

My question during the Urgent Question on Northern Ireland Protocol: Disruption to Trade, 13 January 2020

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend introduce urgent legislation to ensure the smooth flow of goods between Northern Ireland and GB? Is it not crucial to our Union, in respect of both Northern Ireland and Scotland, that the Government keep their promise to take control of our laws and borders and to demonstrate a more prosperous internal market for the whole UK?

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr Michael Gove): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want, first of all, to make sure that we are doing everything technically and administratively in order to ensure the smooth flow of goods but, as the Prime Minister confirmed to the House earlier, if we need to take further legal steps, then of course we will.

Sort out the Northern Ireland border

Yesterday I asked the government to legislate to ensure smooth passage of goods between GB and Northern Ireland. The government promised us we were taking back control of our laws and borders. They assured us their deal with the EU allowed the U.K. single market to work properly for the whole UK.

Not trusting the EU I objected at the time. I was very concerned about continuing EU influence over Northern Ireland and over our fishing, and it now seems I was right to warn. EU interference and requirements are impeding the flow of goods from London to Belfast where they go smoothly from London to any English city.

The government says it can use a clause in the Irish protocol to take over and control our single market in Northern Ireland. It should do so. It could also legislate, as they say we are now a sovereign country. I supported them when they sought to do so before signing the Agreement, only to see them cancel that legislation a day later when the EU offered a deal. Clearly the deal was not as good as the legislation. So bring on legislation.

We meant it when we voted to take back control. That has to include Northern Ireland trade and our fishing grounds. There are plenty of countries and businesses around the world who want to sell us things. Our borders with the rest of the world in Great Britain work just fine. We can also supply more of our own needs. Let's get on with it. We cannot allow the EU to stop us

trading with ourselves!

My speech during the debate on Covid-19, 12 January 2021

We have done many more tests than many other countries, and I pay tribute to Ministers and the NHS for all the hard work that has gone into achieving that. We are now vaccinating many more people than in other countries. We have got ahead, and that is very good news. As the Government see the main way out for us to relax the controls as being the vaccination of many more people, we wish everyone every speed and success in rolling out those vaccines.

I also think congratulations are in order for finding two more treatments that can make a difference to the death rate and reduce the length of time people suffer with a severe form of the disease, but what about ivermectin, which some doctors in other countries say can also achieve good results and reduce the death rate? It would be useful to know what progress is being made with the UK tests and whether that might ever be a recommended treatment, because the more treatments we can have to cut the death rate the better.

I would also be interested to know what our experts think about why there have been such differential case rates and death rates around the world. Unfortunately, the UK has now joined the group of countries where the death rate is over 0.1% of the total population, which means quite a lot of deaths, as we know to our sorrow and cost.

We have joined many other countries in that grouping, but why is it that countries like Sweden and Brazil have not yet got to 0.1% when some have been very critical of the way they have handled the virus, and why do many Asian countries seem to have got through with much less damage? What does the international research tell us about the reasons? Why is it, too, that a country such as Belgium has been blighted by such a high death rate and a pretty high case rate? Of course, testing more means that we identify more cases, but our case rate is still not one of the worst in the world, so clearly some of the actions taken are having a beneficial impact.

I also urge the Government to do rather more for the self-employed and small businesses. They are bearing the brunt of the economic damage of the policies being pursued, and more could be done, particularly for those small businesses and the self-employed who have not received any help at all.

Many of them are in business areas in which there have been closures for the best part of a year now, and in which social contact is very important for the business model, meaning their revenues are well down. We are going to need them, and we need a recovery fairly soon.

So I wish every success to those doing the vaccinations, and I hope we can then lift some of the restrictions, because we want to have a vibrant small business and small enterprise sector available to power the recovery we so desperately need.

Votes matter

Today we will hear of the plans for the English local elections, the English Mayoral elections, the Scottish parliament and the Welsh and London Assemblies.

Last year the English Council elections were cancelled and Mayors got extra time in office. Elections at regular intervals are an important part of our democratic system. Elected people and governments need a reasonable time period of several years to exercise the powers they are given and to show whether they can govern well or not, serving the people who elected them. Whilst many elected politicians have a sense of public duty and wish to serve people well, the looming presence of an election concentrates minds . It makes the elected individuals show they have done what they promised and have offered good service in order to seek renewal of their mandate. It forces them into regular communication with those they serve and gives them an added reason to listen attentively to complaints and wishes from voters.

The debate about the timing of these important elections revolves around how much of a threat the virus will still pose to us in April and May. Will it continue to make door to door canvassing and conversations impossible? Will it continue to restrict our ability to go to a polling station? I would hope by May we would be able to hold elections with suitably social distanced contacts. If the experts are sure we cannot , perhaps we need to consider shifting the elections more onto a digital and postal mechanism.

Some will argue postal voting is too open to abuse, and will argue against universal postal votes. Some will complain if campaigning is via the internet with zoom public meetings and social media communications. Others will think this better than delaying or cancelling elections yet again. What are your views? Many Conservative voters in London are very keen to have an opportunity to vote for a different Mayor, and doubtless voters of other parties in various parts of the UK have equally strong reasons to want an election soon.

Recovering from the virus

The ever tightening lockdowns increase the damage to businesses requiring social contact. They delay the start of recovery and make the loss of more small businesses and supply capacity more likely.

Yesterday's statement from the Chancellor did not update the forecasts for the economy and did not answer the question of why some small businesses that have to shut are left out of the compensation or assistance schemes. Getting through one lock down by borrowing more or drawing down on savings or reserves may be possible but doing it all over again in a second lock down is more difficult. Setting up and running your own business is hard enough without successive bans on trading lasting for the best part of a year.

The government's strategy to get out of this is heavily dependent on rapid roll outs of vaccines. It would also help to redouble efforts to reduce the spread of infection in health settings. The loss of staff from illness and the need to self isolate is adding to the strains. Redoubling efforts to find a wider range of treatments would help, as the treatments cut the time the serious illness lasts.

Today there is another debate on CV 19 in Parliament. It would be good to hear from Ministers progress on providing more support for closed small businesses, more news on infection control and treatments, and some report on how air flow and extraction can be improved to reduce infection spread. We need to get more back to work and more businesses trading as safely as possible.