

My speech during the debate on Public Health, 5 May 2020

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): These measures are doing great damage to the livelihoods and incomes of many of my constituents and people around the country, and they are also damaging to our freedoms and liberties, so I urge the Government to find safe ways to get more people back to work as quickly as possible. It is great news that the NHS has much enhanced capacity. It has tackled the covid-19 waves so well so far and has plenty of capacity, so we must now think about how we get many more people back to work so that they can restore their livelihoods.

It is all too easy for us Members of Parliament, with a guaranteed high salary paid into our bank accounts every month, whether the economy does well or badly, to be a little too dismissive of the struggles faced by people who may be furloughed but are not getting their tips, bonuses or commissions. Some may already have lost their job, while many are living in fear that the company they work for will run out of cash and not be able to trade.

My first piece of advice to the Government is to not make a person's return to work conditional on them having had the virus. The right to work cannot become a macabre lottery whereby people have to prove that they have had a certain illness before they have the right to return to their job. If safe working can be arranged for that person, they should have every right to do it, even if they belong to the majority who the Government assume have not had the virus.

I also want to look at the Government's method of making the decisions on the basis of statistical and scientific advice. We all see the graphs that are presented every day by the scientific advisers, and some of the numbers used to address whether or not we can return to work worry me considerably.

The crucial figure, we are told by the Prime Minister and others, is the transmission rate, which they call R . We have all learned that if that figure is well below 1, we can relax much more because it means that the virus is waning and is not being passed on to enough people by each person who gets it, which means that it will wane further and we can think about returning to normal. We are also told that if it is over 1, we still have a problem because it is growing in scope.

The problem is that in recent discussions we have been given a range of values—from 0.5 to 1—of what R might be. If we look at how they calculate it, we see that it is an estimate, not a precise number. I find it surprising that over the past six weeks we have not been reproducing, through testing, a representative sample of the population. Surely the way to get a more accurate transmission rate is to see over time how the total number of cases, as represented by a sample of the population, is trending.

I am pleased to read in a newspaper that we are now doing a series of random

tests over time. Will they please speed those up? That is not as good as having six weeks of back data, which is a pity. I trust that Ministers will cross-examine scientists carefully to see what proxies they have for a proper set of random tests over time, because if the figures are to be an important part of the decision, we need to make sure they are as accurate as possible.

We then have the so-called comparable death rates in different countries. The death rate is important, because clearly the national death rate is part of the decision-making process. Again, it is very disturbing that the basis on which deaths are registered as being with or related to covid-19 has changed over the series, and of course the series has been greatly changed by moving from just hospital deaths to a wider range of deaths, including those in care homes.

Will Ministers please ensure that when they make decisions based on death rates, they clean up the figures and understand that over the six or seven-week period of the intense duration of this virus, we need comparable and accurate figures? That is what they should concentrate on and try to construct.

We then have the figures for hospital admissions, which seem to be the closest that we have to reliable figures. They look as if they are showing an extremely good story indeed, so I trust that Ministers will focus considerably on them.

They argue that now is the time to let more people get back to work in as safe a way as possible. Industry and commerce are very willing to amend the way in which they operate so that they can get some revenue and start serving their customers again. If we do not do this, the whole thing will be completely unaffordable and the pressures will mount economically, which will not be good news for our health policy either