

We need an unlock plan

Now the vaccines are being rolled out at some speed surely we are owed a proposed timetable to remove restrictions? The experts have always wanted long lock downs and have always seemed to rely on mass vaccination as their answer. It has been hard work getting them to take adaptation and safety measures seriously as a way of re opening more businesses, and even difficult to get results from tests and trials of various treatments to cut the death rate and the severity of the bad cases.

This week has been about securing sufficient deliveries of vaccine and sorting out arrangements to get the inoculations done. There have been debates about the relative role of GPs, pharmacies, hospitals and large temporary centres. The system seems to favour large facilities capable of carrying out many procedures, and favours NHS leadership. Let's hope it goes well.

Meanwhile damage is being done to many small businesses and the economy has declined again. the Chancellor resists all requests to give more temporary help to businesses .

I am pressing for more measures to support the economy and a clearer path back to work.

Government borrowing

A contributor asked for an update on government debt.

The UK had a difficult borrowing problem in the IMF crash of the mid 1970s when the country ran out of foreign currency to borrow and had to make emergency cuts. The IMF supervised a programme of lower public spending in return for loans.

It had a bit of a domestic borrowing problem in the 1980s as a Conservative government tackled the large inherited borrowings. Interest rates rose to high levels to persuade people to take state debt as investments. As spending came under better control so rates came down, helping economic recovery.

It had a worse borrowing problem during and after the banking crash of 2008. State debt was high going into the crash alongside very high levels of private sector borrowing. Both sectors reined in in the last months of the Labour government. The incoming Coalition, contrary to media reports, raised the levels of state borrowing over their tenure.

On each of these occasions debt interest was over 3% of GDP or 6-7% of total

public spending. It was considerably higher immediately after the war when state debt was 250% of GDP reflecting the need to spend and borrow to win the war. Patient work brought the debt under better control in the 1950s.

People ask me if we can afford the sharp build up in gross debt brought on by the policies chosen to deal with the pandemic. I am pleased to report that we can afford it, because interest rates have tumbled so much and because the Bank of England is buying in substantial quantities of the debt. The latest official predictions show net debt interest as a percentage of GDP falling to a tiny 0.8% of GDP next year as debts are rolled over at low rates and as the Bank completes its buying programme. This means debt interest will be at its lowest for the post 1945 period. There is no need to count the interest paid on the debt owned by the Bank of England, as taxpayers and government get that receipt.

The UK government today can borrow money for 10 years at 0.29%. The stated debt is a large 105% of GDP, but the state itself will own £875bn of that so the true figure for the actual net debt owed by the state is around two thirds of GDP.

These are unusual times when the US, UK, leading EU countries and Japan can all borrow at around zero very large sums of money. It is still not a good idea to go on borrowing at scale for too long, and never a good idea to waste money borrowed. The immediate need for high borrowing is necessary to subsidise people and companies that are prevented from working by lock downs. The sooner we can unlock, the sooner we can get our finances under better control.

The good news is there is no need to worry yet. Markets are allowing all the major countries to borrow plenty at ultra low rates of interest, underpinned by Central Banks buying up a lot of the debt. This only has to change were inflation to pick up, which so far it has not. Japan has been doing this now for several decades with no inflation, with gross state debt at 250% of GDP but net state debt around half that and the interest burden very low.

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.