

Time to unlock

I understand the caution of advisers specialising in controlling CV 19. For them there may indeed be a mutant virus around the corner that beats the vaccine, or a new variant that spreads faster. The task of government is to weigh that advice in the balance with the advice coming from people wanting to re open their businesses, get back to work, have a less restricted social and family life who think the current restrictions have gone on long enough.

Earlier in the pandemic debates I suggested a range of measures to help keep people as safe as possible whilst locking down less of the economy. Some were adopted. The basis of the whole package was the principle of helping all elderly and medically vulnerable people to stay away from others who might be a centre of infection whilst allowing others unlikely to get a serious version of the disease more freedom if they wished. It was important to make it as easy as possible for those isolating to get deliveries of the things they needed from phone or on line orders, and for them to keep in touch by phone or zoom or social media. The measures adopted anyway had to allow a large minority freedom to work to keep the rest of us supplied with food and water, power and broadband. It also had to allow all of us the choice to go to food shops and to take some exercise. As the official figures for cases and deaths built up around the world there was no simple relationship between length and severity of lockdown and death rates. Countries like Belgium and Hungary with lockdown policies suffered worse than others not taking so many measures.

The UK government did well in early identification of vaccines to back, offering cash and orders to companies that seemed likely to develop and test a successful vaccine. It also took up the idea of testing existing drugs for their efficacy in treating the disease to cut death rates for those infected. I also urged more work on air flows and air extraction to make public venues safer, and better infection control in health establishments.

Yesterday the government announced a continuation of measures for another four weeks. This will harm a range of businesses still locked down, and continue to impede other businesses operating well below normal capacity thanks to social distancing rules. I urge them to review this decision as soon as new data becomes available. It appears that the vaccines are very effective, and that practically everyone vulnerable to bad version of the disease has now had a vaccine. I favour letting people make more of their own decisions about how much risk they are willing to run in their lives. If someone still has a fear of this virus then of course the employer, the family and the community should be sympathetic and help them to do as much as possible without social contact. For others who are at very little risk of a bad version of the disease, let them make more of their own choices.

The green Opposition MPs are like Remain

Listening again to the tired and repetitious high level arguments of the Opposition MPs advocating faster progress to net zero whatever the cost, I am reminded of the years of their lectures on the dangers of Brexit . On both topics they are sure they are right. They despise anyone who questions their beliefs or suggests amendments to their position. They arrogantly dismiss opponents as too stupid to have a worthwhile view, or too badly informed to take seriously. They do not even want to hear an alternative way of meeting their high level aim which presumably is a better quality of life for the many, whilst tackling flood or drought risk proportionately.

They proceed by making a series of very gloomy forecasts for us all unless their policy is followed. They refuse to analyse why their forecasts have often been wrong in the past, and ignore or explain away repeated errors in their forecasts as new data emerges. Above all they ignore the views of many voters. When challenged on the gap between what they think and what a lot of voters think, they say the political elite has a duty to act and needs to teach the public to accept the actions.

They get plenty of help from traditional media. There is an accepted framework to the green debate. The science is settled. Global warming of more than 2 degrees is coming unless we adopt early net zero. That will flood low lying cities, cause water shortages and forest fires and melt the poles. CO₂ aided by methane rather than water vapour is the main culprit. Pricing carbon is part of the answer. People must be taxed, priced or regulated out of plane travel, off meat and dairy, out of diesel and petrol cars and away from fossil fuel heating.

One of the reasons a lot of voters say they broadly agree with this yet do nothing to change their own lifestyles is the perception of double standards. If the great powers actually thought this was a life and death matter wouldn't China and Germany be closing their coal power stations now? Wouldn't the EU cancel the Nord stream 2 Pipeline and fund a green alternative to Russian gas? Wouldn't all the experts behind the COP 26 climate conference ban all those jet flights to it and go virtual?

Above all they fail to deal with the fundamental dilemma faced by China and emerging economies. They need fossil fuels to achieve higher living standards, but their incremental demand tips the world over the top on these carbon accounts. Does the advanced world have the right to stop fossil fuel growth in large populated developing countries? Is there anyway the advanced countries can help them leapfrog to low carbon economies? So far the use of oil, gas and coal in countries like China and India is rising remorselessly up for billions of people.

5 months out of the EU single market – progress so far

I have had a couple of emails from Remain voters asking what benefits we have seen from our exit from the EU, as they are still unhappy about the decision taken in a referendum and reinforced by two General elections. After five and a half months it is still early days but so far it looks as if we will have a good first year out.

The main benefit of Brexit is we are now a self governing country that can make our own decisions, change our own laws, and run our own budgets. If in the future government did badly we can rid of it at the next election and change the laws and policies which were wrong. A General election here could not change a single EU law, tax or budget decision when we were members.

We have already seen early evidence of the advantage in our decision not to join the EU vaccine policy but to pioneer a new vaccine here in the UK with government support and orders to back it. This resulted in an earlier roll out of vaccinations for all here and the offer of a crucial low cost treatment to the rest of the world. We are busily creating a new and enlarged vaccine production capability in the UK. Spending on the NHS has gone up by more than £350 m a week. We will now start to save larger sums on EU levies as we are no longer liable for new contributions to the EU growing budgets.

The UK has as promised rolled over the trade agreements we shared with the EU with a number of other countries, and is now well advanced on a new round of trade deals with countries that do not have such arrangements with the EU. This year will be our first outside the EU and its single market. According to international bodies the UK should see its fastest growth rate for many years at 7%, ahead of the EU average. Contrary to Remain predictions sterling has been strengthening since we left, house prices have been rising and employment is still at high levels despite the pandemic damage. It is a matter of regret that the EU wishes to damage its exports to us by placing barriers in the way of trade. Fortunately many other countries see this as an opportunity and are keen to sell to us and understand that means they should also be willing to buy more from us. One of the big gains from Brexit will be growing and making more for ourselves, to cut the food miles and create more better paid jobs at home. The latest trade figures show a welcome cut in our trade deficit with the EU thanks to a fall in imports to the UK. We are buying home produced or cheaper and better from the rest of the world.

We live in an age of governments wishing to pursue national resilience. The USA has awoken to the way China has used free access to western markets whilst continuing to protect and control its own to gain a stronghold over crucial technologies, essential raw materials and important manufactures. The USA has embarked on a crash course of regaining the initiative in technology,

onshoring more production and securing its position in a range of things from rare earths to semiconductors and from batteries to 5G communications. The UK too can now do something similar. Our industrial and agricultural base in many crucial areas like steel, electricity production, shipbuilding and temperate foodstuffs was hollowed out by EU competition. In control of our own state aids, public procurement and competition policies we can now set about rebuilding.

The EU is grossly over represented at the G7

If the U.K. thought it should send both the Prime Minister and the Speaker to represent it at the G7 the other states would object that the U.K. was over represented. If the mighty USA sent both the President and the Majority leader of the Senate that too would have seemed silly or unfair. Yet if you look at the photos of the meeting of the G7 you see nine people present. Sure enough the EU had sent not one but two Presidents, the President of the Council and the President of the Commission.

This absurdity famously spilled over into a row between these same two Presidents in recent negotiations between the EU and Turkey. The President of the Council who I think is technically the senior bagged the one large official chair for the EU rep, only for there to be very public complaints from the President of the Commission. The EU needs to get its act together and decide in each meeting or negotiation which of its 5 Presidents leads the delegation and sits in the one chair they should be awarded like the countries present.

There is at the G7 a more serious and worrying issue. The EU has five of the nine seats, sending three member state Heads and two Presidents. On an issue like vaccines which is a crucial issue at this summit the EU has run the policy for its member states, so on that issue just one EU rep should engage with four independent countries. If these intimate gatherings of a few leaders of powerful countries are to be valuable they should not be slowed down by the EU giving five versions of what they will do on vaccines.

On issues where member states have some powers but have to work under the legal and policy framework of the EU as in green matters and economic policy it would be helpful if they settled in advance who was in the lead and who could speak for them. There will inevitably be much groupthink and common policy between all 5 so it does not need all 5 present and talking to represent that one viewpoint. Decisions of the G7 are usually by consensus, not vote, but having a majority of the voices could distort the debate and give the EU view an unjustified numerical advantage over the US or U.K. view.

How will governments gain popular buy in for their green revolution?

Yesterday I launched a pamphlet through Politeia on the ever topical green revolution. In it I asked one central question that governments seem reluctant to ask. When will government and the private sector produce the products and services that they regard as green which fly off the shelves and figure on people's wish lists?

Today practically all of us accept carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas which will heat the planet if more is produced and nothing else changes. We also accept that advanced country governments intend to take people on their railway track to net zero as soon as they can. The track will be signed and the trains powered by subsidy, carbon taxes, rules and laws.

Whilst most people tell pollsters they do think the world is warming and something should be done about it, most people do not plan to do anything very much about their own lifestyles anytime soon despite government urging. Most people have no plans to rip out the gas boiler and put in an expensive heat pump. Few want to pay up to get a new electric car, or have done the sums and cannot afford one. Many people still want to fly abroad for a holiday as soon as covid rules allow. Most family diets continue to include dairy and meat products despite the carbon footprint they create.

Three other panellists had their say. They all spoke only about government policy and large companies. None of them would engage with my simple and crucial question about consumer behaviour. One of them told me the policy answer is a much higher carbon price, presumably to price the lower paid out of carbon based goods and services. One proposed a big subsidy for electric cars to get more people to buy them. They all seemed to think the prime duty for the revolution rests with governments, and governments just need to keep sharpening the regulatory controls and fiddling with the taxes and subsidies until carbon based activity is taxed out of the system.

They did not wish to pursue the issue of why Germany, a keen green advocate, plans to continue with coal based electricity generation well into the next decade. They did not comment on the way large quoted companies, told to get out of coal, simply sell their coal assets onto someone less exposed to criticism. They seemed to think banning all new diesel and petrol cars as early as 2030 would work fine. So I ask again, where are the iconic must have products of the Green revolution? Where is the new domestic heating system, the new diet, the new personal transport that has the pulling power of the smartphone, the ipad and the Amazon Prime and Netflix subscription? For this revolution to take off governments need to engage with the public, not just talk to the elites.