

## Experts often get it wrong

The idea of democratic politics is to elect Ministers who can draw on the best possible expert advice, but then apply commonsense and judgement to it to fashion acceptable policy. Always Ministers have to balance advice on topic A against advice on topics B and C because government is rarely allowed one single simple objective. In the world of the pandemic Ministers need policies that control deaths from non covid as well as from covid, and allow the country to produce food and energy so we do not freeze or starve. They need to balance a range of needs and aims. They also often have to adjudicate between conflicting expert advice. They should not just take the official advice from government advisers if there is a danger it is wrong.

We see these tensions at play with the official advisers on covid understandably wishing to lock everything down as much as possible as their sole aim is to eliminate the disease and only by stopping all contacts between people could you guarantee to do so this. I also note these experts honestly tell us they do not yet know how far and fast Omicron will spread nor how serious an illness it might induce. That does not stop them putting out estimates of a surge in cases and possibly in serious cases too to try to bias the decisions of a government trying to find an appropriate balanced response.

I see the dangers of relying on expert opinion more obviously in the world of economic policy, where the OBR/Treasury and Bank of England have been spectacularly wrong about many things in recent years. It is easier for me to criticise as I did offer alternative forecasts and policy advice at the time. They disastrously forced through membership of the European Exchange rate Mechanism causing a savage boom/bust. They failed to control excess credit in the banking bubble of 2005-7 and then decided to bring the banking system to collapse by over correction in a hurry. After rightly offering substantial stimulus and low interest rates to offset some of the damage of the first general pandemic lockdown, they more recently have misread the inflationary pressures and then decided to sandbag the economy just when the next wave of the virus is slowing things down anyway.

The Chancellor needs to break free from the tyranny of the OBR debt and deficit austerity economics, and set about promoting growth and removing supply bottlenecks by helping boost capacities at home. I will tomorrow set out a package of measures he could announce that would start to tackle the looming cost of living crisis and the slowdown induced by too many tax rises to come.

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# Why not provide some more hospital beds for all purposes?

The Department of Health and Social Care has provided the following answer to your written parliamentary question (90313):

**Question:**

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what plans he has to increase the number of beds in NHS England hospitals. (90313)

Tabled on: 09 December 2021

**Answer:**

**Edward Argar:**

National Health Service bed capacity is not fixed and can be flexible to meet changes in demand.

The seasonal flu and COVID-19 booster vaccination programmes also aim to reduce the level of hospital admissions and increase bed capacity. We have also provided an additional £478 million to the NHS for the rest of this year to continue the enhanced hospital discharge programme, to maximise the number of available beds.

The answer was submitted on 15 Dec 2021 at 16:16.

Let me begin by repeating my gratitude to all those NHS staff who worked beyond the call of duty and took risks themselves to look after all too many covid patients. My criticisms of senior management below do not take anything away from their covid work done.

The issue I have been raising for a long time is why does the NHS run down the number of beds or fail to increase them? This government has made available very large extra amounts of money both to improve the mainstream NHS and to respond to the special challenge of covid 19. As we found during past periods of accelerated funding increases as well there has been a marked reluctance to ever use this to expand bed capacity. Staff numbers have expanded, but maybe not enough of the specialists needed for crucial clinical and nursing teams to staff additional beds. There has been plenty of expansion of the overhead, with more regulatory and policy quangos.

When the NHS was persuaded to spend substantial sums on setting up and equipping the Nightingales they obtained around 5000 extra beds with space to expand that further. I urged them to make these the covid hospitals, isolating patients who would otherwise go to the District Generals who could get on with their regular work. Of course the NHS had to re purpose medical staff so more worked on covid all the time it was raging and had to recruit as many extra as possible for temporary or more permanent work. Instead the NHS insisted on putting covid patients mainly into the District General hospitals. This created cross infection problems and reduced the capacity of

the NHS to carry on with non covid work. The NHS then shut the Nightingales as soon as possible for a total cost of around £500 m. As you can see from a recent Parliamentary answer I received we are not allowed to know where all those beds and equipment have gone to. Surely they should be put to good use?

The non answer to the two questions above shows a strong reluctance to even countenance expanding the number of beds. Why? When money is available it is a good time to do so.

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## [Funding Agreement for Whiteknights Primary School](#)

### **FUNDING AGREEMENT FOR WHITEKNIGHTS PRIMARY SCHOOL**

I am pleased to inform you that the Secretary of State for Education has agreed to enter into a Funding Agreement to allow Whiteknights Primary School, in Wokingham Borough Council, to become an academy.

The date of conversion will be 1 January 2022 and the Minister is writing to the local authority to instruct it to cease maintaining the school from that date.

As you know, academies form an integral part of the Government's education policy to raise attainment for all children and to bring about sustained improvements to all schools. I am delighted that the school recognises the benefits academy status will bring.

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## [Text of the True Brexit elf](#)

**Do you believe in Brexit?**

**Fourth upon a time the Brexit elf went in search of the true Brexit. He had been over the moon all those years ago when the British people had voted to leave the EU. He looked forward to an early and complete departure. He expected the creation of a land of freedom. He looked forward to wise government from a newly independent and powerful Parliament. He knew the British people thought votes mattered. It never occurred to him and his friends that many of the Remainers in powerful positions would try to stop the will of the people.**

He had been over the moon for a second time when in a wet and cold December in 2019 the people once again made clear they meant it. They told their wicked old Parliament that had fought them and tried to block Brexit that they really meant it. They voted again to get Brexit done. They said to the Remain Parliamentarians "You sit on a throne of lies". We are taking many of you off the throne, replacing you with those who will implement our vision.

After that election some things did change. The Leader of the Opposition who had fought pugnaciously against Brexit in the old Parliament, said he now accepted it. It still did not stop him taking the EU's side in any negotiation, and he still wants to tie us in to most of what we left.

After more wrangling and disagreeable negotiations with a rattled EU, the elf was over the moon again in January 2021. The UK had eventually left the EU. The people were free at last. The Parliament and government once again after fifty years of colonial status could decide on laws and taxes, budgets and tasks, responding to the people.

So why, one Christmas later, did the Brexit elf feel he had once again to travel the dark and largely empty covid cleared corridors of Whitehall in search of the true Brexit? The problem was that whilst we had left the EU, practically every EU law remained in place. Despite departing, the EU 20% VAT tax was still on almost everything the EU had placed it on. We had the freedom to set up Freeports, but they still had not come to pass. We should take control of our fishery, yet somehow it was still not in our grasp. We could replace the Common Agricultural Policy, yet much of it remained and some were unhappy with the sketched replacement which did not seem to help UK farmers.

Our Brexit elf as always was positive, cheery and determined to see it through. He was sure there was a true Brexit that would be good news, and was equally sure we still did not have it. So he decided to start at the Cabinet office where much of the Brexit negotiating was conducted.

He politely introduced himself to the Chancellor of the Duchy, a reassuringly old title that linked today to an age when our government was independent. He asked the Chancellor if he believed in Brexit. Of course, said the Chancellor. Like you I voted for it. I had to be brave to do that as the government I supported at the time did not want it. Reassured, the elf asked why it was the government had still not removed any of the old EU laws. After all, he pointed out, there were plenty of such laws we had opposed or criticised at the time they were placed upon us. When would they go or be improved?

Well said the Chancellor, it's not that easy. Of course we are committed to tidying up, repealing a bit here and amending a bit there. We are finding it very difficult to get agreement. Lots of officials tell us we

should not deviate too far. They point out business gets along with it all now it's embedded even if they didn't like it at the time. I think they are worried by the way whatever we do if we take the EU's view of the Northern Ireland Protocol all the EU laws will still apply there.

So, said the elf, when can I spread some Brexit cheer by singing aloud for all to hear that EU laws are a changing? Well, said the Chancellor, we are working on it. Watch out for any consultations we might announce, as we will want to take it gently.

A bit dispirited, the Elf decided to take himself to the Treasury. It's not normally the place you go to raise your sugar levels, but its boss is a well known Brexit voter who surely will want to implement the true Brexit. The Elf asked him why the UK economy was still being run under a version of the old Maastricht austerity rules. No, said the other Chancellor, that surely was not true. We now had a shiny new economic framework suited to the UK. In that case said the Elf, who knew a thing or two about economics, why are you still reporting UK figures against the Maastricht Treaty state debt and deficit requirements. Oh that must be a mistake came the reply. We will stop that. Even if you do said the Elf, you still have as rules the need to get the deficit down to below 3% just like the EU, and the need to get state debt falling as a percentage of GDP, just like the EU control. Oh, said the Chancellor, that is just a coincidence. This is now a UK policy. Well said the elf, I would like us to have a pro growth policy and a counter inflation policy, not a spending cuts and tax rises policy. The Chancellor was a busy man and ran out of time to pursue all this. The Elf had wanted to ask him why he hadn't even taken VAT off green products, but the meeting was over.

The Elf just liked to smile and get on with things. So he went to the Environment and Agriculture department, where there could be so many Brexit wins. He asked the Environment Secretary if he believed in the true Brexit. Yes of course, he beamed. He had been a leading Brexit supporter. So encouraged he asked when would we have full control of our fishing grounds. He was told that was still in transition, but the plan was to make them ours in due course. He asked why we had given so many licences to French boats to fish in our waters and was told that was to get on well with the neighbours. The Elf asked why the French were not then happy with us, but there was no reply. He asked why we had not banned the very damaging super trawlers, all foreign, of over 100m length which pillaged our stocks and damaged our marine environment. There was no clear response. He asked why the replacement for the Common Agriculture Policy mainly would give money to farmers to stop farming and turn their land over to wilderness. What is more vulnerable than a peach asked the Elf? Or an English apple? Wasn't that just like the EU grant scheme to get us to grub our orchards so we imported apples from the continent? How did that help the world environment, and why did we want to destroy our own industry? Again he did not understand the reasons which were

all about public goods and seemed very abstract.

Let down again the Elf took himself off to the Foreign Office. He was worried here, because the Foreign Secretary had voted for Remain. She immediately sought to reassure him that she had seen the light and like him wanted the true Brexit. However, it soon became clear that although she was Foreign Secretary she did not seem to handle the crucial talks with the EU or with France and could not help bring about his vision.

Back to reality he took himself to the Northern Ireland department. The Secretary of State told him he believed in the true Brexit, though he had not at the time of the referendum. The Elf wanted to know why Brexit did not extend to Northern Ireland and why the Protocol was causing so much angst. Well said the Secretary it is very complex. I tend to leave sorting it all out to Lord Frost who tells me he is working on it. The Elf painted a picture of a butterfly in the meeting as it wasn't going anywhere.

He decided to make one last call, on Business and Energy. Surely here there would be buzzing anticipation of a better future as they used the new freedoms to advance UK prosperity. After all there had been a great success for the UK developing its own vaccine for the virus when the EU's common system failed to build one. So he asked the Business Secretary when the UK was going to be self sufficient in energy once again. He was told that would not happen, as they intended to rely more and more on imports through pipes and cables to the continent as part of their domestic net zero policy. Far better the CO2 should be generated somewhere else.

By this time he was a very angry elf. Just as even he was losing his smile and his belief in the true Brexit the British people spoke to him. Cheer up, young elf, they said. You are right. Brexit teems with opportunities. We will tell Whitehall again that is what they have to do. We will make them find the true spirit of Brexit so you can smile and sing about it to your heart's content.

Only a bad Santa tells you Remain were right all along. We know they are wrong, and we will make sure all those departments come to help. If they don't, we will vote again to make our intentions clear. Does someone need a hug? Brexit is about cheer and optimism, to cast aside the dour grey commands of the old remain establishment. We will win our freedom.

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## Christmas story The true Brexit elf

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