

Scrap the targets

I am a great believer in democratic parties and leaders telling us clearly what their aims are, and explaining the principles or beliefs that will help guide them. I am a critic of the modern craze to govern by targets.

Let's consider the target to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence. The aim should be to ensure our country is well defended and can make a good contribution to the NATO alliance. We need first to ask what forces we need, not how much we must spend. If GDP falls or grows slowly the target means we have less defence, whatever the need.

A similar set of objections relates to the target of spending 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid. When this was in place the U.K. ended up backing projects of questionable worth and giving large sums to the UN and EU to spend in ways we could not control.

Worst of all is the deeply damaging national CO₂ target. This is encouraging all 3 main parties in Parliament to back closing down energy and industry in the U.K. to hit our domestic CO₂ target, only to import fossil fuel and industrial products so more CO₂ is generated elsewhere than we save.

The government's target of growing faster than any other G 7 country is a good aim. It however depends on what 7 other economies do which we do not control as well as on what we do. Were they all to go into recession or slowdown beating them does not give us much growth.

Setting a target to get NHS waiting lists down a more sensible target as it is under government control and not relative to external events. Even this has proved to be beyond the U.K. public sector to deliver despite record NHS funding. They cannot even collect and publish reliable and relevant figures on how many are waiting for what. If you want to manage something that is under your control it helps if you can measure it accurately and watch progress.