

# A Christmas tale of our times

Father Christmas always has to spend a lot of time planning all those presents and deliveries. It requires enormous skill and teamwork to get all the right presents to everyone on Christmas night, even though of course he is helped by the way the world spins on its axis, extending the night time around the world to a 24 hour period. It does mean a superhuman effort by him and his reindeers, famed for their speed and navigating skills.

In 2020 his helpers came to him and said he did need to do some homework for his deliveries as there were so many new rules applying to all the people he was going to visit. There was a nasty virus spreading its way around the globe, so countries required limited social contact and proper sanitising of goods. The world was so much keener now on green policies, so many of his global family would expect him to watch his carbon output. Anyone buying things today did want to know more about where they came from, who had made them and whether they were socially aware and well governed. Santa above all others must show he is a leader of these movements for the good.

Over the summer Father Christmas was advised that he took some training courses so he was ready for the new management regime. They wanted him to do a general course on Money Laundering. Then there was fraud and bribery to study, to be followed by cyber crime. He should gain a grounding in socially aware present giving, environmentally benign gifts and a course on governance of the parcels business. He needed to ensure he did not fall foul of the ever higher standards for animal welfare for the reindeers, so he needed a module on advanced Reindeer husbandry. He should ask about any new restrictions on fast moving sleighs. Then of course owing to the pandemic everything he did this year has to be Covid compliant. How was he on all the differing rules around the world on social distancing, mask wearing and digital alternatives? He also had to get up to speed with the green necessities, ensuring all gifts were zero carbon and his sleigh ride did not generate too much carbon dioxide from himself and the animals. He needed to be more socially aware, so each gift would need a certificate to prove it had been made in good conditions for the staff, and he would need himself an approval certificate that he had achieved high standards of governance. Then he should answer the stropky email from the EU pointing out that giving lots of goods away was an infringement of single market rules. As it was a form of state aids or unfair competition he would need to apply two months in advance for an exemption certificate, explaining why he should get away with undercutting properly regulated and taxed suppliers.

Father Christmas is a bit of a traditionalist, and was not sure he wanted to spend his summer slaving over all these worldly topics that might take the fun out of Noel. So he compromised with his advisers and agreed to a conference with experts to see what if anything was relevant to him. At the meeting the Diversity Advuiser started asking lots of very personal questions about the elves. What was their background and how did they reflect differing attitudes towards society and the family? The Trade

Union adviser warned him that his workers even on Christmas night would need decent breaks. Was there a written guarantee that none of them were on zero hours contracts or were going to be sacked immediately after the public holiday? The anti Money Laundering Officer told him he could no longer get away with refusing to disclose who paid for all the presents he was dropping off. The Data Protection Officer said he was in possession of vital individual information which was both personal and commercially valuable. All those wish lists for presents needed to be better filed and password protected, preferably with a duo system and complex codes. The criminal lawyer told him he was especially vulnerable to suspicion of bribes, so he needed to keep a register of any mince pies, glasses of wine or tips he was offered during his work.

The cyber expert told him that as many children now sent in text messages, emails or social media posts with all their details, he needed much better cyber protection. He also needed reliable and secure systems of ordering the gifts. A Christmas Grinch could so easily crash his systems, wrecking the only day of the year when he could provide his service. Indeed, on reflection there was a good case for him straddling Christmas over more days to lessen the risk. The Covid compliance officer told him he must wear a face mask in any house he visited, would have to self isolate for fourteen days before his journey, and should either use disposable gloves at each house or take plenty of hand gel. They thought he could probably argue his journey was necessary for work, but leaving the presents on the doorstep was much safer. The Animal Welfare expert told him he could no longer rely on just one team of reindeers as the work was too great, so he should train and station relief teams around the world. The Green Adviser proposed a fully automated electric sleigh as a better option. The Social Awareness analyst said he could help supply print outs on the suitability of various gift suppliers which would need to be appended to each present. The Governance Adviser said he would need to be certificated himself as someone who had done a good job organising and leading the delivery service.

Father Christmas was well aware that everything had to go like magic to fit it all into a single night. He was nervous about accepting too many changes to the tried and tested methods he used to deliver the lot. Nor did he welcome too many questions on the detail of how it was managed, as the whole point was its seemingly effortless magic that delivered. No-one must be let down and go without a present. He asked the Green adviser how would the electric sleigh work? Might it need recharging on what is a very long journey, and if so how long would that take? The lack of certainty about this led him to conclude he preferred his old sleigh. He said his reindeer had always managed before and knew the routine to perfection. If a vet certified they were fit before and gave them a check over on return wouldn't that suffice? He couldn't see the point of all the financial requirements. It was after all a free service he offered, and part of the wonder was not knowing how it was all paid for. As to him receiving bribes it was laughable. No-one left him cash or large gifts. They were just being friendly with their mince pies. Given his weight problem it was not something he asked for or wanted.

The advisers then changed their tone and said how delighted they

were to get to meet him in person at last. In order to save the postage they had brought their own family lists with them as that might help in his great task. "So" said Santa, "when it comes to your family you do not seem to have the same worries about CV 19, bribes or how green is my transport. Can I suggest that you and your Regulators turn a blind eye to how I do my job on this unique occasion each year? I doubt you would be happy if I told you that on reflection on all your points it was just too difficult to do this on one special night, so the service was cancelled"

So it transpired that the worried advisers thought this could after all be a rare exception to all the rules. Isn't it good to know Father Christmas is Covid compliant after all? Happy Christmas everyone.

---

## Freedom

I was proud to learn when young that I had been born into a freedom loving country. Our nation's story was told as a long progress to one person, one vote. We had pioneered the Mother of Parliaments and had established equal freedoms under the law from Magna Carta onwards. Our country held a distinguished record of defending the rights of smaller nations in Europe to self determination. England had become the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, after seeing off the aggressive tyranny of imperial Spain. Together we had turned the tide of the Napoleonic conquests and military rule of much of Europe. In the twentieth century in coalition with allies we defeated German belligerence twice .

As a teenager I found the defeatism of a new establishment generation surprising. I was advised as a student to emigrate, as people were so gloomy about the prospects of Labour's Britain in the run up to their forced visit to the IMF for bail out. I watched in sadness as a City analyst as our first decade in the European Common market produced the widespread destruction of industry, with closure after closure of mines, steel works, foundries, textile mills and car plants. Many senior managers had lost the will or ability to manage, and many Union leaders were willing to press companies toward bankruptcy by their strike ridden actions. Tariff free product from Germany, France and Italy displaced home production.

In the 1980s I advised Margaret Thatcher on how she could implement a vision of a dynamic enterprising UK, with wider ownership for the many, more small businesses and self employment, higher standards of education and training and better management and Unions working more often for a common good. Towards the end of her time in office I became a Minister in the DTI or Business Department. As Single market Minister given the task of helping the EU "complete" the single market by 1992 I grew to understand just how damaging the EU project was for UK enterprise and small business. Far from being a liberating wealth and income generating project, it was a massive

legislative programme to put so many aspects of commercial and personal life under EU control. It was a one way ratchet to more laws we could not hope to repeal or even at times to improve against the wishes of the Commission. So often the laws set out a blueprint for how you had to make or do things based on continental multinational company procedures.

EU power advanced under successive Treaties agreed by the Conservatives at Maastricht and then far faster and deeper through Nice, Amsterdam and Lisbon under Labour to the full Treaty of European Union. I resigned from the Cabinet under John Major when he refused to rule out abolishing the pound at Maastricht and took the case to the country.

I worked with my party in Opposition to vote against and to highlight the damage the successive integration Treaties Labour signed us up to did to UK Parliamentary democracy. I worked with a few colleagues to make a referendum Conservative policy, finally persuading David Cameron when we approached a majority of Conservative MPs demanding one. When we finally got a referendum in 2016 the majority agreed that continued membership of the EU was incompatible with a flourishing UK democracy based on Parliament and the ability of people to sack incompetent or unpopular governments in regular General elections.

Today it is most important that we make a decisive move to accountable democracy by the way we handle our exit from the EU. Leave voters did not vote to have an Agreement with the EU that recreates the legal ties and obligations of membership. You do not have to accept EU laws to trade with them, as the USA, many smaller independent countries and China can affirm. This week's news with France closing her borders against a fellow member of the single market reminds us of various past occasions when strike action closed the French Channel ports disrupting U.K. supply chains. Taking back control must herald a drive for more U.K. self reliance as we had before our membership of the EEC/EU. Later blogs will examine the other battles we need to win to re establish our lost freedoms.

---

## 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.

---

## 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 more strenuous official efforts to find an alternative to these severe

controls on economic and personal freedom.

---

## 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.