

The five targets for government

I have always supported the Prime Minister's five targets. Of course they should curb illegal migration, bring down health waiting lists, cut inflation, boost growth and control public sector borrowing. Being competent at doing these things is an important part of reassuring people about the quality of the government. The fact that the Opposition would make some of these things worse with their misguided approaches does not absolve government of the need to deliver.

With others I did raise the question with him of how they would stop all the boats, desirable though the aim was. It was never going to be easy given the criminal persistence of the boat trip organisers. I have always thought you can get the three economic variables all moving in the right direction at the same time, but you need to reduce tax rates and to control public spending to do so. It was always clear to get NHS waiting lists down you need to get the full engagement of NHS staff, which is not helped by strikes and disputes over pay and conditions of employment.

The NHS pledge is important. Too many people complain of the lottery to get a doctors appointment with the system some practices in some parts of the country use with the need to ring first thing in the morning when everyone else is and then finding the appointments for that day have gone. Too many people wait for months to get access to hospital appointments for diagnosis or for treatments.

One way to help get the waiting lists for treatment down would be for the NHS to buy in more capacity from the private sector, as it did during covid, to get routine items like cataract removal and knee surgery done in private facilities, providing it free for NHS patients. Specialising and making full use of operating theatre capacities would accelerate productivity and quality, as doing many of the same types of operation improves skills and reduces handover time between different teams using a general operating theatre.

A thorough review of the needs of those on long waiting lists would also be a good idea , with administrators updating needs and producing plans to maximise capacity to tackle the big areas of delay.

Even better than all such thinking would be a workable plan from the Chief Executive of NHS England with defined targets and methods to cut the waiting lists, that met Ministers' urgings to cut the list. The Chief Executive should have that as her priority after patient safety, and should have plans to at least get NHS productivity back to where it was in 2019 as quickly as possible.