

My question during Business of the House, 25 February 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As businesses large and small need more orders to power jobs and economic recovery, can we have a debate on Government buying? Can we learn from the great success of buying so many vaccine doses from UK science and facilities, and buy more innovative and competitive goods and services from companies here at home?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees Mogg): My right hon. Friend, as always, raises interesting and important points.

The Government are planning on creating a much simpler and nimbler procurement system, which will open up procurement opportunity to small and medium-sized businesses. However, I hope he will contribute to the Budget debate that is coming up, which will be an opportunity to talk about these matters at greater length.

The rise of the pound

In the first two months after our exit from the single market and customs union, the pound has risen against the dollar, the Euro and the yen. It is up by 3.6% against the dollar and Euro, and by 8.6% against the yen. In the referendum campaign I rightly criticised the silly pessimism of Remain forecasters saying there would be large falls in GDP immediately after a Leave vote, a collapse in house prices and a surge in unemployment. On sterling I merely said that the pound would doubtless continue to fluctuate once we had voted to leave as surely as it had varied widely during our period in the EU. I thought relative interest rates, QE rates, dollar money policy and the other usual issues would have more impact on the pound than Brexit. So it has proved.

Today the pound is at the same level against the dollar and the yen as it recorded before the referendum vote, a time when the establishment and market view was that Remain would win. It would not have been easy to forecast that the pound should now be exactly where it was against the dollar and yen after a Leave vote and after exit given the elapse of time and the many other influences and variables involved. It should worry Remain forecasters that their one remaining gloomy forecast of a big fall in sterling has not proved to be right either. The pound is down by 5.5% against the Euro over the same time period, as the Euro has appreciated against the dollar and yen.

The future of the pound is never easy to forecast given the huge volumes of currency transactions and the differing money policies of the USA, Japan, the

Euro area and the UK. We seem to be living through a current period of dollar weakness, probably reflecting the very loose money and fiscal policy being pursued in Washington. The rise this year so far in sterling will help limit inflationary tendencies on all those imports and will make exporting a bit more difficult. What is interesting is that in the first two months of exit sterling has risen against all major currencies including the Euro.

Roadmap – Return to full attendance at Education Settings

On the 22 February, the Department for Education announced that all schools, colleges and further education settings should allow full attendance from 8 March. Furthermore, higher education providers are asked to recommence in-person teaching and learning in a phased manner from the 8 March for students on practical or practice-based (including creative arts) courses who need access to specialist equipment and facilities.

Key messages

- Our shared goal now is to support pupils and students returning to face-to-face education, and to reverse the long-term impact of the pandemic on their education.
- The Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of remaining students. This review will take account of the latest data and will be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and providers will be given a week's notice ahead of any further return.
- Although the public health picture is improving, it remains crucial that steps are taken to reduce and mitigate any risks within education and childcare settings. DfE has worked closely with PHE to develop and refresh the system of controls to reduce the risk of transmission in education and childcare settings, based on scientific rationale.

Key Q&A

Infection rates within the community continue to remain high. Why have you asked schools and colleges to return to full attendance?

- We are committed to getting all pupils and students back as soon as it is possible to do so.
- We are clear that the decision is based on the balance of risk: to the NHS of rising admissions, but also to students and pupils of the continued educational, social and psychological harms of missed education.
- In doing so, the Department for Education will be informed by the

scientific and medical experts, where data and evidence is considered regularly including by SAGE, the Joint Biosecurity Centre, Public Health England, and the Chief Medical Officers.

Why are you not asking remaining HE students to return?

- We are committed to getting all students back into university as soon as the public health situation allows, taking into account the spread of the virus in communities and the pressures on the NHS. In doing so, the government has been informed by the scientific and medical experts, where data and evidence is considered regularly including by SAGE, the Joint Biosecurity Centre, Public Health England, and the Chief Medical Officers.
- The Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of the remaining students. This review will take account of the latest data and will be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and providers will be given a week's notice ahead of any further return.
- Until then, we ask universities to continue to provide high-quality remote education, enabling students to access the help that they need to continue learning whilst at home.

What about clinically extremely vulnerable pupils, students and staff?

- People in the highest risk category (the clinically extremely vulnerable) are currently advised by the Government to shield and stay at home as much as possible until further notice, except to exercise or to attend health appointments (including your vaccination appointments). These individuals will know who they are as they will have been written to, informing them that they are on the list.
- CEV children and young people are advised not to attend educational settings and wraparound childcare. Education settings should make appropriate arrangements for them to continue their education remotely.
- CEV staff should not attend their workplace. Staff should talk to their employers about how they will be supported, including to work from home. Schools and colleges should continue to pay clinically extremely vulnerable staff on their usual terms.
- CEV advice applies to individuals, not households. Those individuals who live with someone who is CEV, but who are not CEV themselves, can still attend education and wraparound childcare settings and work (if they are unable to work from home).

Can parents send their children to wraparound childcare or out-of-school settings to support them to work?

Until 8 March, wraparound childcare providers and out-of-school settings should only offer face-to-face provision to children of critical workers and vulnerable children and young people, in line with those children eligible to attend school for onsite provision.

- From 8 March, wraparound childcare providers and out-of-school settings will be able to offer provision to all children, in line with those returning to school. However, parents and carers will only be able to access settings for certain essential purposes. Providers will be able to offer provision to vulnerable children and young people as normal, but other children should only be accessing this provision, where it is: o Reasonably necessary to enable their parents or carers to work, seek work, undertake education or training, or attend a medical appointment or address a medical need.
 - Being used by electively home educating parents, as part of their arrangements for their child to receive a suitable full-time education.
 - Being used for the purposes of obtaining a regulated qualification, meeting the entry requirements for an education institution, or to undertake exams or assessments.
 - Schools should be working to resume all their breakfast and after-school clubs for their pupils, where this provision is necessary to support parents to important for providing enriching activities which support children's education, vulnerable children's wellbeing, as well as supporting parents to work, attend education and access medical care, and to support pupil's wider education and training.
 - From the start of the school summer term, it is our ambition that all children will be able to access this provision for both indoor and outdoor activities as normal. This will be no earlier than 12 April and will be confirmed as part of Step 2 of the Government's Roadmap.
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Freedom

We have lost a lot of freedoms during the battle against CV 19. Most have accepted the need to take tough measures to protect those at risk of serious illness and death. Now vaccines supply a way out of the public health imperative it is important we do not come to think some of these controls are acceptable or useful for the future. These were extreme measures which should be temporary.

I never thought I would be living in a country where you needed a reason to leave your house, where you were banned from making trips just for pleasure and where every social contact you wished to make had to be done electronically or under a special dispensation allowed by the regulations.

The government has promised us the way out of lockdown will be data driven. The slow indicative timetable to eventual freedom on June 21 is subject to revision. It is highly likely the data for serious cases admitted to hospital and deaths from CV 19 will continue to fall rapidly as the NHS completes vaccination of most people over 50 and anyone with another worrying medical

condition. The government must understand the data is dynamic, and lagged. It needs to respond to the trend and to the vaccination figures, and get on with relaxing the controls.

I do not think it a good idea to make a vaccination certificate an official document that is used to enforce controls on people's conduct in the UK. Of course if foreign countries want proof of vaccination for people to travel there that is up to them and the potential traveller. We might wish to require vaccination for people coming to the UK, particularly from countries that still have bad attacks of the pandemic or to require quarantine. A more difficult question which the government as employer does need to resolve is should NHS employees have to have the vaccine in order to work in NHS establishments? I am happy with the current policy of advising them to but not enforcing it. It would be quite wrong to make the rest of us have the vaccine in order to go to a shop or theatre if the government isn't even willing to require vaccination as a condition of employment in exposed state employment.

[My contribution to the debate on Coronavirus: Supporting Businesses and Individuals, 23 February](#)

Now is not the time for tax rises. Now is the time to promote a vigorous recovery as soon as it is safe to do so. Yes, the deficit is far too large, but it is affordable as long as it is a one-off.

The deficit is the product of sensible support for individuals and businesses when they were locked out or closed down, and it was sensible support for the economy as a whole at a time when tax revenues had fallen sharply because people were not allowed to go to work and businesses were not allowed to trade. The way out of all that is not tax rises that would sap confidence and undermine business cash flows even more. The way out is a vigorous recovery that will replace lost revenues, and reduce the need for the support that the Government have rightly produced for small businesses and individuals.

What businesses and individuals will need is turnover, orders and work. I ask all Government Departments—led, probably, by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—to look at how the UK Government can make more work available. The Government have mighty procurement programmes, so when we are building great new railway lines, let us ensure that it is UK steel for the tracks and that it is UK-produced trains with plenty of components and value added, as well as the assembly work taking place in the United Kingdom.

As the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs designs new grants and loans schemes, it should be promoting British food and agriculture at the

same time as taking care of environmental concerns. There is a great opportunity to reduce the amount of imported food and to substitute Great British food from our farms and fishing grounds.

BEIS itself leads on energy. Why are we importing so much energy through interconnectors? Can we not have another round of capacity procurement so that we have future electricity generation here in Britain? We have plenty of means of generating power; surely we can harness that.

The Government should want to greatly expand the electricity output of this country because they want to unleash on us a great electric revolution in transport, space heating and powering our factories, so let us make the provision early. Let us invest now for the future so that we have that electric power when it comes to be needed.

A number of businesses have been very badly damaged by lockdown and shut-out, and I am glad that the Government are making some money available to them. I urge them to be generous. It was not those businesses' fault and we need them to be there when we have recovery.

Small businesses and the self-employed are mightily flexible, but they cannot survive on thin air, and they will need to repay their debts, so give them some turnover and some tax cuts.