

My interventions in the International Health Regulations 2005 e-petition (1)

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the lack of accountability? We are having an extensive and public examination of the Government's response to covid, but there is no comparable examination of the important decisions and advice that the WHO offered to the whole world, and it probably had more influence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):

My right hon. Friend is, as ever, absolutely right. We should all be concerned about that and concerned that we do not end up falling into the same problems as we have had in the past, being in a position where there is nothing we can do about it and sleepwalking into a disaster.

We are talking about a top-down approach to global public health hardwired into international law. At the top of that top-down approach we have our single source of truth on all things pandemic: the World Health Organisation's director general, who it appears will have the sole authority to decide when and where these regulations will be deployed. Let us not forget that the director general is appointed by an opaque, non-democratic process—and I think that is being rather generous.

Rather worryingly, in their response to this petition the Government have said they are

“supporting the process of agreeing targeted amendments of the IHR as a means of strengthening preparedness for and response to future health emergencies; including through increasing compliance and implementation of the IHR”.

They have also previously said that they support

“a new legally-binding instrument”

—that certainly sounds like a threat to parliamentary sovereignty to me. Will the Minister commit today to laying those plans before Parliament so they can be properly debated, and if I had my way, robustly rejected?

It is also vital to take a step back and understand what is driving this pandemic preparedness agenda. At a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on pandemic response and recovery, Dr David Bell gave a briefing on how the World Health Organisation, with the backing of the World Bank, says these amendments are the only way to prepare for future pandemics that it says are getting more frequent, and where there is more risk from zoonotic—animal to human—spread. The reality is that the WHO's figures do not tell the whole story. When we take into account population growth, significant natural pandemics are rare events. We also have to take into

account that there has been a huge expansion of tests and genome sequencing over the last few decades. The invention of polymerase chain reaction testing, for example, has had a massive impact on the detection rate of those outbreaks that the World Health Organisation is now using to justify its agenda.

Since the Spanish flu over 100 years ago, we have only had two pandemics above the average yearly seasonal influenza mortality rates, thanks to antibiotics and advances in modern medical care. We hear a lot about disease outbreaks that actually have low mortality burdens when compared to other public health threats: for example, in 2003, SARS-CoV-1—severe acute respiratory syndrome—had the equivalent disease burden of about five hours of tuberculosis. Funnily enough, in its 2019 pandemic influenza recommendations, the World Health Organisation itself could find no evidence that serious zoonotic pandemics were increasing. What is undoubtedly increasing are the eye-watering costs of managing pandemics, with vast sums of taxpayer money being wasted on poorly conceived initiatives, such as locking down the economy for two years.

It seems to me that the World Health Organisation has no need to rush any of this—we have time to reassess and get it right—and it seems I am not the only one to think that. In recent weeks, we have seen signs that some countries, including Estonia, Slovakia and New Zealand, are looking to question the proposals. It is not clear if any member states have submitted formal notices to reject them and opt out, but New Zealand does appear to have lodged a reservation to allow the incoming Government more time to consider whether the amendments are consistent with a national interest test required by New Zealand law. That is entirely sensible, and I would like to see our own Government take a pause to apply some critical thinking to this situation before blindly supporting the World Health Organisation's installation as our new global public health power.

It is absolutely essential that the Government make a clear and unambiguous promise that they will neither support nor abide by anything that in any way undermines our national sovereignty. We have not spent so many years battling to get out of the frying pan of the EU to jump straight back into the fire with the equally unaccountable, undemocratic and hopeless World Health Organisation.