

An independent defence policy

Some have expressed worries that the UK will not be free to run its own defence policy once out of the EU fully owing to alleged commitments to a Common European Defence and Security Policy.

The Agreements entered in to make clear this is not the case. The UK has the option to participate in CSDP missions on a case by case basis, but only if the EU offers and the UK agrees. The Agreement is express is saying “without prejudice to decision making autonomy of the UK or of the sovereignty of the UK”. “The UK will maintain the right to determine how it would respond to any invitation or option to participate in operations or missions”

It will also be important to reinforce these freedoms that the UK organises its defence procurement in a way which allows it freedom to pursue its own policy. There is no binding requirement to go for European weapons systems and supplies. Each procurement can be arranged in a way which protects UK independence. It is important that the UK controls the necessary technologies and intellectual property and has potential capacity to make the weapons it might need.

Letter from Transport Secretary about train tickets

I appreciate you taking the time to share your suggestions about the introduction and benefits of flexible season tickets. The Government recognises the change in modern commuting patterns, the impact of COVID19 and therefore the need to accommodate a more flexible style of working and travelling.

In response, the Department has proactively worked with the rail industry, and is currently considering proposals received from train operators that try to ensure better value and convenience for part-time and flexible commuters and support those returning to the railway.

My Department remains committed to delivering wholesale reform of the rail industry to put the priorities of passengers first. The Williams Rail Review was in the final stages at the outbreak of COVID-19. I view the purpose of the reforms as important as ever, but further work needs to be done now to reflect the impact of COVID-19 on the sector.

We are progressing with this work and are continuing to examine a range of options to reform the railways, including how we can accelerate our

modernisation plans in light of a changed post-COVID world.

Questions to the government CV 19 advisers

Monday's slide show was short and not very informative. They did present a worrying increase in hospital admissions. The rest of the numbers were curiously selected.

There was no published figure for R , no comment on how they are now calculating it and no slide to show how they think it has varied over time, yet R drives their models and much of their thinking. Their argument that we could see a doubling of cases every week for four weeks implies they think R is now high. It would be good to hear more on why they think that and how they compute it.

The first two graphs showed upward trends in daily cases and daily deaths in Spain and France. The two graphs were shown side by side. The death rate scale was one hundredth of the case rate scale, to achieve similar looking graphs. There was no graph for Sweden which followed a different approach to the virus, nor for Germany and Italy where there is not the same growth in cases.

They then turned to England, and changed from daily case numbers to weekly case numbers, meaning higher figures. Their speculation over future trends was then revealed with a demonstration of a big surge in cases were they to double every week for four weeks.

It would be good to have a proper presentation on the death rate so far, with improved data to smooth out the different definitions used over the pandemic to date. It would be good to know the results of the sample testing of the population over time.

They showed a series of numbers for the proportion of the population that have antibodies which may strengthen their immunity to a future attack. What was odd was the 16 August latest figure was considerably lower than the figures from May/June/July. It would be good to have an explanation of this.

Based on this the government has decided on some further restrictions on social and business life and said they are likely to last for six months. It is time for a proper Parliamentary debate on these matters, to tease more out from the advice and to look around the world at what has worked best to contain the disease and keep economies turning. I and others are trying to get an opportunity to explore the options in Parliament.

Dealing with crime

I reproduce below the Lord Chancellor's letter to MPs setting out his new proposals, as I think they are good.

I am writing to inform you that the Government has laid before Parliament a White Paper entitled '*A Smarter Approach to Sentencing*'.

This paper sets out the Government's proposals to deliver on manifesto commitments to **crack down on crime and protect the public by ensuring dangerous criminals are kept in prison for longer.**

Our current sentencing and release framework is failing to give victims and the wider public the confidence they should have in our criminal justice system. Too often the time offenders spend in prison does not match the severity of the crime, with some of the most serious criminals being released after serving only half their sentence.

At the heart of this paper are reforms to the sentencing and release framework in England and Wales, which will see certain sexual and violent offenders serve longer jail time, while new measures aim to tackle the underlying causes of criminal behaviour and improve the rehabilitation and supervision of offenders in the community.

Keeping dangerous criminals in prison for longer

Our white paper sets out plans to **make whole life orders the starting point for child killers**, as well as allowing judges the discretion to hand out this maximum punishment to 18-20-year olds in exceptional cases (where, currently, only those aged 21 and over may receive a whole life order). We are **ending the halfway release of offenders** sentenced to between four and seven years in prison for serious crimes such as rape, manslaughter and GBH with intent. Instead they will have to spend two-thirds of their time behind bars, like those serving determinate sentences of more than seven years already do following the legislation we brought in earlier this year. We will also introduce a new power to **prevent automatic release for offenders who pose a terrorist threat or are a danger to the public** and are serving standard determinate sentences. We will also legislate to increase the time discretionary life sentence prisoners and certain sex offenders must serve in prison before they can be considered for release by the Parole Board.

Tougher community sentences which tackle the underlying causes of crime

The white paper includes plans to make community sentences stricter, better monitored and more targeted at cutting reoffending by tackling issues associated with criminality. **More vulnerable offenders who do not pose a risk to public safety will be diverted into treatment programmes to recover from these serious issues, such as mental health, alcohol or drug addiction**

programmes. This will help them lead crime free lives, ultimately helping drive down reoffending rates alongside strengthened supervision to ensure compliance.

Community sentences will be made tougher by **doubling the amount of time offenders can be subject to curfew restrictions** to two years for more serious criminals. Courts and **probation staff will be given more flexibility to use those curfews to support rehabilitation.** For example, by having lesser restrictions Monday to Friday to keep offenders in work, but stricter curfews of up to 20 hours a day on weekends. The robust measures aim to provide strong but rehabilitative punishment in the community.

GPS tagging for burglars

Meanwhile, for the first time, **GPS electronic location monitoring will be used to track burglars,** robbers and thieves when they are released from prison. Reoffending rates among these offenders is amongst the highest across all offence types, with individuals convicted of theft who reoffend doing so on average five times over their lifetime. The technology will allow probation to monitor an offender's whereabouts and where appropriate share this data with the police to support them investigating and prosecuting these crimes.

The move builds on Government's plans to **make greater use of electronic tags to cut crime,** following the rollout of GPS monitoring over the last twelve months and plans to begin using so-called 'sobriety tags' to tackle alcohol-related offending.

Reducing Re-offending

There is more that we, across Government, need to do to address reoffending. Reoffending weakens public confidence in the criminal justice system's ability to deal with offenders. It also has a significant financial cost, not only to the criminal justice system, but to wider society. **This paper introduces cross-government work underway to develop ambitious plans to reduce reoffending, focusing on employment, accommodation, and substance misuse.** An important first step is supporting ex-offenders striving to turn their lives around through work by **reducing the time in which they are required to disclose certain convictions for non-sensitive roles.**

Alongside this, work is underway to boost education in prisons. Ministers will deliver on the manifesto commitment to **develop a Prisoner Education Service, focused on work-based training and skills.** It will build on recent reforms that have already enabled Governors to commission education services that meets the needs of their prison populations and local economies. The ability to improve prisoners' functional, vocational and life-skills is key to support wider rehabilitation and reduce reoffending on release.

Next steps

The Government will bring forward legislation next year to deliver on the proposals set out in this paper.

You can view the White Paper at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-smarter-approach-to-sentencing>.

Not another lock down

The Prime Minister is right to say he does not want another national lock down. The Chancellor is right to warn of economic damage were the government to impose one.

It appears that the Cabinet is arguing over what is the right balance between encouraging people and businesses back to school and to work, and advice or controls over conduct to seek to limit the spread of the virus.

The government needs to ask itself why it wants more of a lock down, and what purpose will be served. The first national lock down had two specified purposes. The first was to save the NHS which was not ready or equipped to handle an upsurge in CV 19 cases. This problem has surely been solved by the addition of many more intensive care beds and the arrival of the Nightingale emergency hospitals, along with billions of pounds of extra funding.

The second idea was to squash the sombrero or flatten the hump in the graph of cases. No-one said they could eliminate the virus. The terms of the lockdown implied a subsequent increase in virus cases as it came off, but at a more acceptable rate and below much increased NHS capacity to cope. It also meant spreading out the virus outbreak reduced the time to the arrival of a vaccine if one is going to emerge this winter.

Now it appears some are moving closer to the idea that we need to eliminate the virus. That would be great. Unfortunately it seems they think this can only be done by imposing very intrusive controls, doing lasting damage to all businesses that rely on social contacts, and keeping the controls in place for a long time. There does not yet seem to be any country worldwide outside China that has imposed draconian lock downs that has avoided a second coming of the virus after relaxing some of the controls. If one country could do it they would need very tough border controls to stop it coming back in from elsewhere.

Yesterday I made some suggestions on how to stop the current spread of the virus leading to more deaths, by stronger safeguarding for those most at risk. I think it unlikely further controls on social contact either for business or within groups of family and friends will be sufficient to end the virus. Test and trace becomes more difficult as we enter the flu and cold season, leaving many more with symptoms. The rate of false results on tests and delays in getting them and finding the results also makes it difficult to guarantee success in stopping the virus by this means.

I have not lectured people on how they should live their lives or respond to

the virus. I think the government needs to repeat clear advice on how the virus spreads, what the risks are and what actions might reduce the risk, and leave more to individuals to decide how they wish to respond.