

My speech during the debate on Covid-19, 28 September 2020

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Government rightly want to get the virus down and limit deaths, but they also need to promote livelihoods and economic recovery, and it is proving difficult to get that balance right. I do not accept the criticisms that say, "Well, the Government change their mind." Of course the Government change their mind, because the virus waxes and wanes and the situation changes on the ground. They have to study the data and do the best they can.

What I would like to hear from Ministers is more in various directions where I think they could improve the position more quickly. The first is the issue of treatments. There has been some excellent work done in the United Kingdom, and it is great that a steroid has now been discovered that can make a decent improvement for various patients. That is great news and I welcome it, but what about the tests and trials we were promised when I raised this, many months ago now, of other antivirals, other steroids, antimalarials and clot-busting drugs? All those may have possible efficacy and they have their scientific and medical support around the world. We have great science here, so can we hear the results, please, Minister? Where have we got to? Are any of those going to work? The more and better treatments we can get and the more we can understand the different strands and features of this disease in different patients, the better it will be for keeping people safe.

We have learned that the Government now agree with me and others that they need to do a better job on isolation hospitals and on segregating patients who have this very contagious disease from all the other people who need to use our health service. I am pleased about that, but can we have some more details? Why cannot we simply use the Nightingale hospitals for covid-19—let us hope we do not need anything like that number of beds for this second wave—and keep all the other hospitals for non-covid? Or, if they are going to have shared facilities, certainly in urban areas where there is more than one hospital, can we have covid-19 hospitals and other hospitals that are open for other conditions? We do not want to see all the death rates for other things shooting up because people feel they cannot get access to their hospital or they are worried about going to their hospital because of covid-19.□

We then have the issue of the damage this is doing to the economy. I understand the strategy, but it seems that the damage is going to fall unduly heavily on hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism, the areas where we need more social contact and where that is thought to encourage the transmission of the disease. As someone who does not normally recommend subsidies, I do think that when people are banned from going to work, running their business or doing their job, they deserve some public support. They are doing that in the public interest, because their Government have told them that their activity is particularly damaging to the public good. If that is true, surely we the taxpayers have to pay for that.

I assume that the Government think we will come out of this sometime, and we want to go back to a world where there are theatres, cinemas, entertainments, good restaurants and all the other things that make life worth while and give pleasure to families. We do not want to live in a world where they are gradually all closed because there is no support and they are not allowed to function at all. We need more intelligence to work alongside those sectors, to see how they can get ways of working and living alongside this virus all the time it is out there and causing us trouble.

There have already been hon. Members today requesting exit strategies, and I quite understand why it is very difficult for the Government to give us one, because they are all sorts of unknowns that I do not know any more than they or their advisers do. We understand that their preferred exit strategy is the discovery of a vaccine and the roll-out of massive quantities of that vaccine for sometime early next year, so that we can then come out of lockdown.

That would be great, but we cannot bank on that. There are ifs and buts in that and it may not happen, so there needs to be a strategy for a situation where we do not have a magic vaccine. That is why we need more work on safeguarding people who are most at risk and more work on how we can get other people back to work, to save those livelihoods and those businesses and to wean them gradually off subsidy, which they are going to need all the time they are banned from doing their job and keeping things ready for us when times improve.

Above all, the nation needs some hope. It needs a vision of a better future. It needs to believe that, in a few months' time, something good will happen. It certainly does not need the threat of cancellation of Christmas or the threat that thousands of students will be locked away in rather small accommodation in their universities because there is a fear that they might spread the virus more widely.

[Coronavirus powers and the Brady amendment](#)

Tomorrow I will vote for the Brady amendment which requires the government to provide time for a debate and a vote on further extensions and changes to Coronavirus powers.

I expect the Speaker to allow this debate and vote, though the government does not think it should happen. I trust the government will meet Sir Graham Brady and agree to accept the terms of the proposal, to avoid the defeat which is otherwise likely on this matter.

I will also post today my speech yesterday in the CV 19 debate.

Commons bars observe the curfew

I received the following official communication today, contrary to some contributors here.

“Sale of alcohol on the parliamentary estate

Alcohol will not be sold after 10pm anywhere on the parliamentary estate. In line with the Government’s industry guidance, catering facilities will remain open later (but no selling of alcohol) when the House is sitting, to serve food for those still working and to support social distancing.

This decision was taken by the Speaker last Thursday. Today [28 September] is the first day since that the House is expected to sit beyond 10pm.”

No to negative interest rates

I welcomed the arrival of the new Governor this Spring. He immediately responded rapidly and decisively to the pandemic induced collapse of demand and activity with a strong programme designed to generate fast money growth as an offset to the large contractionary forces brought on by lock down. Like the Fed but on a smaller relative and absolute scale, the Bank created money and bought up government bonds, lowering the interest rates in the process.

Money growth accelerated rapidly, hitting 13% on the wider M4 measure. This was a welcome contrast with the previous Governor’s era when for the later years the Bank was busy slowing money growth well below a safe speed, which was duly reflected in and contributed to lower overall GDP growth. In the last couple of months it appears that the Bank has throttled back its money programme, which will become a problem as we face more regional and local lockdowns.

Maybe the Bank was unduly impressed by Chief Economist Mr Haldane’s confident and positive forecast of a sharp V shaped recovery. My readers will know I never thought that likely. It must now be clear to Mr Haldane that this is not going to happen. All the time large sectors like hospitality, leisure, shop retail, travel , property and others are impaired and damaged by the Covid measures, there can be no early return to total output and incomes at February levels. The fear must be that recent news of the virus will depress confidence again and lead to substantial job losses as exposed businesses recognise there is no early return to full capacity working for them.

I read that the Bank is reconsidering using negative interest rates. The

Governor wisely expressed scepticism about such a course in his earlier interviews. There is no evidence to suppose that the official rate of interest at 0.1% is too high or causing a problem. Taking it mildly negative will not provide a significant boost, nor will it allow businesses scarred by the pandemic measures to borrow more cheaply, as commercial banks will want a big margin to take care of loan losses from future bankruptcies and capital write offs. Countries that have gone negative have not shown any striking gains to output as a result. Despite its large issue programme the UK government can currently borrow very cheaply. That can continue and will be assisted by the Bank's bond buying programme.

The Bank has the tools it needs to support the economy in these worrying times. The main issue for the MPC to settle is the pace and scale of money creation and bond buying. Having started so well as the crisis struck, they need to look to that again now we have another knock to many businesses and sectors from the further measures being taken on health grounds.

Mind the gap

One of the dangers of a political world that expects absolute loyalty to fixed views of the world and roundly condemns dissenting or sceptical voices is it creates a bigger and bigger gap between what people say they believe and what they imply they believe by what they actually do.

Today we see this in the long term issue of green transformation, and in the shorter term issue of how we should respond to the virus. Polls show a high degree of agreement with the Green movement propositions that climate change is real and a serious threat to our lives and livelihoods. There is also agreement with governments pursuing policies to lower carbon dioxide output.

This makes it curious that most people are not rushing out to buy an electric car or to trade in their diesel for a bicycle. There are no queues to replace the gas or oil boiler in the home with an electric system based on renewable power or heat pumps. Those who do take up cycling – and many do – are usually doing so as a leisure or keep fit activity, not as a way of getting children to school, going to work or picking up food from the shops. Prior to the virus many MPs and others were happy both to tell pollsters something more needed to be done about climate change, whilst continuing to book their foreign holiday jet flights, renew their internal combustion engine vehicle, continue with a meat and dairy based diet and buy products that had been shipped half way round the world to get to them.

I remember the ultimate irony when I went to a pre CV 19 meeting in London to hear the case for more electric cars. I asked the leading advocate about his own car buying habits. Without any sense of shame he told me he had not got around to buying an electric vehicle and had no plans to.

All this suggests that people do not think the threat of climate change is so great that they need to make much if any change in their own behaviours.

The polls on CV 19 show that 71% of the UK public are concerned or very concerned about CV 19 for themselves, and 87% are similarly concerned about CV 19's impact on the country as a whole. There has been majority support for lock downs, quarantines and early closing of hospitality venues.

Yet the recently released Kings College London study of public responses to the measures from March to August shows that only 18% of those suspecting they have the virus did actually self isolate, and only 11% of those contacted by Test and Trace to alert them to recent exposure to the virus stayed at home as requested. The study concludes that many people just find the need to stay at home with no ability to go to work, go to the shops or see friends and relatives too difficult. It may not be affordable, it may prevent looking after the people they care for, or it may be too stressful. Clearly whilst acknowledging CV 19 is a threat they do not think their own chances of getting the serious form of the disease are high enough to require them to comply with the isolation guidance.