

Putting things right

The significance of officials inviting each other to a bottle party when their rules and words told the rest of us to stay at home alone or with our immediate family is twofold. It implies they did not think the virus was as serious as they told us it would be, as they were willing to take risks themselves. It reinforced the view of a technocracy that lectured the rest of us but lived by different standards. Apparently officials decided what was right and asked the PM to drop by his own garden to thank the staff. He was clearly not in charge of working arrangements. Some argue he should have been. It leads to more questions about the way advisers used statistics and one strand of scientific opinion to take over government and dictate controls and interventions on a war time scale.

Ministers and the Prime Minister not only allowed them to do this, but made it all visible by thrusting forward one group of advisers to front news conferences and to explain policy. You cannot allow government policy to be dictated by the "science". Ministers should of course place public safety as a central aim of policy and should take best medical and epidemiological advice. They must however balance that with assessments of what lockdown will do to mental health, other causes of death, to jobs, incomes and livelihoods. They should also test out the official advice by hearing from other scientists. There were other views to consider on treatments, air flows, infection control and expanding capacity that were not welcome as part of the official narrative. There were other ways than locking us up at home of limiting spread, abating the impact and fighting the virus that we needed to do more about. My questions and comments to get these actions were often accepted by Ministers but not progressed with energy or pace.

Sorting out the question of what senior officials and maybe some Ministers and the PM did in lockdown is less important than ensuring they govern well today, though the one does reflect on the central problem of when will the government as a whole bend to the will of the people that pay for it? People would be less angry about the office arrangements if they were getting what they voted for. The government needs to reset, to show Ministers are in charge, and to demonstrate they can work productively with civil servants to deliver promises.

Many people would be happier to see a curb on the UK's carbon dioxide output begun by reducing immigration numbers. The more people in the country the more CO2 they will generate themselves and in meeting their needs. The same policy would allow us to keep more green areas free from new houses, a popular green policy with many. We would be happy if the government kept its promise not to raise taxes and if it wound down wasteful expenditures like the excessive CV 19 testing programme and the large costs of hotel accommodation for people claiming asylum who are not refugees.

We want the Brexit wins. Why hasn't the government even taken VAT off green products yet? Given the passion they show for net zero it looks as if the officials are blocking tax changes which would start to differentiate us

from the EU. Why are the Freeports not up and running, and why does the draft not offer much freedom in the freeports proposed?

Of course Ministers are ultimately to blame. They are meant to be in charge. Too many of them seem unable to apply common sense to official advice and to reach sensible judgements that powerful advisers do not always like.