

The US election

So once again the mainstream media and the polling companies get an election massively wrong. They are tone deaf to people who vote for so called populist politicians. They despise parties that dare to stand against some of the fashionable and often wrong analyses and policies of the World bodies and elites that presume to know best. This makes it impossible for them to see the appeal of policies geared to freedom, free enterprise, self respect, and healthy scepticism of centralised power in governments and international bodies.

Doubtless they will now claim the fault was all the voters who voted the wrong way. They usually decry them and abuse them, and may say they lied to the pollsters. The fault is all their own, not that of the voters. If they are so clever and so worth their hire, they need to ask the right questions of the right people in their samples and interviews to get the forecast right. What is the point of them if they cannot?

Some of the media are quite incapable of understanding a Trump voter or a Brexit voter, because they start from the belief that it is an unacceptable conduct which only the bad, the ill informed and the stupid could countenance. Remember Hillary Clinton trying to win the Presidency by calling all who were planning to vote for Mr Trump the deplorables? I strongly disagree with the socialist way, but I respect those who vote for it and believe in it and seek to engage in political argument with them, not in trading abuse about their abilities and motives.

The polls said there would be a 10% gap between Mr Trump and Mr Biden. There is a 1.8% one. They said Mr Trump would lose a number of crucial swing states he won. The weight of media opinion was a Biden win was both inevitable and desirable. They endlessly repeated that Mr Biden would unite the USA whilst Mr Trump would divide it. They should look around them. The USA is deeply divided, and Mr Trump and Mr Biden stand for two very different ways forward for their country. It is not an easy task for anyone to unite the USA. Those who want their personal freedoms will always oppose the big government model. Those who want more government control and action to right the wrongs they see around them will never accept the demands of those who simply want their own right to lead their lives without more government demands.

Vote on lock down

The government won its motion to impose an English national lock down from tomorrow by 516 to 38 votes. Labour supported the government. It was mainly Conservatives voting against with some DUP MPs. Clearly there were numerous abstentions or absences on what was a most important vote. I voted against,

as the government did not amend the Regulations in ways suggested to reduce the damage to jobs and social life. Most of the speakers were Conservative, with many asking for amendments to the rules, seeking better data and asking for an exit plan even where they were voting for the motion.

My Question during the Urgent Question on Lockdown: Economic Support, 3 November 2020

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am glad that the Government agree that where, by law, they stop people working and earning a living, they should compensate them.

Will the Government look again at the terms of the scheme for the self-employed—there are restrictions on several categories of self-employed who have no other means of earning their living and no large company support—and be more generous?

Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need all those self-employed people to be ready to return to work to get some kind of recovery going soon, because the economy is in deep trouble?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Steve Barclay): I agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to ensure that the economy is able to bounce back quickly. That is why we have provided over £13 billion of support to the self-employed, which by international comparisons—I know my right hon. Friend looks at international comparisons—he will see is extremely generous.

I have set out previously in the House part of the operational difficulties, for example with owner-directors in terms of what is dividend income and what is not.

The point is that we have set out a generous self-employment income support scheme, but we need to deliver that operationally in a way that meets the tests set by, for example, the Public Accounts Committee, which has asked whether we have the right level of controls in place, given the speed at which these schemes were deployed.

In praise of small business and the self employed

Yesterday in Parliament the government confirmed its renewed scheme to offer some money to the self employed who are banned from working by lock down rules.

In the exchanges I welcomed the government's acceptance of a simple proposition. If government prevents someone from earning their living or from trading their business for a public health reason, they should compensate them.

I went on to ask given this common ground between us, why didn't the government follow through and make sure all categories of self employed who have lost their livelihoods to lockdown are in receipt of some substitute income for the duration of the controls?

I was not the only one to ask this. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury gave us the same answer as during the first Furlough scheme. They find it too difficult, for example, to distinguish between a self employed person working only for his own small company and paying himself a dividend, and a rich individual receiving dividends from other companies where he or she does little or no work. I find this bizarre. The Treasury should already know from tax records that the individual just has the one source of income, and works in the company he runs. They can always check it if they are suspicious. They could demand some certification by the individual when claiming the money. They rely on the individual to make an honest declaration of the dividends for tax purposes anyway.

I and others will keep pressing the government, though they seem unwilling so far to be fairer and more flexible. As I explained again to the Minister we will need all the entrepreneurs, small business people and small companies we can get when lockdown is over to power the economy back to life. Our small business sector deserves better. The Treasury should also abandon its tax attacks on people who work for themselves where the tax authorities want to claim they work one of their customers.

The hard questions that must be asked about forecasts, numbers, data and treatments

Throughout this pandemic, I have been dismayed by the poor data and the

misleading forecasts produced by some of the official advisers to the government.

On Saturday evening, like many people, I was left trying to read graphs purporting to give the reasons to justify a major curtailment of personal and business freedom, only to be unable to see the varying scales, the sources of the data or the relevant dates. There were as often glaring omissions. Why, for example, are we never given up to date figures of bed occupancies for the NHS either nationally or regionally?

Over the last six months, we have been shown some gloomy forecasts that proved wrong, regular changes in the way figures like the numbers of deaths are computed, misleading international comparisons with countries that compile data differently and a refusal by the advisers to engage in public with legitimate professional concerns of other medical and scientific experts who take a different view.

We hear a stupid mantra that we must follow the science. There is no single agreed scientific view of this disease because it is new and talented scientists and medics are wrestling to understand it and to work out how best to treat it. There are healthy disagreements between them as they seek better knowledge.

It is the worst kind of talking down to tell us there is one perfect settled scientific view which leads to one simple policy prescription of lock down. When I asked about the forecast of four thousand future daily deaths and the huge range in estimates for both deaths and cases into December, there was no convincing answer. The truth is that the government advisers do not know how many cases or deaths there will be next week or month.

I fully accept that for a minority this is a dangerous and potentially lethal disease. For most, it is at worst a flu-like illness; for others, there are no symptoms at all. I am seeking changes to the way that the government responds to the pandemic. I wish them to do all that a government can to save lives, and to help the vulnerable find the protection they need and want from the disease.

I also wish to see the Government avoid measures which do substantial damage to jobs and livelihoods. As we saw, the last national lockdown was unable to stop the virus spreading again come the autumn. The Government's own advisers who think the lockdown itself brought down case numbers and deaths substantially accept that a tough national lockdown does not solve the problem. They recommend continuing with various lockdown measures as long as we have no cure or preventative vaccine. Others think the virus had peaked at the point where the lockdown was imposed, and maybe the weather and other factors played a part in its temporary demise.

I am urging the government to work closely with medics and pharmaceutical researchers to identify more treatments to cut the death rates. There are various steroids, anti-virals, clot busters and antibody treatments that have now been found to help, or may emerge from trials as useful additions to treatment.

Health professionals have also now discovered using non invasive ways of administering extra oxygen are often best. There are also issues about whether Vitamin D and zinc supplements can help. I have urged more emphasis on qualified people seeking new ways of treating and preventing. There is much medical and pharmaceutical talent in the UK, and it may well make more breakthroughs, as it did with the introduction of steroid treatment.

I have urged better data. The basis of defining a death has been changed several times during the pandemic, and there are issues about whether Covid-19 deaths have been overstated whilst understating other lung infections and serious co morbidities in the mainly elderly people dying. In the early stages, the authorities boosted death numbers from Covid-19 by directing its inclusion on a death certificate even if there was no confirmatory test for its presence, based on reported symptoms.

There was also a wish to ascribe all deaths to Covid-19 where it was present, even though the elderly person concerned may have died from one or more of several other bad conditions they had. Some of the most common tests for the disease may also report false positives, which needs to be taken into account when examining figures for deaths and cases. The latest forecasts for cases and deaths take the form of very wide ranges where the upper figure is three times the lower figure, making them meaningless as planning forecasts.

There is an absence of reliable public data on hospital bed occupancy, which seems to be the main worry of NHS management and the scientific advisers. We must not close the economy down to save the NHS if it can now cope thanks to the building of the Nightingales, greatly expanding intensive care facilities and recruiting many more staff. Why are we not using some hospitals as isolation hospitals specialising in Covid-19, and leaving the rest of the system free of the disease to reassure patients needing many other treatments?

What we do know is a lockdown is very damaging to jobs and business. The first national lock down took around a quarter off our national income and output – an unprecedented fall. We cannot afford to do that again, as government rightly spent a fortune on subsidising public services and private sector employment to cushion the blow.

I am pressing for substantial changes to lockdown plans. I see no need to close outdoor sports facilities. I think a range of specialist retailers should stay open with suitable measures to cut risks of infection spreading. Pubs and restaurants should be allowed to sell drink as well as food for take away. Government should work with business and offer help to improve air extraction so more can function safely indoors.

I do support the schools staying open as this is important to the development and future prospects of children and teenagers. This disease is usually very mild in young people. I have urged the resumption of non Covid-19 work by the NHS as Ministers seek, as many more people die of causes other than Covid-19 every day.

In order to reduce, the spread of the virus everyone needs to reduce the

number of social contacts they have in enclosed spaces with poor air. This requires buy-in by the public. There is no agreed set of laws and controls on our everyday movements that will guarantee success. Government needs to persuade people to reduce social contacts rather than try to find a set of laws they can enforce against the wishes of a significant minority. It could also help by assisting more people and businesses to live with the virus for all the time we have no cures and vaccines.

Can we have more UV sanitising systems deployed in public places? Can we have more assistance to adapt air systems in commercial premises to extract dirty air promptly to make them safer? Can we have some better understanding from government that we need all the small businesses that serve us, and they are the ones that are in danger of being hounded out of work by clumsy generalised lockdowns.

We can adapt our lives to living with the virus by many small steps of a practical nature. This battle cannot be won by taking too many liberties away, and lecturing people to stop their social and business lives. My constituents want the government to work with them to help protect the vulnerable and make normal life safer for the rest. There is no silver bullet or single answer. We all need to help, and that requires a general spirit of collaboration, tolerance and commonsense.

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