

No extension to Brexit talks

Today Parliament will hear a statement on the Brexit talks. Like last week all my requests to ask oral questions or participate in Statements have failed in the ballots for slots because time is so limited,

What I wish to say and have said many times to Ministers is we must not delay our exit. Nor should we concede our fish, money or law making powers. The UK has rightly offered a Free Trade based Agreement and should stick with that offer.

Mayor Khan – travelling safely?

In March the London Mayor told us travelling on buses and the tube did not pose a threat of catching the virus. More recently he has supervised a major cut back in services and expressed worries about the safety of staff and passengers.

The background to his astonishing U turn on public transport safety is the fast deteriorating financial position of London Transport on his watch, which pre dated the collapse of revenues on lock down but worsened when that happened. His early comments on the virus were probably motivated by the need to keep revenues up and to hit targets for more people using the tube and bus. His lower fares policy left LT short of revenue to pay all the running costs and finance the improvements and expansions this growing business needed.

He has now been forced into asking for a big bail out from central government and national taxpayers. Last week the Transport Secretary agreed a grant of £1.095 billion and a loan of £505m just to see the Mayor through to October. In return the Mayor had to accept the need for a government review of the finances and efficiency of LT, and to two government representatives on the Board.

Mr Shapps the Transport Secretary now needs to sharpen up central analysis and supervision of this expensive state business. The writer of the official government release said this:

“In order to reduce the risk of crowding and to encourage vulnerable groups to from using (sic) public transport at the busiest times when there is greater risk of transmission it may not be possible to socially distance, (sic) the deal will see the temporary suspension of the Freedom Pass and the 60+ card concessions to off peak hours. It will also see temporary suspension of free travel for under 18s and special arrangements will be made to ensure children eligible under national legislation can still travel to school for

free. The changes will take place soon as (sic) practicable”

There is immediate work to be done on how many services and what the rules are over the number of people allowed on each train and platform. It will also be complex to allow free travel to school but not for other junior journeys.

The new Board members need to examine the impact of Mayor Khan's fares policy on the finances of LT before the virus hit, and to help LT find the right fares policy to maximise permitted use and generate more revenue relative to costs. The whole structure of costs has just changed substantially with revenues much down for the next few weeks at least. They need to re-examine the whole business approach, with safety and costs in mind.

Educational divides

One of the tragedies of the lock down is the growing educational divides it is creating.

The minority of pupils whose parents pay fees for their schooling may well be at a school that is teaching a full timetable of lessons today. Parents who pay directly for their children's education expect it be delivered. Many public schoolteachers are delivering their normal lessons on line. They give their lesson or lecture on video, supervise the class who log in and are required to participate, take in electronic work for marking and set homework electronically. Some state schools too are providing an excellent on line education.

The teachers doing this find it exacting as everything they say is recorded and can be reviewed by a parent or colleague, but they accept it is what they and the school are paid to do. Some are flourishing, learning to use the special features of internet programmes to encourage more participation and to share more material more easily. Universities too are often teaching a full timetable of on line lectures, seminars and classes. I will be giving an on line lecture soon in Oxford in a digital lecture series on central banking. It was possible to say Yes because I do not have to find four hours for travel there and back.

Some state schools are not offering this on line full timetable teaching option, so the divide between schools is in danger of widening. I have asked the government to look at bridging the computer divide where low income families in receipt of benefits do not have a home computer that can receive internet lessons. It would be good to offer a laptop or other suitable device programmed to receive intranet lessons and free educational information over the web to those who need one. Many families do have a number of digital and internet devices at home which could allow children in

the family to pick up the lessons by borrowing that. The wider family might also help in equipping the pupils for digital lessons where necessary.

There is also a further divide within the state pupil community. The gap is not one between rich and poor. It is between homes with a parent or parents who believe in education and who encourage their children to listen, read, watch and download material which adds to their knowledge, and those who do not. Some high income families do not take time to encourage learning or to share books, articles and internet sites with children. They do not see it as their job to supervise learning. Some low income parents take much time and trouble to pass on knowledge. The gap is between the educationally rich and the educationally poor households. The privileged may of course include the children of teachers and of professional workers who have had to learn to earn and want their children to do the same.

It is time to review the role of technology in education. If we use on line lectures and classes more, we could give more students access to the best minds and the most accomplished work. It gives an opportunity to share materials between schools, from one expert to another and out to the wider student body. One of the benefits I found from an Oxford undergraduate education was an open lecture list. You could go to lectures in subjects you were not officially studying as part of your general education as they were often pitched at the right for such an interest. You could hear the best known or highest regarded academics in person.

Letter to the Health Secretary

Dear Matt

Thank you for your tireless work to bring down the death rate and slow the spread of this nasty disease. You have asked MPs to share ideas and concerns with you as you battle the virus. You have always rightly stressed that you will take advice from medics and scientists and be guided by their professional expertise. In your position you have access to the best advice the country can offer, to various strands of academic work on the nature and behaviour of the disease, to the experiences of doctors dealing with seriously ill patients and to pharmaceutical companies seeking drugs and a vaccine.

There are various opinions coming from medics and scientists as they seek to understand and treat this new disease. Your medical and scientific advisers have to draw together the strands and make judgements about what is best advice. I think it would help the public understanding and support for the policy if you could set out more information about current professional thinking in the following important areas.

1. Treatments for Covid 19. Several existing drugs have been proposed as

alleviating symptoms or shortening time to recovery. The UK is I believe undertaking trials of these drugs to see which if any works. Can we have a progress report?

2. Understanding the serious forms of the disease. Is it correct that whilst many die of a pneumonia like disease of the lungs, some die from excessive blood clotting and others from attacks on various organs of the body? If so, what different treatments are being used to combat the different versions of the disease?
3. Given the way the disease spreads in hospital and care home settings, why do we not move to identifying some hospitals as isolation hospitals specialising in Covid 19 and free others for non Covid patients?
4. You place great emphasis on R or the transmission rate, and are now supplying calculations of this rate by region. Does the UK yet have random sampled test results of the population as a whole, as this over time would presumably give the most accurate view of the transmission rate. When will we have a sufficient time series of such data to be more accurate over R which is often currently expressed as a wide range.
5. Face masks are regarded as an important part of protective clothing for nurses and doctors treating Covid 19 patients. We all agree they should have them and supplying them is the priority. Both voluntary and commercial effort could make other masks for people going into social and work settings to offer some protection against spreading a disease they may not know they have. Is guidance going to be modified, subject of course to the overriding priority of supplies of surgical grade masks for those nursing and treating Covid patients?
6. What do your advisers think about the use of Vitamin D to strengthen people's defences against the virus?

Yours

John

Dear Constituent

Unemployment has risen sharply, and many people on furlough are worried about whether and when their jobs will return. I have been pressing hard for more people to be allowed back to work in safe ways.

I am pleased to report some progress in recent days. Many of you wanted Garden Centres to re open and waste tips. Both have done so this week with social distancing rules in place.

The Government passed its new Agriculture Bill through the Commons this week. I wrote about my contribution yesterday. I am pressing hard for more of the government support to be grants to assist the expansion of market gardening. There is considerable scope for the UK to grow more of its own fruit, vegetables and flowers, and to expand the glass house space to do so. It will

also create many more jobs for local people to help.

Builders are resuming work and homes can be bought and sold again. Car factories are starting up and other industrial production is underway. There will still be a substantial hit to output and incomes, given the way social distancing limits how much can be produced in any given factory.

The government has set out a timetable for limited returns to school before the summer break. Some of you are very keen to see the schools re open, conscious that children need formal education and will miss out without school. Some are nervous about safety. The good news is CV 19 does not normally cause health problems for children. The bad news is grandparents may need to stay isolated from their grandchildren for longer, especially where they are vulnerable through other medical conditions.

The worst affected areas remain leisure, entertainment and hospitality. There will be delays before they are allowed to re open, and substantial restrictions on how many people they can serve once they are allowed to trade. Shops too are struggling, with more being done on line. There are no easy answers to these problems, where the businesses themselves are going to have to adapt to changed circumstances.

I have successfully urged a strong response from the Bank of England to make money available and from the Treasury to provide grants and loans to individuals and businesses who have lost their incomes. I am now urging the government to put in place more policies for economic recovery. These include tax cuts to assist the self employed, small businesses and individuals wanting to buy a house or car .

I passed on wishes to allow more sport and outside activity. It was easiest making the cases for fishing and golf which have now been relaxed. All of us can now go for walks or runs as often as we like.