

Freedom

We have lost a lot of freedoms during the battle against CV 19. Most have accepted the need to take tough measures to protect those at risk of serious illness and death. Now vaccines supply a way out of the public health imperative it is important we do not come to think some of these controls are acceptable or useful for the future. These were extreme measures which should be temporary.

I never thought I would be living in a country where you needed a reason to leave your house, where you were banned from making trips just for pleasure and where every social contact you wished to make had to be done electronically or under a special dispensation allowed by the regulations.

The government has promised us the way out of lockdown will be data driven. The slow indicative timetable to eventual freedom on June 21 is subject to revision. It is highly likely the data for serious cases admitted to hospital and deaths from CV 19 will continue to fall rapidly as the NHS completes vaccination of most people over 50 and anyone with another worrying medical condition. The government must understand the data is dynamic, and lagged. It needs to respond to the trend and to the vaccination figures, and get on with relaxing the controls.

I do not think it a good idea to make a vaccination certificate an official document that is used to enforce controls on people's conduct in the UK. Of course if foreign countries want proof of vaccination for people to travel there that is up to them and the potential traveller. We might wish to require vaccination for people coming to the UK, particularly from countries that still have bad attacks of the pandemic or to require quarantine. A more difficult question which the government as employer does need to resolve is should NHS employees have to have the vaccine in order to work in NHS establishments? I am happy with the current policy of advising them to but not enforcing it. It would be quite wrong to make the rest of us have the vaccine in order to go to a shop or theatre if the government isn't even willing to require vaccination as a condition of employment in exposed state employment.

My contribution to the debate on Coronavirus: Supporting Businesses and Individuals, 23 February

Now is not the time for tax rises. Now is the time to promote a vigorous recovery as soon as it is safe to do so. Yes, the deficit is far too large,

but it is affordable as long as it is a one-off.

The deficit is the product of sensible support for individuals and businesses when they were locked out or closed down, and it was sensible support for the economy as a whole at a time when tax revenues had fallen sharply because people were not allowed to go to work and businesses were not allowed to trade. The way out of all that is not tax rises that would sap confidence and undermine business cash flows even more. The way out is a vigorous recovery that will replace lost revenues, and reduce the need for the support that the Government have rightly produced for small businesses and individuals.

What businesses and individuals will need is turnover, orders and work. I ask all Government Departments—led, probably, by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—to look at how the UK Government can make more work available. The Government have mighty procurement programmes, so when we are building great new railway lines, let us ensure that it is UK steel for the tracks and that it is UK-produced trains with plenty of components and value added, as well as the assembly work taking place in the United Kingdom.

As the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs designs new grants and loans schemes, it should be promoting British food and agriculture at the same time as taking care of environmental concerns. There is a great opportunity to reduce the amount of imported food and to substitute Great British food from our farms and fishing grounds.

BEIS itself leads on energy. Why are we importing so much energy through interconnectors? Can we not have another round of capacity procurement so that we have future electricity generation here in Britain? We have plenty of means of generating power; surely we can harness that.

The Government should want to greatly expand the electricity output of this country because they want to unleash on us a great electric revolution in transport, space heating and powering our factories, so let us make the provision early. Let us invest now for the future so that we have that electric power when it comes to be needed.

A number of businesses have been very badly damaged by lockdown and shut-out, and I am glad that the Government are making some money available to them. I urge them to be generous. It was not those businesses' fault and we need them to be there when we have recovery.

Small businesses and the self-employed are mightily flexible, but they cannot survive on thin air, and they will need to repay their debts, so give them some turnover and some tax cuts.

The state of the pandemic – show your papers?

It was tragic news from the USA that the country surpassed 500,000 deaths this week from CV 19. The President and Vice President commemorated the sad landmark in a moving ceremony and with appropriate words. The USA and the UK make daily announcements of the deaths attributed to the virus, with Ministers and Administration representatives making regular statements of sympathy for the relatives of those lost.

The EU passed through the 500,000 deaths before the USA. They have gone over to weekly reporting, and last announced 515,519 deaths. The incidence of the virus and the death rate has been very variable around the EU. Belgium's death rate has been more than three times that of Greece. Luxembourg has had more cases relative to the size of its population than most, whilst Finland has low figures for cases and deaths. The world figures released daily on the worldometer does not include EU figures so you have to add up all the relevant national figures. This is surprising given the leadership role the EU has adopted over responses to the pandemic in member states. It would be good to see more analysis of the reasons for the very different rates of cases and deaths amongst neighbouring states.

Asian countries led by Japan have had much lower case rates and lower death rates than the Americas and Europe. I have yet to see a good account of why the spread of the disease and the fatalities have been so much lower in much of Asia. It would be good to know if it was to do with the nature of the response, or to the treatments, or to greater natural immunity from past exposures to similar viruses or to diet or other issues.

The U.K. after Israel has achieved much more in offering vaccines to people vulnerable to the virus and vaccinating most at risk. In both France and Germany misleading negative briefings against the Astra Zeneca vaccine has held up acceptance of vaccination on top of the slower moves of the EU authorities to approve the jab and to buy enough for fast roll out.

We now learn that the U.K. is considering using vaccination certificates for other purposes. Ministers accept there are practical and moral problems with such an idea. I would be interested in your thoughts on this possible limitation on freedoms.

My question during the Prime

Minister's statement on Covid-19: Road Map, 22 February 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government do more to improve air flow, control and extraction in health settings, and to make more safe use of powerful ultraviolet cleaners to reduce cross-infection further?

The Prime Minister (Mr Boris Johnson): My right hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. Our scientific advisers are looking at everything we can do, including the means that he suggests, to reduce transmission of the disease.

The arguments over the Union.

I am in favour of the Union of the UK. I also believe Unions only work well when the main parts of them accept the Union's authority and feel at home in it. That is why I supported the idea of having a referendum in Scotland to see how strong the feelings for independence were. Had a majority wanted to leave I would have accepted that verdict and been in favour of as fast and smooth a divorce as possible. I was given assurances from the SNP at Westminster that such a vote would be a once in a generation event. As more than half the Scottish people wished to stay in the Union just a few years ago we owe it to them to offer stability around their victory. I understand how the SNP voters feel, as I voted to leave the EEC in 1975 and had to wait until 2016 to get another chance to vote. That was too long, but I never thought we should have a second ballot for the first 25 years after the 1975 referendum. It was the acceptance of the Maastricht Treaty followed by Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon along with the long period of time elapsed which confirmed the need for a new vote.

The Scottish Parliamentary elections will be dominated by arguments about a second referendum if many of the politicians fighting it have their way. This seems to be a pity. Now Scotland has a Parliament and government with considerable powers to go their own way on everything from pandemics to agriculture and from spending priorities to law and order the elections might mainly be about how well the current government has done and who of the competing parties offers the best prospect of governing well and meeting most of the aspirations of voters. There should be a lively debate on what is and is not working in education, health, economic development and the rest. Instead much of the media accepts the diversion to the arguments over independence in place of scrutiny of how all the new powers and money are being used. If that is what most Scottish people want to debate then so be it.

Many in the SNP do not seem to want proper independence anyway. Muddled over what they did want made the 2014 referendum campaign difficult for them. Many seemed to want to stay with sterling. The first thing I would want for my country is its own currency, to have the full range of options for economic policy. Most of them wanted to rejoin the EU, limiting their ability to legislate and administer Scotland in the way of their choice. The wish to join the EU implied a wish to join the Euro which was in conflict with the wish to keep the pound. They seemed to want to keep the monarchy, a symbol of the union of England and Scotland which started as a union of crowns before progressing to a union of Parliament and government some hundred years later.

Today we still await a definitive SNP view on what currency they want, how they might rejoin the EU, if they will accept the Euro as part of the price of EU membership, how much of the joint state debt of the UK they would assume on leaving, what if any they would like by way of defence assistance and what a Scottish budget would look like without the links into Union finances and taxes. If we are to have a debate again on independence instead of a decent election debate on the successes and failures of the SNP government, these are some of the questions the media should be asking them.