

The Christmas break

As the Prime Minister says,, the virus will not know it's Christmas. He tells us to be jolly careful.

Nonetheless the government proposes a five day period when we are free to make more of our own decisions about social contacts in our homes with family. Some families will decide they do not wish to run any risk of infecting elderly or vulnerable people, and will not use the new freedoms to have a crowded house and table over the festive season. Others will decide that the risk is low for them of catching the disease at all or for getting a bad version of it, and will go ahead and use the freedoms the state permits.

Some elderly people will want the warmth and friendship of a family occasion and will assess their own risks accordingly.

This has itself created a further debate. A few have contacted me to say the relaxation is too generous, as they fear some will make bad judgements. More contact me to say if we can be trusted to make these decisions for five days, why cannot this be extended or why can't there be a more general relaxation of rules? People after all do not wish to pass on a bad disease to loved ones and can make their own decisions about risk.

Where the government can help and reassure is to see what can be done about train travel. Now the railway is fully under state control for the time being the state has a duty of care to passengers. What actions have been taken or are being taken to ensure safer airflows in carriages? What evidence is there about spread rates for the virus at different levels of seat occupancy?

The railway is examining fare structures to avoid an incentive for more people to want to travel on an off peak train. Over a holiday period and in an era of homeworking off peak is a less clear idea anyway. They also need to renew the guidance about safe use of the railway and tell us what they think the risks are to inform people making those difficult judgements about family reunions over the five days of Christmas allotted.

The credibility of the science

I admire the work done by medics and scientists who study disease in getting to a much better understanding of this virus quickly, and in finding some treatments and some potential vaccines that can help tame it. These offer the establishment's way out from lockdowns. I am urging the government to do more on treatments, as we are still due test results for various medicines which might help fight the disease.

I have been less impressed by the epidemiologists and modellers working for the government, who have produced high and worrying numbers which even they have had to amend or shade. They have had problems compiling and publishing reliable figures to plot the disease, had trouble designing reliable tests to see how much of the disease is around, and have chopped and changed definitions even for something as important as deaths. In the early months they delighted in publishing comparisons with other countries that seemed to exaggerate the UK figures in a negative direction as numbers were not calculated on the same basis for each country. There was also a time when there seemed to be facilitation to maximise the number of death certificates saying died "with CV 19" rather than died of CV 19. There have been big arguments amongst scientists over the speed and method of spread and the likely future course of transmission of the disease, with very different forecasts.

It is most important that the public have trust in the official scientists and advisers. This is more likely if they treat the public as adults, explain what they do not know as well as what they know, leave scope for individual risk assessment and judgement, and try not to change requirements or strong advice unless they find they were wrong and need to tell us that.

The advisers did change their stance on mask wearing, from telling us they did not do much or any good to saying we must wear them in enclosed public places. They shifted from emphasis on picking up the virus through your hands, with the need for hand washing and much sterilisation of surfaces, to emphasis on airborne virus picked up from sharing airspace with infected people. This is understandable as their knowledge improves or changes, but does lead more people to ask if the latest iteration of the advice is good advice. It is likely to be true you can catch the virus both ways and so need to be careful both ways.

Today these same scientific advisers have persuaded Ministers to back them again with recommendations for more severe lockdowns, maybe continuing all the way through to April next year. This is why their advice needs challenging, as the cost to livelihoods and businesses will be considerable if this is followed. What evidence do they have that the worst transmission now occurs through hospitality venues rather than through everyday social contact? There is much contact through schools and universities staying open, through family gatherings and through the many businesses that do need people to go to a place of work so our power stays on and our food is on the shelves. How much transmission is occurring through rule breaking with people holding unofficial parties, entertainments and events?

The government advisers have always seemed to want a vaccine and to want as many of us as possible out of circulation until a vaccine arrives. They need to help the government and the rest of us to live with this virus whilst various vaccines are rolled out in ways which minimise deaths and serious cases whilst allowing as much normal life as possible.

I am pressing again for the results of work the government has said it is doing on safer indoor environments through better air extraction systems, best practice on how to run shops, gyms, events in a socially distanced way,

and recommended standards for protective clothing for different tasks. What is the latest thinking on the use of UV machines for removing the virus from places where people meet? I will look tomorrow at the big issue of NHS capacity.

Chips with everything

Under the new tier 2, much of the country will only be able to buy a drink in a pub or cafe if at the same time they order a meal. This policy of chips with everything is causing concerns about how many pubs and other hospitality venues will close down for good as a result. Tiers 2 and 3 with its more severe closures represent additional erosion of the High Street and more heartache for owners and employees of catering based business. A Parliament which has often campaigned to save pubs and Town Centres is edging towards more policies that destroy both.

There is a wider concern that I have set out before. Can we have a better vision than the idea that we suffer one bad lockdown only to have a brief respite before another. This time indeed many places face a tougher continuing lockdown with a different name and different criteria immediately after a national lockdown.

The government is having trouble persuading its MPs to back this latest redrawing of the map and rejigging of detailed controls over our lives. Many Conservative MPs are demanding more information on how the decisions are made over which Tier a place is in, over which controls and rules might have some beneficial impact upon the progress of the virus, over how much collateral damage will be done to other health care issues, how much economic damage will be done, and how a place gets out of the higher tiers.

This may turn out to be first angry responses, to be assuaged by better information later. It may be a more serious challenge to the whole base of the policy. I have heard MPs ask many detailed and searching questions, with no signs so far of compelling answers.

It turns out there is considerable judgement involved in putting a place into Tier 2 or 3, despite the generally expressed wish for it be more data driven. Whilst we are told there are five sets of figures they look at to do with case numbers, rates of change and NHS capacity, they admit they also look at Travel to Work areas and make assumptions about future developments.

There is great concern that many places have just lived through the national lockdown, only to find themselves allocated to a higher tier than before. Doesn't that mean the national lockdown failed for them? There is little explanation of the true compliance rate with the rules, or of how the scientific modellers expect compliance to develop given the longevity of these measures and the sense of lack of progress their latest proposals have

generated. It appears Ministers recommended a long Christmas break with permitted travel in response to polling, which was then used by the advisers to demand more lockdown for longer as offset for the Christmas relaxation.

Many pose the issue as one of seeking a balance between measures which control the virus and measures which allow jobs and activity to flourish. We need to move on to find solutions to both the pandemic and the need for economic recovery based on best policies for each issue, without having so many policies which favour one at cost to the other. I will be pursuing again the options that can help protect us whilst keeping open more hospitality, entertainment and travel, and asking more about the capacity of the NHS and the forecasts of the government advisers.

A new UK fishing industry

Remembering past experiences of EU negotiations some fear another sell out of our fish. Unrelenting Remain supporters tell us as the fishing industry is so small, we should make concessions to secure other unspecified advantages in a general agreement. If the industry is as unimportant as they say it is to us, why would the EU be so keen to win concessions on it?

Isn't the truth that it is small today for the UK only because most of our fish are taken by continental boats and often taken away for processing far from our shores?

Fish is one of many important wins from Brexit for the UK. It is also totemic, because most agree our membership of the EEC, now the EU, came with the sacrifice of our once large and healthy fishing industry. We have gone from good surplus and plenty of stock in our seas, to overfishing from abroad and an astonishing net deficit in fish.

The government needs to take action to make the most of this opportunity. They must of course hold firm in negotiations and refuse to make any sacrifice of our fish. A Free Trade Agreement makes sense for the EU, so there is no need to sweeten the deal with a gift of fish.

The government should also get on with the following policies

1. Announce freeports, including our best fishing harbours, with favourable tax and regulatory conditions to found and grow a high quality food processing industry on the back of more landed fish.
2. Offer a fund to finance or guarantee finance on the purchase of new vessels from a UK yard or second hand vessels from a non UK owner, to undertake a rapid expansion of the UK fishing fleet.
3. Offer more training and training support packages to people wishing to undertake work in the industry.

I am sending this to the government for consideration.

Three cheers for overseas aid

I am glad the UK spends money on ships and equipment that go to assist countries facing flood and tempest. I am in admiration of our medics and armed forces when they sometimes go to help treat and contain dangerous infectious diseases abroad. I am pleased the UK as one of the leading and richest countries of the world helps alleviate and tackle poverty in the developing nations.

The UK should set out what it can do and what it is good at, and should be generous where need arises and where we have the means to help. I want to see reform of our budgets and our activities in these areas so we achieve more with better value for taxpayers.

I went along with the Conservative leaderships' support for hitting the 0.7% target of GDP, though I have misgivings about such targets. I do not think we should commit to spend a certain proportion of a fluctuating and usually growing number. We should decide on spending on a case by case basis and against our general budget background. We do not pledge to spend a fixed proportion of GDP on health or education or policing, but look at those budgets in the light of needs and costs. I trust the government will now repeal the 0.7% pledge in our law codes.

Labour will doubtless oppose such a change. They averaged under 0.4% of GDP on overseas aid in their period in government 1997-2010, despite pretending to support the international commitment to spend around twice as much as they managed. They never explained why during all those years they did not do what now they say we must do. Those who want to see more overseas aid spent might do better to lobby the EU and its member countries who spend together well below the 0.5% the UK is now indicating as a new temporary level.

Last year the UK again spent 0.7% or £15bn on overseas aid. £10bn of this was spent on projects and activities we chose along with the recipient country in so called bilateral aid. The balance of £5bn was spent by our giving the money to the EU and other multinational bodies to spend as they saw fit in so called multilateral aid. As we leave the EU it is a good time to bring our overseas aid spending back in house and decide on how we can best help those in need. We should also look at the full support we give, which goes wider than the items allowed under international conventions to be called Overseas Aid. Some of our Defence expenditure is aid, being used to help bring peace to strife torn countries and providing assets to tackle disasters.

I want us to identify the areas where we have most expertise and can do most to help. Maybe the UK should specialise in a few areas like the provision of clean water to each home, the provision of primary education to all girls as

well as boys in poor countries and the roll out of programmes to tackle infectious diseases.

We should follow certain guidelines. The money should for preference be spent in the country we are trying to help, using as much local labour and skills as possible. Where we need advanced country inputs these should usually come from people and companies based in the UK. We should work on the principle that it is better to teach a hungry person to fish and farm for themselves rather than sending them food parcels. The aim is to get countries out of poverty, not into dependence. More trade is often of more help than more aid.

It will be great to see us achieve more by concentrating our efforts in areas where we have most to offer, harnessing public and private sectors together, and taking control with more programmes we run for the benefit of the poorer countries. .