

Making Parliament work

I spoke in Parliament this week on a link from home, as MPs are encouraged to do. I am grateful to the Speaker and House authorities for their hard work in making sure Parliament can meet whilst obeying the social distancing rules. They responded to those of us who requested we meet.

We can only have a Parliament by limiting numbers strictly in the Chamber itself, where I would rather be. A Parliament working remotely is better than a Parliament not meeting at all, but there are losses from this temporary system. An MP cannot intervene on another to debate an issue or challenge an assertion. You cannot spontaneously ask a question or decide to make a contribution to a debate. You have to book a slot well in advance, with plenty of competition for such slots. Parliament is meeting for less time so opportunities are more limited.

Readers may be relieved to know there are still plenty of other meetings and communication underway between MPs, though we no longer benefit from those many informal conversations and rapidly convened meetings that characterise a usual Parliamentary day. Ministers are making themselves available by tele conference. Groups of MPs and committees meet through Zoom or Teams. There is intensified email traffic and phone calls. Many of us are trying to find substitutes for the many face to face meetings and conversations which help shape government policy and government responses to problems.

Coronavirus Testing

I have received this update from the Government:

Today the Government announced that anyone in England with coronavirus symptoms who either must go to work or is over 65 can now be tested.

Further information on accessing the service is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Apply for a test here:

<https://self-referral.test-for-coronavirus.service.gov.uk/test-type>

The UK as a leading advocate of Free Trade worldwide

The Minister of State for Trade has told us that the UK has now taken her place as a full WTO member and is making an important contribution to the world trade discussions. Secretary of State Truss made the first UK Ministerial speech there since 1972 earlier this year.

The Department for International Trade is now planning trade talks with the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. These will be in parallel with the PM's negotiations through Mr Frost with the EU. The US Trade Representative has made a recent visit to London, and the US is keen to make rapid progress. Since 2008 our trade with the rest of the world has been bigger than our trade with the EU and growing faster, despite the absence of Free Trade Agreements with most of it.

Trade talks with the US were scheduled to take place face to face in April, but these are having to be transferred to audio visual conferences owing to anti virus controls. I want the UK to respond positively to the US wish to press on with them quickly.

In discussions with the EU State aid issues can be best handled by the UK having a strong competition policy of its own whilst accepting that the EU regime is sufficient on the continent, so each party can trust the other's system.

The UK should aim for lower tariffs than the EU common external tariff. We should encourage cheaper food where we cannot grow the products for ourselves. We should set our own high standards for food quality, animal welfare and hygiene, and aim for mutual recognition of each other's standards with counter parties in Free Trade Agreements. There is no need to charge any tariff on imported components needed for UK manufacture.

The US/UK Agreement could become a template for other deals worldwide by both the USA and the UK.

My speech during the debate on the Finance Bill, 27 April 2020

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

At the time of the Budget it was a very different world. The Government were

forecasting a little bit of growth and recommended a modest stimulus.

I remember that I was able to welcome that stimulus in the Budget debate—I thought it was right that we boosted public spending a bit and borrowed a bit more—but with masterly understatement I said that I was a bit surprised by the magnitude of the stimulus: I thought that perhaps something more was needed.

In the six weeks that have elapsed since then, we have seen a blizzard of announcements that have made it clear that the Government recognise the magnitude of the downturn that now besets us and the world economy and are rightly moving swiftly to try to provide some compensation to the many businesses that cannot trade and the many people whose jobs are under threat or whose income is disappearing because of the lack of work.

The response is correct, so the Government should look again at the Finance Bill in the light of the fact that the events that led to its formation have been completely overtaken by the magnitude of this crisis, and because we will need quite soon a Finance Act that does everything in its power to promote recovery.

Tax rises are not a good idea at all. The Government, in this period of response to the crisis, have offered tax holidays, tax reductions and tax deferrals, which is the right response as the private sector and individuals cannot afford those taxes at the moment with their incomes so rudely interrupted.

The Government must also look at the groups of people they are targeting. I urge the Minister to think again about changing the rules on IR35. There are about 5 million self-employed people in this country who have been doing a magnificent job for us.

They provide flexibility, service and products that we need and they are very competitive. A number of them have been living under the shadow of those tax changes; some have lost contracts and work to overseas companies and competitors simply from that threat. I therefore urge the Minister to think again and recognise that we need to reward and encourage those people, not threaten them with a new tax. Above all they will offer a lot of the flexibility, hard work and energy that the recovery will need.

The Government are right to provide as much compensation as they can and the Bank of England is right to buy a lot of bonds and create money, but we all know that that is not a sustainable model for the economy in the medium to longer term. I echo the comments of colleagues who rightly said that we need a way back to safe working as quickly as possible. The only way we can afford to pay for the NHS is to have more people at work paying taxes and earning decent incomes, and more companies generating turnover who can then afford company taxation.

Through the Finance Bill and all the other measures the Government can undertake, we must together ensure that we have as early a return to work, and as safe a return to work, as possible, and that means working away with

business on better safety so that people have the clothing and equipment they need, automating where necessary and allowing proper social segregation while people are working in warehouses, offices and shops.

We need to develop those new business models, and the Government can provide a lead by showing how they can continue to administer their great services while looking after the safety of their employees to the best possible effect.

That requires reshaping the Finance Bill. I am delighted that the Minister is thinking of making amendments to the Bill during its passage through the House. I ask him above all to look at measures that could reward companies that go in for a new model, and reward employees and the self-employed who go that extra mile to work safely and create some restoration of service and activity in our economy.

No one in this House has seen anything on this scale or magnitude before. Never have we got to the point where a quarter or more of the companies in the country are not allowed to trade and millions of people are banned from doing their job because of public health and safety considerations.

In this situation, we need to offer them a Finance Bill with hope, a Finance Bill that will help them finance the recovery and a Finance Bill that will make it worthwhile for them to lead that recovery as soon as the time comes.

Dear Constituent

There is some good news to pass on. It looks as if the virus spread has peaked in our area. Hospital admissions are down, and the Royal Berks Hospital has plenty of capacity in both normal beds and Intensive Care beds should there be any relapse in progress. The first aim of policy to ensure the NHS can cope is so far working.

This also means the NHS has capacity for the other killers and serious conditions that people contract. Patients should not be deterred by the priority to the virus. There are additional hospital facilities in the private sector that the local NHS is using for cancer and other conditions. The NHS wishes to provide a good service to anyone who is seriously ill.

I have continued to pass on contacts who can supply protective clothing to our public services, where there are shortages. West Berkshire and the Royal Berks Hospital report no problems, and Wokingham Social services is managing with help from national and regional stocks. The government is well aware of the need for more and is working with the national and overseas suppliers on schedules and deliveries.

More testing is becoming available. There are local test centres at

Whiteknights in Reading and at the Community Hospital in Thatcham for NHS and care staff. The aim nationally is to extend the range of people eligible for tests as the supply increases.

I am urging a managed return to work for more people. Working practices will need to be adapted, but business shows every willingness to do so. There will be social distancing, more home working, more use of remote technology, more screens, more protective clothing and more automation. I am very conscious of the economic damage being done, and keen to promote more safer working as the obvious way to improve things.

I spoke in the debate on the economy yesterday using the video link from home as MPs were encouraged to do. It demonstrates there are ways to adapt and to do our jobs in these difficult times.