

My contribution to the debate on Public Health, 1 December 2020

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Many of my constituents are very angry that west Berkshire and Wokingham have been placed in tier 2 when we were in tier 1 before the national lockdown and we still have very low figures. On all the evidence that the Government say they look at—case numbers, trends in cases and available hospital capacity—there seems a very clear case that we should not be worse off as we come out of national lockdown than we were when we went in, and my constituents will expect me to reflect their anger in the way that I vote tonight.

I would far rather work with the Government, and I think that on the whole they are doing a very good job in a very difficult circumstance, but they could make life easier for themselves if they identified more policies that both bear down on the virus problem and allow the much-needed economic recovery so that we rescue and encourage more livelihoods.

The first policy is this: why can we not have expanded isolation capacity in the NHS to deal with covid-19, with volunteers properly backed up with all the equipment and safety protocols they need so that we free up many more of the district generals to do the general work that they need to do and free up their staff from the possibility of cross-infection and cross-contamination? One of the problems in the NHS at the moment is that there are too many staff who have had to self-isolate. Can we not do better on infection control, isolation, and specialisation? Money is no longer a problem, I am pleased to see. I am very happy for more money to go into the health service, but it must buy the staff and make sure that the staff are properly looked after, so that we have that extra capacity.

The second issue is the capacity of our hospitality industry. I encouraged the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department of Health and Social Care to do work some time ago on safer methods of extracting air quickly from hospitality venues, so that more people can use a hospitality venue safely. I believe that some of that work has shown some fruit, and that experts agree that we can create much safer environments if we reverse overflows and extract air quickly. We are now told by the experts that the main transmission threat is aerial transmission by being in an enclosed space with people with the disease. Can we not have more public prominence for that work? Perhaps we could have some grant systems for small businesses and proper technical assistance from the Government and from those the Government retain so that more venues can trade sensibly and profitably without being threatening in any way.

Can we please also have a proper package for all the self-employed and the small business people? Why do some groups of the self-employed get omitted from the packages every time? These are the people who go the extra distance, provide the flexible service, work all the hours God made, and do not often get much reward for it. These are also the people who have suffered the most

from these compulsory closures. If a person works for a large company, they are, in many cases, paid their salary, even if that company cannot operate properly, but if they work for their own business, there is no income coming in. They cannot put food on the table unless they get public support or can trade profitably. I urge the Government to look again at their totally inadequate packages for the self-employed and small businesses and understand just how much we are going to need them when we get into recovery mode proper.

My final point in the brief time allotted is that we desperately need to give people hope about livelihoods and economic growth again. We desperately need to have a full recovery programme sector by sector, including for small businesses and the self-employed, and understand that some people will need to retrain and some will need to go from the employment they have lost into self-employment. Can we not hear a lot more about this and be positive? We need to cheer up the country up as well as control the virus.