

Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons on coronavirus: 4 November 2020

Mr Speaker, I beg to move that these Regulations are approved and that we come together today to implement time-limited restrictions across England from midnight, so we can contain the Autumn surge of the virus, protect our NHS and save many lives.

Of course, this not something that any of us wanted to do.

None of us came into politics to tell people once again to shutter their shops,

To furlough their staff, or stay away from their friends and family.

And I feel the pain and anxiety that we all share in the month ahead.

But as Prime Minister, when I am confronted with data that projects our NHS could even collapse, with deaths in this second wave potentially exceeding those of the first; and when I look at what is happening now amongst some of our continental friends and see doctors who have tested positive being ordered alas to work on covid wards, and patients airlifted to hospitals in some other countries simply to make space,

I can reach only one conclusion: I am not prepared to take the risk with the lives of the British people.

And I know, Mr Speaker, it might be tempting to think that because some progress has been made we just need to stay the course and see through our locally led approach.

And it is true that the extraordinary efforts of millions across the country especially those in high and very high alert level areas – they have made a difference, Mr Speaker suppressing the R, the reproduction rate of the virus below where it would have otherwise have been

And I want to record again my thanks again to the millions who have put up with local restrictions,

and I want to thank the local leaders who have understood the gravity of the position.

But I am sorry to say that the number of Covid patients in some hospitals is already higher than at the peak of the first wave.

Even in the South West, which has so far had lower case rates than most of the rest of the country, hospital admissions are over half way to their first

wave peak.

SAGE's latest analysis, published on Friday, suggests that the R remains above 1 in every part of England, which means the virus is continuing to grow among the population.

And every day that the number is above one, is another day that the number of cases will rise

locking in, more hospital admissions and alas more fatalities.

and pushing the NHS ever closer to the moment when it cannot cope.

The course we have before us is to prevent the R from going back remaining above one and to get it down.

Otherwise we face a bleak and an uncertain future of steadily rising infections and admissions until as I say the capacity of the NHS is breached.

And I know there has been some debate about the projections from some of these models, for example, exactly how big the loss of life might be, or the precise point at which the NHS might be overwhelmed, but all the scientific experts that I have talked to are unanimous on one point

As the Chief Medical Officer has said –

“if we did not act now, then the chance of the NHS being in extraordinary trouble in December would be very, very high.”

And be in no doubt Mr Speaker what that means for our country and for our society. It means that the precious principle – of care for everyone who needs it, whoever they are and whenever they need it – that principal could be shattered for the first time in our experience

It means those who are sick and suffering and in need of help – could be turned away because there was no room in our hospitals Mr Speaker even in East Sussex Mr Speaker.

Doctors and nurses could be forced to make impossible choices about which patients would live and would die, who would get oxygen and who couldn't.

And I know that there are some Members like my honourable friend who are hearing from their local hospitals that the pressure is not that great yet.

But the whole point about a National Health Service, is that when hospitals in one part of the country are over-run, sick patients are transferred to another, until the whole system falls over.

And let me be clear this existential threat to our NHS comes not from focusing too much on Coronavirus, as is sometimes asserted but from not focusing enough.

Because if we fail to get Coronavirus under control, it is the sheer weight of demand from Covid patients that would not only lead to the covid

casualties that I've described but which would deprive other patients of the care they need.

We simply cannot reach the point where our National Health Service is no longer there for everyone.

And Mr Speaker this fate is not inevitable.

We are moving to these national measures here when the rate both of deaths and infections is lower than they were for instance in France, when President Macron took similar steps.

If we act now and act decisively we can stem the rising waters before our defences are breached.

And this approach, these regulations I do believe are the way we can do that.

Mr Speaker, I know there are many in the House who are concerned about how long these measures might last, and that if people vote for these regulations today, they could suddenly find that we are trapped with these national measures for months on end.

So let me level with the House.

Of course, I cannot say exactly where the epidemiology will be by 2nd December,

But what I can say is that the national measures – that I hope the House will vote on tonight – are time-limited.

It is not that we choose to stop them.

They legally expire.

So whatever we decide to do from 2nd December will require a fresh mandate and a fresh vote from this House.

And as I have made clear, it is my express intent that we should return to a tiered system on a local and a regional basis according to the latest data and trends.

Mr Speaker, the whole House will share my sorrow and regret at the necessity of these measures, particularly for businesses who had just got back on their feet Mr Speaker, who had done their level best to make themselves Covid-secure, installing handwashing stations, plexiglass screens, one-way systems

And as the Chancellor has set out, we will do whatever it takes to support them.

We have protected almost 10 million jobs with furlough, and we are now extending this scheme throughout November.

We have already paid out £13 billion to help support the self-employed, and we are now doubling our support from 40 to 80 per cent of trading profits for

the self-employed for this month.

We're providing cash grants of up to £3,000 per month for businesses who are closed – worth over £1 billion a month and benefiting over 600,000 business premises.

We are giving funding of £1.1 billion to Local Authorities in England, to further support businesses and their local economy in the winter months.

And this comes on top of the more than £200 billion we've provided since March.

And we will also ensure that throughout this period that our schools stay open.

We will not allow this virus to do any further damage to the future of our children.

I said in the Summer we had a moral duty to reopen our schools as soon as it was safe to do so and that they would be the last element of society to close down again.

And we have stuck to that pledge Mr Speaker

Our schools will remain open, as will colleges, universities, childcare and early years settings.

Mr Speaker, the measures before the House are designed to arrest the virus, to drive it down and to get on top of it once and for all.

If we are able to test on a big enough scale to identify the people who are infected – often without symptoms and who unwittingly, asymptotically pass the virus to others then those people will be helped immediately – this is the key thing – to self-isolate and break the chains of transmission, and reducing the spread of the virus –reducing the number of people in hospital, reducing the number of people dying.

I think that if we all play our part in this system it could be a hugely valuable weapon in our fight against Covid in the short medium and long term, and an alternative to the blanket restrictions that have been imposed in so many parts of the world.

We are piloting this week a mass test in Liverpool, where an immense effort benefiting from the logistical skill of the armed services will offer everyone a test.

And our aim is to make mass and repeated testing available for everyone across the country.

Thanks to the pioneering work of British scientists, we already have a life-saving treatment for Covid and the genuine possibility of a safe and effective vaccine next year.

Taken together, these achievements provide every reason for confidence that our country can and will pull through this crisis and that our ingenuity will prove equal to the challenge.

Mr Speaker, this year I and the whole government has asked much of the British people.

More than any Prime Minister I believe has asked of the British people in peacetime.

And I have to say that the public have responded magnificently and selflessly.

Putting their lives on hold, bearing any burden, overcoming every obstacle and tolerating every disruption and inconvenience no matter how large or small or inconsistent Mr Speaker so that they can do the right thing by their fellow citizens.

I wish that it had been enough to defeat this Autumn surge.

But while I am more optimistic now, more optimistic about the medium and long-term future than I have been for many months, there can be no doubt that the situation before us today is grave, and the need for action acute.

It is absolutely right for this House – for members on all sides of this House- to have the doubts that have been expressed, to seek answers from me and to provide scrutiny.

That is the purpose and duty of the House of Commons.

But, while it pains me to call for such restrictions on lives, liberty and business, I have no doubt that these restrictions represent the best and safest path for our country, our people and our economy.

So now is the time for us to put our differences aside and focus on the next four weeks, getting this virus back to its box.

And I know that, once again, our amazing country will respond to adversity by doing what is right – staying at home, protecting the NHS, and saving lives.

And in that spirit, I commend these regulations to the House.