

# Christmas Greetings 2020

This is the second version of my Christmas message, as there has been such a fundamental change in the government's approach in the last few days. The rapid escalation of Wokingham, West Berkshire and much of London and the south east into Tier 3 to be followed almost immediately by a further move to a new Tier 4 means many of us have very few options this Christmas. I will now work on over the holiday period. My planned little break at a local hotel to enjoy someone else's cooking for a change and a visit to family has gone. I will press the government for better compensation for people and businesses stopped from working, and for better ways of managing the NHS and limiting the spread of the infection.

Like many people I put up my tree and decorations early this year, as we all need some colour, light and hope in what has been a worrying year, darkened by the pandemic. I spend so much more of my days at home talking to you all through email, conference calls and my website rather than dropping by in person. I find it is uplifting to remember freer times at Christmas through the decorations and an occasional background of great Christmas music. It is a pleasant punctuation of a busy working day to add something to the tally of cards or the range of Christmas ornaments. I find it brings me both memories of happy Wokingham Christmases past, and hopes of happy Christmases to come post covid.

I am also more than ever conscious that there are some who have been isolated too much and are fighting loneliness as they seek to shield themselves from the virus. Where we know of people on their own it will mean the world to them if we pick up the phone, take to the zoom or find any other safe way to get in touch. Many extended families have contacted each other more during these long days of lockdown, teaching young and old the joys of smartphones, pads and laptop led video chats. Grandparents have heard their grandchildren sing over zoom and seen them dance through their smartphone. On line and hybrid shops will do a good job and roaring trade this Christmas delivering presents around the country, with relatives keen to see reactions when they are opened from their separate homes.

Most have done their bit to control the virus and to keep their friends and families together. Parents have had more time at home with their children where they have been working from home themselves. I think many will find a way to relax and to enjoy some of the features of a normal Christmas within the new legal restraints. We owe it to each other to capture the Christmas spirit in an unusual anti covid 19 style bottle.

I wish to say a big thank you to heroes and heroines of the CV 19 crisis, to all those who did go out to work to help the rest of us. There were those who had to keep the power and the broadband running, to grow and deliver our food, to care for those in hospital and care homes who did have this very contagious disease, to equip and train the nation in the skills needed to live with lock down and to deliver all the things we needed. There are countless unsung hard working people who have served us well during this

constrained year. I hope like me you have sought to use local self employed and small business where possible, as many of them have had tough times. Christmas is a good time to say thank you. The words matter a lot. Cards or presents can embellish where appropriate.

I wish you and yours the best possible Christmas. For a young child this is an especially magic time. CV 19 should not come in the way of a child's joy, anticipation and excitement about presents, Christmas food and the family atmosphere that surrounds it. So ban all talk of covid and politics from Thursday, wrap up the presents, put on the lights, prepare the feast and let Christmas begin. You will have fewer people in your home to celebrate, so get on the phone or zoom to share experiences with those you wanted to be with you. We all want our children and grandchildren to have happy memories of Christmas 2020. Many of us will still enjoy some of the childhood feelings as we spend the day with those we care most about, or find a way to talk to them where they are.

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## Tiers and national lockdowns

When we held the debate and vote at the beginning of the month on the restrictions placed on business and social contacts, we were told to look forward to a review in mid December when areas might be taken down from Tiers 2 and 3 into Tiers 1 and 2. The government was allowing people to believe that the restrictions would bear early fruit resulting in gradual relaxation.

The rapid approval of the Pfizer vaccine in the UK gave a boost to confidence, with some eventual end in sight to lock downs as people at risk get the protection they need and want. The USA has now also approved this vaccine and I guess the EU will follow, showing that the world professional establishment does not think the UK Regulatory Agency was taking undue risks or coming to a hasty conclusion.

Then we saw a surge in cases of the virus detected by the much more comprehensive testing scheme available compared to last Spring. Official advice hardened in favour of tougher and more prolonged lockdowns. By the time we reached mid December word went out that instead of taking a number of regions or areas down a tier, there would be a substantial net increase in places under the toughest Tier 3 restrictions. Ministers seem to suggest now that restrictions will be with us until next spring, when the arrival of warmer weather and more natural ultra violet light might cause recession in the virus, and when many more people will have opted for the vaccine protection. Then last evening there was a further change with the invention of a new Tier 4 for a quarter of the country and cancellation of most of the Christmas relaxations for the rest of the country. Parliament needs to debate and vote on these measures.

It appears Parliament will have another chance to debate and vote on these

controls only later in the new year. I will present a case again to find other methods of protecting the vulnerable and keeping more people safe, whilst allowing the resumption of more business activity. Livelihoods matter as well as lives. The scarring to business life in entertainment, travel, leisure, shop retail, commercial property and some personal services is very pronounced. We run the risk of more bankruptcies, more people deciding to pack up their small businesses, and more people deciding working for themselves is simply too difficult with all the regulations.

I will pursue again the issue of the trials of other drugs that might help treatment, the use of isolation hospitals and the extra Nightingale capacity to ease the situation in District General hospitals, the improvement of ventilation systems in indoor venues to clean the air continuously and other methods to allow more safe business activity to take place. There needs to be more strenuous official efforts to find an alternative to these severe controls on economic and personal freedom.

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## Devolution and the virus

Devolution has provided the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland the opportunity to vary the response to the virus in their areas of the UK. Today I would be interested in your comments on how you think the different administrations have fared, and what if anything devolved power has brought to help us in this crisis.

If we start with the data we see that all four parts of the UK have suffered badly. Each had a bad attack in the spring, and each has seen a further flare up in the late autumn after a summer lull. The Scottish government's slightly tougher approach earlier in the year was designed to eliminate the virus, but it did not do so. Wales taking a modestly tougher approach has ended up with the worst figures for cases and deaths.

Latest figures 17.12.20 from inception of pandemic

Cases by area per 100,000 people

Wales 3633

Northern Ireland 3183

England 2957

Scotland 2000

Certified deaths involving CV 19 per 100,000

Wales 123 (0.123%)

England 115.6 (0.115%)

Scotland 107.4 (0.107%)

Northern Ireland 78.2 (0.078%)

We also see that despite plenty of different rhetoric and some criticism of the UK/English approach by both Scotland and Wales, the policies followed throughout the UK have been remarkably similar. There have been minor differences played up by spinners over the timing and length of some lock down moves, and over the numbers of contacts or hours of opening permitted. These do not seem to have made much difference. The Welsh short circuit breaker was followed by a further surge and more extensive lockdowns. Rural areas seem to fare better than more densely populated urban areas.

There has been no devolved challenge to the general academic and policy framework provided by UK experts, and no attempt to define a very distinctive course to see if a different approach works better. The experts of the devolved administrations seem to have very similar views to the UK national experts.

The First Minister of Scotland has used the crisis to give herself a much greater media exposure on UK as well as Scottish programmes, choosing to front run some of the common working of the UK and devolved governments before the daily UK news conferences which have characterised a lot of this period. She has wanted to argue there is a distinctively Scottish approach which is better, but has found this more difficult to sustain as the Scottish numbers remain high and her country stays in lock downs. Each administration has had its share of embarrassments, with experts and advisers breaking their own rules and now Wales discovering a lot of lost data.

I think the overall results have been disappointing. I would have liked to have seen more collaboration from the devolved governments. Alternatively it would have been good to see more intelligent challenge and experiment with a different way of responding so we could learn from the differing approaches, By nature this is an experimental period faced with a new disease where no-one started with the answers. The main breakthrough that can save all the administrations is the vaccine invention by US companies so far, coupled with the foresight of the UK government to licence it quickly and order it in big quantities. No administration has made Test and Trace work well. None has tried isolation hospitals nor used much extra capacity created by the Nightingales. Let us hope UK science soon lands its own vaccines and treatments. UK scientists and medics are to be congratulated on discovering that steroids can cut the death rate from the disease and on their progress with other treatments.

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## West Berkshire and Wokingham moved to Tier 3

Berkshire MPs met earlier this week to discuss the possible move of Berkshire into the highest Tier of CV 19 controls. Several of us agreed on a joint approach to the Secretary of State urging him to look at the data in smaller areas than the whole County and to keep in Tier 2 those parts and places where the numbers of cases could justify that. We were also swayed by figures saying the NHS was coping well with spare capacity still available.

These representations did not succeed, so the government has decided to place the whole of Berkshire in Tier3, where Slough has been since the system was first introduced. I will continue to urge the government to improve the scope and generosity of its assistance to small business, as many of them will suffer again from the tougher lock down.

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## Small Business Saturday

On Saturday 5th December I visited local businesses to see how they were bearing up under the controls and to thank them for the service they have supplied to our local community over the last difficult year. As always small business have shown resolve and flexibility, to tackle the changing rules and provide ways of operating that reduce the risk of people catching the virus.