

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford

Many of our businesses finding it harder to make the sums add up

I've had some really interesting meetings over the past couple of weeks. Now that Parliament has broken up for the summer recess, I wanted to make sure I told you about a couple of them.

The BBC has been a big part of my life – not because I've ever worked there or had any specific personal connection, but simply because it's always been a presence in the backdrop to my life – as I know it has been to so many people.

For as long as I can remember, my radio alarm clock has been tuned to BBC Radio 5 Live. I love how its reliable, but relatively fast-paced coverage lets me know as soon as I wake up what's going on in the world.

As a slight aside, many MPs I know listen to Radio 4 as their news channel of choice. I know they do excellent in-depth interviews and news programmes, but it has never been part of my daily routine. I wondered if becoming an MP might change that – so far, it hasn't, but I guess there is always time.

When it comes to television, I'm old enough to remember when there were only four channels to choose from: BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV and Channel 4.

As a child, I remember being glued to the children's programmes in the late afternoon slot before the news at 6pm, hosted by successive presenters from the 'Broom Cupboard'.

As I've got older, I've loved the stunning period dramas that have set the global standard for recreating both sumptuous and less-than-salubrious scenes from the past.

In short, I've always been a big fan of the BBC. Not without criticism, though – it certainly hasn't always got everything right, but then very few large and long-lived organisations do.

Previously, as a local councillor, and now as an MP, I've been to a few of the smaller BBC studios, including BBC Essex in Chelmsford, and their studios at The Forum in Norwich, where they film BBC Politics East.

But until a week or so ago, I'd never been to BBC Broadcasting House, in Portland Place at the top of Regent Street in London. So I was excited to be invited, alongside



Marie Goldman MP in the BBC Blue Room
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some of my Lib Dem MP colleagues, to pay a visit.

Specifically, we were invited to have a look at something called the Blue Room. This is where the BBC explores the latest technologies. Right now, that includes the thing that everyone is talking about in the technology sector and beyond: Artificial intelligence (AI).

Alongside the many gadgets and gizmos, including TVs, virtual reality headsets and Amazon Alexa devices, we looked at examples of the rapid advances in the capability of AI to create not just

images, but videos, including very realistic-looking AI-generated human characters playing the role of reporters talking to camera.

Although the subject matter of aliens crash-landing in a field gave the game away, it was otherwise impossible to tell that it was fake. The subsequent scene of a crashed alien spacecraft surrounded by ambulances and police vehicles wouldn't have looked out of place in a Hollywood blockbuster movie.

It was a stark reminder that this technology is very shortly going to be commonplace and that we're



The Small Business Roundtable in Chelmsford
MARIE GOLDMAN MP

going to have to work very hard to distinguish between the real and the fake.

Apart from the jobs it is undoubtedly going to put at risk, I also worry that our rules, regulations and laws are going to struggle to keep up. This could have dire consequences for society as a whole.

On the plus side, we were also shown some of the work done by BBC Verify. This is the BBC department responsible for fact-checking and verifying reports and footage not just from the UK, but from around the world.

Their work is embedded in so much that the BBC now does. Given the challenges that AI is already posing and the ease with which fake content can be not only created but

also disseminated, I think this is a vital role, and I was pleased to learn more about it.

Back in Chelmsford, I held a roundtable discussion with some of Chelmsford's small businesses to hear directly from them about the challenges they are facing.

There were business owners from several sectors, including construction, hospitality and legal services.

It was clear – and sadly not surprising – that many businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to make the sums add up as they are faced with additional cost pressures from lots of different directions.

They told me about the increase in the cost of materials and supplies, as well as the impact of the Government's hike in employers' National

Insurance Contributions (NICs). In some cases, they told me about their dreams of expanding, but the impossibility of being able to make ends meet, with banks unwilling to loan funds, despite a proven track record.

Two things were clear from the meeting: firstly, we have some fabulous small businesses in Chelmsford; and secondly, they need far more support from central government.

I'm keen to do whatever I can to help make that happen. Running this roundtable to gather their feedback which will input into a nationwide survey is just one small step towards that.

A huge thank you to the businesses who took part – I know they had to take time out of their busy schedules to meet with me and I'm extremely grateful to them for that.

While persuading the Government to do more will inevitably be a long, hard battle, there are things that we can all do to support our local businesses, and that includes buying from them.

So when you're deciding where to go for dinner, or who to use for this service or that, please do consider choosing a small, independent local business.

Your support could make all the difference.

Thanks for reading.

Marie

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