

Should the schools open?

Some are writing to me to support the Prime Minister and the Chief Inspector of schools in wanting the schools to open today. Others are contacting me urging closure in line with the ideas of the main teaching Union and the Opposition parties. I invite more views.

The government case is based on several propositions. Children get very mild versions of the disease and the younger ones often show no symptoms so they are not much at risk. There will be testing systems to ensure early isolation of anyone with the disease. Teachers will be protected by social distancing with bubbles , limits on numbers in confined spaces to reduce the risk of any infection spreading and regular cleaning.

If children are barred from school they will lack social contacts with their friends and will miss the benefit of a class teacher. There will be more cases of depression and other mental illnesses. Exams ,ay be disrupted leading to another year with a likely different basis for assessing a student's level of achievement for qualifications.

Closing schools will force many more parents into home working or not working leading to income loss and further strains on other important activities that need the workforce to turn up to work in person.

The Union case argues that with the advent of a strain of the virus which is more infectious there is a danger that school children will spread the virus to others at home. Teachers need more protection than the testing and social distancing regimes adopted so far. They think seeking to limit any additional spread of the virus should take precedence over any other consideration of people's mental health, educational progress or ability to go to work.

The government counters by saying it advises families with elderly and at risk members who do not live with them to avoid any contact with the children until those at risk have been vaccinated.

Taming the virus

Next week I will return to issues over how we handle the virus that I have often raised before. I welcome the arrival of two vaccines which will be widely taken up by those who want protection. The UK has been first of the advanced countries to licence these products and to start vaccinating people. The scientific advisers have always seen this as the way out of lockdown, so the sooner a lot of people are vaccinated the sooner presumably they will be satisfied,

Meanwhile there are other things that could help us live with the virus, as we have to do with a number of potential killer diseases without locking down society.

- 1, Air extraction. Where have the government got to in improving air extraction at their own buildings including hospitals to ensure rapid removal of potentially contaminated air?
2. Where are the grant and advice schemes to allow private sector businesses from shops to restaurants to improve their air extraction and make their venues safer?
3. Air and surfaces purification. Where have they reached in using powerful UV cleaners (in safe spaces) to clean up recycled air and to decontaminate surfaces?
4. Other treatments. After the initial break through with a steroid we were promised test results for a range of other possible treatments. Where have they got to with those?
5. Isolation hospitals. Why are they not using the Nightingales as specialist isolation CV 19 units to cut numbers going to District General hospitals and to allow more hospitals to be CV 19 free? Cross infection is still an issue.
6. Staffing. Why do they not do 5 above to cut numbers of staff away from work because they have CV 19 or may have been in contact with it?
7. When will they cut through the barriers to the return of retired staff who are qualified to help them?

[The EU finds it difficult to adjust](#)

The EU website today has no record of the EU/UK Trade Agreement under trade deals. Nor does its site give any indication of how to trade with the UK, left out from a long list of nations they refer to in the Trade section. Do they not want to keep on selling us so much, or are they just unable to update their site for the new realities? Surely they should put up the EU/UK Agreement subject to ratification, as I understand that is what they intend to do. Alternatively if they do not think they will be ratifying it they should put up the WTO terms to alert people to that.

The EU site has however been updated in one important respect. Where it seeks to show the scale and size of the EU in the world they now quote figures for the EU 27 without the UK. It shows the EU currently at a little under 15% of world GDP, with a forecast suggesting this will fall to 9% of the world by 2050. The EU cites estimates that the USA will lose less share than the EU over the next 30 years, whilst India will surge and China will do well.

I did not see any discussion of how the EU might limit its losses in share of world output, or narrow the gap with the USA. The challenge for the UK out of the EU will be shift our performance upwards to US or better levels, by varying our policy mix from the one the EU predicts will leave it declining as an economic force in the world.

Using the new freedoms

I am glad to see the government is starting to use the new freedoms we gain.

Now we can control our taxes the Tampon tax as promised goes. Other bad VAT impositions need to follow.

As we start to regain full control of our fishing grounds, pulse fishing is to be banned in UK waters. This will help improve our marine environment protection and help to rebuild fish stocks. More is needed as I have been setting out. Bring on the full range of policies to build a much bigger fish based industry.

I look forward to many more announcements to come to boost our recovery and give us a better deal. We should repeal the Ports Regulation and re instate the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 which was overturned by the ECJ

New Year's day

Happy New Year.

2021 should be a year of economic recovery and renewal, the year when we put the pandemic behind us and embrace the new opportunities for global Britain.

Welcome to our first day as an independent country after 48 years in the EEC/EU. I want the government to use our new freedoms to promote our our voice for the good abroad and our prosperity at home.

Rejoining the World Trade Organisation as a full member, the UK will now be a strong and influential proponent of free trade. I look forward to us enhancing the trade deals we already have, and entering new ones. The Trans Pacific Partnership, for example, is a large fast growing bloc which offers us many opportunities to increase our trade.

Chairing the world conference on green matters, I want the UK to be a voice for a practical and popular roll out of products and services that can place

clean air and water at the heart of what we do. Policy needs to go with the grain of human nature and ambition.

As a leading member of NATO I want the UK to be a force for peace in the world, building on recent advances with peace treaties in the Middle East, and acting as a strong deterrent to disruptive actions by rogue states and movements.

I look forward to the removal of VAT from items like heating controls and insulation now we can make our own tax decisions. I want to see Freeports and Enterprise Zones to attract more investment and more better paid jobs to places that need a boost. I welcome the new student exchange scheme to replace and improve on Erasmus. The Turing scheme will support more students wanting to study abroad, and will be a worldwide scheme, not just a European one, extending their choices and widening horizons.

I want to see more of our farming grant regime go to promote more UK grown and reared food, to cut the food miles and ensure high local standards. I welcome the decision to ban the live export of animals, and want the government to ban pulse fishing in our waters. We need to rebuild our fish stocks as we plan a larger UK industry, and restore our marine environment.

Today we have again an independent country. Every adult is a voter who can choose MPs to pass the laws and spend the state budget as we wish, and who can dismiss MPs at elections if they let us down. The restoration of accountable democracy is at the centre of the Brexit project. 2021 will be the year to educate the official government into responding more to the needs and wishes of the people, and less to the requirements of an EU law code.

A happy new year to you all. I look forward to working on all the challenges in conjunction with a government which now has more power to shape events for us.