

Controlling public spending

There is renewed interest amongst Conservative MPs in value for money and controlling public spending. We have just lived through an extraordinary two years when public budgets were increased hugely to combat the virus, find a vaccine, set up a nationwide free test and trace system, boost benefits, pay furlough incomes, subsidise businesses facing impaired trading and offer finance to business in difficulties from banned or restricted trading.

The first part of controlling spending is reversing all of these special measures as the economy has now returned to its pre pandemic levels. This is largely done though the NHS budget needs to be fully adjusted to ensure enough of the expanded budget that remains goes to non covid work and to waiting list reduction. As answers to my various questions have shown the NHS needs to do more to have a good manpower plan going forward, to recruit the extra medical staff it needs to handle demand. It may need more beds just as I and others strove to get to handle the first covid wave through the Nightingales. It needs to reduce overhead and concentrate resources on the medical services at its core. Much of the task of raising productivity in the public sector, raising service quality and improving value for money needs to come from this crucial service which absorbs 40 % of the state budget.

The government should urgently review overseas aid to eliminate payments to countries supporting Russia and countries with space, nuclear weapons or other large armaments programmes.

The costs of providing initial housing and other public provision for refugees should be charged to the overseas aid budget. The number of economic migrants should be controlled to allow a reduction in spending on additional social housing.

The government must work with the railway to make substantial reductions to the current very high level of subsidy. The Secretary of State is right to try to promote more use of the railway. The U.K. will need to be realistic about ticket prices after his initial bargain promotions. It may be that more freight use of the railway is the quickest win for revenue and beneficial environmental impact, reducing road congestion.

The Cabinet Office Minister Jacob Rees Mogg is right to seek a slimmed civil service. Ending much new external recruitment, promoting from within and eliminating posts would save substantial sums and boost productivity.