic average household income will start to creep up again. The median household income will probably rise far more slowly and may even continue to fall. The Government relies on people not understanding the difference between means and medians to remain popular. Even if incomes do start to rise slightly, if house prices and rents are rising faster, then people are becoming poorer overall.

Alex Salmond and George Osborne have squared up over the future of the pound. Is the Scottish referendum about politics or economics?

The referendum has come about because of the growing divides between the wishes and aspirations of the majority of the Scottish people and the direction of policy in which a few politicians in Westminster have taken the whole of the UK since the late 1970s. When all three of the major political parties of the UK appear to be unwilling to accept ever-growing economic inequalities, it is hardly surprising that Scotland should consider independence. The referendum is largely about what England is becoming and whether that can be altered more easily than going it alone. Soon the UK will spend even less on its public services than the US does as a proportion of GDP. It already spends less than anywhere else in Europe.

Danny Dorling is a Professor in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. His latest book, 'All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster', is published by Allen Lane