

# My Question during the Statement on Defence and Security Industrial Strategy, 23 March 2021

**Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):** I strongly welcome the emphasis of the statement on making more in Britain, because we cannot be properly defended if we rely on imports for crucial things. Is the UK undertaking a full audit of the designs, intellectual property and rare materials we would need to manufacture all our crucial defence equipment here, were we to face a blockade or other hostile action against our imports? President Biden is currently carrying out such a supply chain analysis for his country.

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Jeremy Quin):** As my right hon. Friend will know, the supply chains in defence are vast, but it is an analysis that we are undertaking. We are doing it project by project, making certain that the most crucial are investigated first, but we are doing an analysis of our supply chains, and that is being elevated to the Defence Board, to make certain that we have greater oversight of what goes into our crucial defence kit and equipment.

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## The virus and the third wave

The European continent remains the centre of the pandemic storm. As Italy, Germany and France extend their lockdowns and discourage movement outside the home at Easter it is time to set out some of the facts and figures on what has happened so far.

Official figures are produced and updated daily for the worldometer site. They are the best we have, though they are of course influenced by how much testing is carried out in each country to identify the disease, and how doctors fill in death certificates for people suffering from a variety of conditions as well as CV 19. These figures show that the five worst countries for numbers of cases and the five worst countries for acknowledged CV 19 deaths are all continental European. The best countries with fewest deaths and case numbers are likely to be in Asia.

Deaths per million

Gibraltar 2791  
Czechia (EU) 2336  
San Marino 2325  
Belgium (EU) 1955  
Hungary (EU) 1940

Cases per million

Andorra 149249

Montenegro 139523

Czechia (EU) 137600

San Marino 129123

Gibraltar 126766

The figures reveal a number of divergencies. Amongst these countries with the worst case and death numbers the death rate measured as deaths in proportion to reported cases varies from as high as nearly 3.2% in Hungary to a little under 1% in Andorra. Does this tell us anything about different treatments, or about death certificate definitions or about the ages of the people catching the virus? Most of these badly affected countries did introduce lockdowns and test and trace systems but still suffered greatly.

The Panorama programme on Monday sought to show that Korea got it right with a strong test and trace system, whilst arguing the Sweden got it wrong by being too relaxed in the first wave of the disease. The Swedish numbers are not out of line with other large EU countries that did go in for longer and earlier lockdowns. Korea's performance is good but so is the performance of many other Asian countries. We need to study a range of possibilities before leaping to policy conclusions. Could it be that past Asian flu varieties gave Asians more natural immunity or ability to fight the virus? Is it that those Asian countries which did go for test, trace and isolate got more compliance from their populations than Europe did? Do diet and vitamins C and D play any part?

There are lots of facts and figures in circulation, but they need careful study to understand them and their defects before rushing to conclusions about what worked. High urban concentrations of people makes virus passage more likely, and elderly populations suffered the more serious versions of the disease in much larger numbers than younger populations. The latest news from the USA showing in their tests that the Astra Zeneca vaccine is highly effective at stopping serious case and deaths means the UK hospital admission and death rates should continue to fall as they have been doing as most of the at risk people have now been vaccinated.

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## [A new framework for our economy](#)

The UK economy has been steered for twenty years by the Maastricht requirements. The UK has sought to keep state debt down to 60% or to get it moving towards that total, and to keep the budget deficit down to below 3% of GDP. The inherited targets are to record state borrowing below 2% of GDP this year and to see net debt declining as a percentage of GDP. Overall borrowing should be at or below zero by 2025-6. These targets of course were blown away by the measures to tackle the pandemic.

The government needs to consider new rules. Of course it needs to control public spending and taxation to affordable levels. Maybe it should go over to a target of not normally allowing borrowing for current spending, but allow borrowing for capital spending. That capital spending should continue to need a value for money and rate of return test, preferably better estimated and policed than prior capital projects have often been.

I dislike the Maastricht rules for a variety of reasons. Now most advanced countries are borrowing around 100% of GDP the idea that anytime soon can see them back to 60% is silly. The usually automatic 3% running deficit control can cause austerity or undesirable tax rises and cuts. I have no wish to advise the EU on what to do about their rules, and understand that they are trying to avoid the free rider problem. When countries share a currency with a common official interest rate a country which had borrowed too much could seek to take advantage of the better credit rating of leading members of the zone and carry on borrowing excessively. The fact that the criteria are recorded in the Treaties makes changing them very problematic.

For the UK we now need rules which keep our finances in good order and take advantage of a good credit rating and low rates to allow productive investment. The Maastricht figures do not adjust the state debt figures for all that debt now owned by the Bank of England as agents of the Treasury which also seems strange.

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## Use of a flag

One of the big visual differences when I was a visiting Minister in foreign lands was the usual universal presence of their national flags in the Ministerial offices and meeting rooms, with nothing similar at home. Here we had the odd battle about where and when the EU flag would be shown, and we had the relentless use of the EU flag on every project which had received however modest a sum of our money routed back to us via the EU. When Ministers asked that the display should also have the Union flag on it with acknowledgement of the usually larger sums of UK direct taxpayer money they were told that was against EU rules or given some other reason why the UK flag could not be shown.

The decision of today's Ministers to show the flag for their presentations and in their offices is merely bringing the UK into line with most other countries of the world. It also brings them into line with EU practice with universal use of the EU flag. It is curious that some in the BBC and their friends think it cause for merriment that government should be proud of our country and wish to display one of its known symbols. It is one thing to see a joke on twitter showing a picture of a man in a Union flag suit, with Union flag glasses and hat with the caption "Interview with a government Minister" but another to see mainstream BBC news programmes trying to become comedy

shows at the expense of normal government practice to fly the flag. I have never heard them make fun of the many foreign interviewees who sit with their flag in their office, from US senators to Prime Ministers and Presidents of many countries.

It is all part of the strange mood of some in this country that seeks to denigrate who we are, what we stand for and what our ancestors did. Like all great countries that have contributed to human development there have been bad chapters to our story. There have been many more fine chapters, from saving Europe from dictators on several occasions to abolishing the slave trade to pioneering the industrial revolution. The fact that so many people wish to come to live and work in our country shows many abroad rate us highly. One of the most touching moments when I was a Minister came when I made an early visit to what had been Soviet eastern Europe. A lady stepped out when the official car with a small Union flag was stopped at lights to pay her respects to the flag. To her it symbolised freedom. She remembered the UK's role in liberating Europe from tyranny.

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## What is the point of the Census?

I duly filled in my Census to comply with the law and ordered the email receipt to be able to prove it. As we now live in a snooper state where government keeps so many records about us it is difficult to fathom why they need to conduct a census.

They know who I am , where I live, where I work and all the details I supplied for my National Insurance number, Passport and driving licence. They have Income tax records, National Insurance records, residence records for Council Tax, health records through the NHS ,a birth, marriage and divorce record. So why do they need to know again who I am, where I live, what my general state of health is, what job I do and what my marital status is despite knowing all this already? They also wanted to know a few of the qualifications I hold, all known to the Examining Boards and Universities which are part of a government guided educational system.

They might argue that the point of the Census is to catch up with a minority who have not duly complied with all the form filling needed by everyone from the Passport office to the Council Tax desk. I fear that if people are housing illegal migrants or covering for people dodging Income Tax and national Insurance they are unlikely to blow their cover by providing honest answers to the census form.

They might also argue it helps them plan future services and policies. If that is the purpose then it would need to be more precise and detailed than the form they provided. Let's take the possible use of census data for a skills audit and future skills policy. The form did not allow someone to explain what professional qualifications they might have, made no distinction

between the three main levels of degree to encompass research oriented doctorates as opposed to first degrees, and did not press home general enquiries about apprenticeships to discover which areas were best served. Asking people to make a general assessment of their health is hardly sufficient evidence to plan NHS capacity. The GPs know much more about their patients. The multiple questions about identity and background were more detailed than some other areas.

Of course good government needs good data. Instead of spending money on another general survey the government should clean up and use the huge quantities of data it already holds. Why not start by reconciling National Insurance numbers with employee and Income Tax records? Why have more NI numbers been issued than there are meant to be employees? Why not use the substantial NHS data held on all using the service to model future patterns of service need and capacity better? Why not improve a system of patient records with non UK users receiving bills? Why not ask for consolidated data from Examining Boards and Universities to improve national data over skills and education if they think there are holes in their current knowledge?

It is even more bizarre that the census will not take place in Scotland when on its own logic it needs to be U.K. wide.

I hope this is the last general Census we face. On the general topic of population numbers and migration what we want is a reliable total available monthly, with good systems and border controls to assure us that the numbers are accurate. All those welcome to come legally should be included in the moving totals as permits are issued on arrival, with effective controls against illegals. For the working age population it should be one person, one NI number.