

## Tiers and national lockdowns

When we held the debate and vote at the beginning of the month on the restrictions placed on business and social contacts, we were told to look forward to a review in mid December when areas might be taken down from Tiers 2 and 3 into Tiers 1 and 2. The government was allowing people to believe that the restrictions would bear early fruit resulting in gradual relaxation.

The rapid approval of the Pfizer vaccine in the UK gave a boost to confidence, with some eventual end in sight to lock downs as people at risk get the protection they need and want. The USA has now also approved this vaccine and I guess the EU will follow, showing that the world professional establishment does not think the UK Regulatory Agency was taking undue risks or coming to a hasty conclusion.

Then we saw a surge in cases of the virus detected by the much more comprehensive testing scheme available compared to last Spring. Official advice hardened in favour of tougher and more prolonged lockdowns. By the time we reached mid December word went out that instead of taking a number of regions or areas down a tier, there would be a substantial net increase in places under the toughest Tier 3 restrictions. Ministers seem to suggest now that restrictions will be with us until next spring, when the arrival of warmer weather and more natural ultra violet light might cause recession in the virus, and when many more people will have opted for the vaccine protection. Then last evening there was a further change with the invention of a new Tier 4 for a quarter of the country and cancellation of most of the Christmas relaxations for the rest of the country. Parliament needs to debate and vote on these measures.

It appears Parliament will have another chance to debate and vote on these controls only later in the new year. I will present a case again to find other methods of protecting the vulnerable and keeping more people safe, whilst allowing the resumption of more business activity. Livelihoods matter as well as lives. The scarring to business life in entertainment, travel, leisure, shop retail, commercial property and some personal services is very pronounced. We run the risk of more bankruptcies, more people deciding to pack up their small businesses, and more people deciding working for themselves is simply too difficult with all the regulations.

I will pursue again the issue of the trials of other drugs that might help treatment, the use of isolation hospitals and the extra Nightingale capacity to ease the situation in District General hospitals, the improvement of ventilation systems in indoor venues to clean the air continuously and other methods to allow more safe business activity to take place. There needs to more strenuous official efforts to find an alternative to these severe controls on economic and personal freedom.

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# Devolution and the virus

Devolution has provided the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland the opportunity to vary the response to the virus in their areas of the UK. Today I would be interested in your comments on how you think the different administrations have fared, and what if anything devolved power has brought to help us in this crisis.

If we start with the data we see that all four parts of the UK have suffered badly. Each had a bad attack in the spring, and each has seen a further flare up in the late autumn after a summer lull. The Scottish government's slightly tougher approach earlier in the year was designed to eliminate the virus, but it did not do so. Wales taking a modestly tougher approach has ended up with the worst figures for cases and deaths.

Latest figures 17.12.20 from inception of pandemic

Cases by area per 100,000 people

Wales 3633

Northern Ireland 3183

England 2957

Scotland 2000

Certified deaths involving CV 19 per 100,000

Wales 123 (0.123%)

England 115.6 (0.115%)

Scotland 107.4 (0.107%)

Northern Ireland 78.2 (0.078%)

We also see that despite plenty of different rhetoric and some criticism of the UK/English approach by both Scotland and Wales, the policies followed throughout the UK have been remarkably similar. There have been minor differences played up by spinners over the timing and length of some lock down moves, and over the numbers of contacts or hours of opening permitted. These do not seem to have made much difference. The Welsh short circuit breaker was followed by a further surge and more extensive lockdowns. Rural areas seem to fare better than more densely populated urban areas.

There has been no devolved challenge to the general academic and policy framework provided by UK experts, and no attempt to define a very distinctive course to see if a different approach works better. The experts of the devolved administrations seem to have very similar views to the UK national experts.

The First Minister of Scotland has used the crisis to give herself a much greater media exposure on UK as well as Scottish programmes, choosing to front run some of the common working of the UK and devolved governments before the daily UK news conferences which have characterised a lot of this period. She has wanted to argue there is a distinctively Scottish approach which is better, but has found this more difficult to sustain as the Scottish numbers remain high and her country stays in lock downs. Each administration has had its share of embarrassments, with experts and advisers breaking their own rules and now Wales discovering a lot of lost data.

I think the overall results have been disappointing. I would have liked to have seen more collaboration from the devolved governments. Alternatively it would have been good to see more intelligent challenge and experiment with a different way of responding so we could learn from the differing approaches, By nature this is an experimental period faced with a new disease where no-one started with the answers. The main breakthrough that can save all the administrations is the vaccine invention by US companies so far, coupled with the foresight of the UK government to licence it quickly and order it in big quantities. No administration has made Test and Trace work well. None has tried isolation hospitals nor used much extra capacity created by the Nightingales. Let us hope UK science soon lands its own vaccines and treatments. UK scientists and medics are to be congratulated on discovering that steroids can cut the death rate from the disease and on their progress with other treatments.

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## [West Berkshire and Wokingham moved to Tier 3](#)

Berkshire MPs met earlier this week to discuss the possible move of Berkshire into the highest Tier of CV 19 controls. Several of us agreed on a joint approach to the Secretary of State urging him to look at the data in smaller areas than the whole County and to keep in Tier 2 those parts and places where the numbers of cases could justify that. We were also swayed by figures saying the NHS was coping well with spare capacity still available.

These representations did not succeed, so the government has decided to place the whole of Berkshire in Tier3, where Slough has been since the system was first introduced. I will continue to urge the government to improve the scope and generosity of its assistance to small business, as many of them will suffer again from the tougher lock down.

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## Small Business Saturday

On Saturday 5th December I visited local businesses to see how they were bearing up under the controls and to thank them for the service they have supplied to our local community over the last difficult year. As always small business have shown resolve and flexibility, to tackle the changing rules and provide ways of operating that reduce the risk of people catching the virus.

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## Devolution, the EU and the future of the UK

At the end of the last century I wrote a book entitled *The Death of Britain?* I argued that Tony Blair's constitutional revolution would damage our democracy and undermine the UK.

I said "Labour's constitutional blueprint is nothing more than a plan for the destruction of UK democracy. It threatens splits within the Kingdom. It threatens transferring far too much out of democratic control. (to independent quangos as well as to the EU) It gives far too much ground to the federal plans on the continent. "

I always thought if we lost the pound, our independent currency, then there would be no point in pretending there was an easy rescue. If we could save the pound, which I set about campaigning to achieve, we could rescue the rest in due course.

The endless delays over Brexit have shown how Labour's devolution settlement can be used to disunite our response to the policy and seek to overturn it. The impact of devolution on our exit teems with ironies and contradictions. The Republic of Ireland and the EU are seeking to force a compromise that keeps Northern Ireland partially in the EU's orbit of their single market, worrying Unionists in Ulster about creeping EU control. Meanwhile Scotland with the SNP in a majority at Edinburgh say they want the Northern Irish arrangements for themselves. The EU must privately worry about the strength of the SNP, as the EU sides with Spain in seeking to resist an independence movement in Catalonia when there is read across from the one to the other.

The Conservative party opposed devolution in Scotland and Wales, and was on the losing side in the referendums that created it. The party has always accepted the result, did not try to delay or derail devolution going through and has faithfully pursued it ever since. If we revisit the arguments that underlay the referendum it is unfortunate that the Conservatives were right about one fundamental issue. Labour always claimed if they granted Scotland a bit of devolution and it would end the nationalist movement. Instead it ended

Labour's dominance as a political force in Scotland. Conservatives argued it would give the nationalists a platform, and they would use the politics of grievance to seek to increase devolved powers, always circling the true objective of independence.

This week devolution has been yet again the subject of SNP interventions, seeking to claim that despite the transfer of more powers to the Scottish Parliament from the ones we repatriate from the EU, Scotland does not get enough power over single market matters in the UK as of course trade policy for example is a reserved matter for the Union.

Brexit has made even more obvious the unfairness of lopsided devolution to England. England voted decisively to leave but has had no voice at the table when the devolved administrations meet Union Ministers to decide how to proceed. We need to look again at the issue of voice for England. Meanwhile both major parties in the Commons have to get better at countering the politics of grievance from the SNP, who seek to turn every debate about our future into recriminations over what Scotland is allowed to do.

I am proud of the decision of the UK Parliament to grant Scotland a referendum to settle the issue of Scottish attachment to the UK for another generation. It contrasts well with the anti democratic approach of Spain and the EU to the demands for a referendum on Catalan independence. It would be good if MPs meant what they said when they say they will implement the results of a referendum on such important matters.