

Smart motorways

Some constituents asked me to take up the issue of accidents on smart motorways where a vehicle has come to a halt on the inside lane.

The Transport Secretary responded to general concern and held an inquiry. The investigation showed that smart motorways have lower risks of tailgating, rapid changes of speeds and vehicles drifting off the carriageway which can all create accidents on conventional motorways. However, as we thought there is more risk of collision with a stationary vehicle.

The government will speed up the introduction of stopped vehicle radar detection to give immediate warnings and lane closure signs. They will also put in more stopping places off highway, spaced at not more than 0.75 mile apart or every 45 seconds at 60mph on some new schemes with a maximum of 1 mile separation elsewhere. Additional pull offs will be added to the M25, with consideration of other changes also for the M1 and M6 where there have been incidents.

Ploys to make a politician look bad

I try to accept interviews on topics I know something about and have well based or distinctive views on. Usually the media want to offer an interview on a topic where I am not an expert where they think I will have difficulty supporting the position of my party or government so they can create a split which does not yet exist. When I do get an offer that is worth accepting I spend my preparation time not on the topic itself, because I know the subject and know what I wish to say. I spend the time thinking about all the other things the interviewer might wish to deviate to in the hope of ensnaring me.

There are a series of regular ploys.

1. The creation of a caricature. The BBC often claims to know the views of the interviewee better than the interviewee knows them himself. When the person explains their view to them they counter argue by asserting they must believe something else because they have invented a caricature of the person as a "right winger" or "left winger", or "Euroscptic" or whatever. It makes the interviews foolish, with the BBC setting out their version of the person's view and the interviewee denying it. They then seek to suggest that their version of the view is the real view and so the interviewee is in some way dishonest to say otherwise.
2. Undermining by false association. The BBC quickly diverts the interview of a politician who is doing well into an interview about the worst or stupidest thing some other member of that person's party has said or

done recently. The interviewee is forced to deny what the person has said or done to avoid contamination. An original interview about an important subject then becomes instead repeated pressure to get the interviewee to set themselves up as the moral arbiter and disciplinarian for their party with questions about whether the person who misspoke should be sacked, prosecuted etc.

3. Subverting from past quotations. Someone setting out a cogent and appropriate case for current conditions is confronted with something they said or wrote many years before in different circumstances. It may be that the two views are fully compatible because circumstances are different, but precious interview time is lost trying to establish that. It may be that the interviewee has changed their mind owing to new facts and insights. This should not be a crime unless it is one of those cases where a party does do a major U turn in a dishonest or flagrantly political self serving way.
4. Setting the interviewee up against others in his or her party. Someone making a good recommendation or providing informative background to policy may suddenly be faced with a contradictory quote from another senior person in their party, as if this invalidates their position.
5. Quoting so called experts and insisting that because they are experts their opinion is correct and the politicians must be wrong. The politician is never allowed to debate with the experts and will not have advance warning to be able to explain why these particular experts may have flawed judgement or be coming at the problem from a biased vantage point.
6. Mistaking fashionable viewpoints in media circles like Remain and a particular version of Green for facts and attempting to shout down or crowd out a politician who has a considered but different opinion.
7. Trying to ascribe base motives to any politician expressing a different view from those deemed acceptable to the BBC. The interviewer alleges motives of personal career advancement or party interest when someone is putting forward their best judgement of what is in the public interest or the interests of their constituents.

Half a statement

Yesterday the Health Secretary explained the government's approach to the virus, going a long way to cut contacts between people to slow or prevent contagion. The measures mean the effective closure of a huge part of our economy in sport, leisure, culture, hospitality and transport.

There was no complementary statement from the Chancellor explaining how they will help the many businesses that will struggle as a result. Cash flow dries up with no customers. Many employees will be made redundant, and many businesses will fold.

We need the government to help, to prevent large scale loss of good businesses which will result from this policy. Individuals losing their job or their self employed work will need Income support. I asked about the scheme in yesterday's blog in the Commons and got various MPs to voice the need for some such relief.

Issues with coaches

I have recently heard from a local coach company of the difficulties imposed by new government regulations on coach operators.

The company concerned had bought a new coach fleet to comply with low emissions standards, only to be told that there is now an additional requirement to make all coaches accessible for wheelchair users. The company concerned on contract work supplies a coach that is wheelchair compatible when that is needed but does not have this capability on all coaches as many contract routes do not need it.

The coach industry also tells me that electric coaches are around one third dearer than diesel coaches, and have limited range. There are concerns that these will become compulsory before the range and recharging issues are properly resolved. This would make it difficult for coach companies to carry out certain return routes or excursions, given the mileage involved. It also places some services at risk were a coach to be delayed in a traffic jam, using up power on air conditioning, windscreen wipers, radio, lights etc.

Cushioning the economic impact of the virus measures

It is time to take stronger economic action to offset the impact government measures against the virus around the world, along with consumer behaviour is now having on jobs and business.

It is clear that as the virus spreads so people cancel travel plans, hotels, restaurants and pubs lose clients, cultural and sporting events are stopped, business and academic conferences abandoned and discretionary shopping and tourism fall substantially.

Let us take a bad case of what could happen. Let us suppose that the 20% of our economy most exposed to these activities that lose out from closures and loss of customers are in trouble for four months. Let us guess that they

lose a large 50% of their revenue on average. They are likely to lose more turnover than businesses do in a typical recession, as in some cases what they do is simply banned and in other cases consumers walk away from them in big numbers.

This would mean a fall of 3.3% in annual GDP just from the impact on the most vulnerable 20% of the economy. There would then be second round effects. These businesses would shed labour quickly as they try to stem their cash losses. Some will go bust with every employee losing their job. This then means lower incomes for people to spend on other things, and a further loss of consumer and investment confidence.

What could be done to reduce this bad outcome? The government could step in with temporary help for employees working for basically sound businesses that have experienced a big loss of turnover thanks only to the special circumstances of the virus. It could be like the German temporary reduced working scheme which has got through state aid tests.

The terms might be that the government will pay a specified quite high percentage of the wage bill for a company that was profitable up to the end of January, but has faced a fall of more than say 15% of turnover since thanks either to the virus putting off customers or from bans and closures required by law. This would be a grant, available for a limited period related to the progress of the virus. It would be conditional on the business not taking on any extra employees during that period, and not making anyone redundant. The business would otherwise be loss making.

It is most important that say a good hotel in a town or city can keep its core staff together during a period of much reduced bookings to be available again for the recovery once we have an all clear from the virus. Putting more businesses through bankruptcy is not a good idea if they are sound businesses for the future damaged by this one off extraordinary event. Bankruptcy puts the costs of the employees onto the state anyway when they lose their jobs, and makes recovery for them and for business more difficult afterwards.

The new facilities to lend to business, and the capacity of the Treasury to delay tax payments are both very helpful to many businesses hit by the virus slowdown. They will not be sufficient for the businesses at the sharp edge of the problems, as their revenues fall too much to survive just on more loans and deferred tax.