

Tackling the virus

There are three government models for tackling the pandemic.

The first is to give priority in all policy matters to curbing the spread and reducing the death rate from the virus through strong national action. The UK and most other governments tried this in the spring. The problem with this approach is that as soon as governments relax the virus spreads again, leading to pressures to shut down more of the economy for a second or successive times. The concentration of resources is difficult to sustain for long periods, leads to unwelcome deaths from other conditions that can go untreated or may be exacerbated by the policy, and merely delays the spread of the pandemic itself.

The second is to see the problem of public health as one for local government. Patterns of infection and pressures on health services vary widely within the same country, so why not have a menu of possible actions for local government to adopt as they see fit? This is the US model, where State Governors led the responses to the virus, drawing on Federal resource and law where needed. The UK has also been moving more to this model in recent weeks with a three tier approach to lock down.

The third is to trust people and free institutions within a democracy to make their own decisions about how and whether to protect themselves from possible transmission. Government sets out the dangers and passes on national and international knowledge about the threat and the spread. Government also provides support for those who wish to shield themselves, offering the ability to work from home, to have home deliveries and help with technology to switch more of their lives to on line. Governments can message that people need to keep their distance from possible infection, wash their hands and reduce their risk through their choice of travel and work patterns.

Forming hybrids of these approaches is complex. Devolved and local governments often want a say but do not want to take full responsibility. They may wish to lock down, but see it as an opportunity to demand other policy initiatives and resources from central government. Some wish to play politics with it, to try to shift blame onto national government and cast them in a poor light.

My advice is to keep working away on a wide range of actions that can tame the virus and make living with it less dangerous. The medical teams are now coming up with a wider range of drugs to treat the severe forms of the disease, and the death rate in intensive care is dropping. More can be expected from improved understanding of the disease and from trials of better treatments. More knowledge and communication about how the disease spreads should lead to more people opting to take precautions voluntarily, to reduce the risks to themselves, which should help.

It is difficult to see a Test and Trace scheme which can guarantee success as democratic governments hope. Delays in testing and getting results, imperfect

recoding of who was present in an infected location, false results from tests, and reluctance by some to self isolate owing to the difficulties it poses for their lives mean it is not the silver bullet some seek.

My intervention during the debate on the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, 19 October 2020

Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister accept that paying people from the local labour force better, and paying for their training, is a much cheaper solution than building lots of houses to invite migrants in, and a much more popular one?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr Kevin Foster): My right hon. Friend points out that in a time when we have large numbers of people affected by the current economic situation, we need to focus on our own UK-based workforce when it comes to filling needs.

My question during the Statement on EU Exit: Negotiations and the Joint Committee, 19 October 2020

Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen how much popular and excellent quality fresh food there is in our supermarkets with the Union flag on the packaging? Will he confirm that if the EU insists on high tariffs on food trade, where it sells us massively more than we sell it, that would be a huge opportunity for our farmers to grow and rear more for the domestic market and get back the huge amounts of market share stolen from them under the common agricultural policy?

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr Michael Gove): My right hon. Friend makes three very important points. The first thing is that UK producers are doing a fantastic job in increasing production in a sustainable way. Championing the quality of UK produce is something that we should all do and recognise, whether it is Orkney cheddar

or Welsh lamb, that the UK flag is a symbol that connects quality not just to our consumers but worldwide.

The second point that he makes, which is absolutely right, is that the common agricultural policy has been harmful, and our escape from it will ensure both that our farmers can prosper and that our environment can improve. His third point is that we should be confident not just that we can sell more excellent produce here in the UK but that, as we emerge into the world as a global free-trading nation, new opportunities to sell our excellent produce are available to our farmers, and he is absolutely right to be optimistic.

More home grown and reared food please

Yesterday in the Commons I raised again the issue of more home grown produce. The fresh food in supermarkets packaged with the UK flag is popular and usually of excellent quality. Many of us want to keep the food miles down, keep the standards up, and support UK agriculture.

I saw a film recently which said that tomatoes grown in modern greenhouses in carefully controlled environments can yield up to forty times the weight of product that a typical outdoors plant can achieve. It can also be much easier to pick. Modern methods of growing strawberries under polythene or glass can prolong the UK growing season, produce great fruit and simplify picking.

The same film reminded viewer of the how many orchards had to be grubbed up in the 1970s as a tidal wave of tariff free continental imports came into our market and offered cheaper product than the domestic fruit. Under the Common Agricultural Policy and the tariff free EU food regime we have seen a decline of around one fifth in domestically produced temperate food, whilst we have had at the same time to protect the EU growers from cheaper competition from outside the EU with tariffs against the most efficient world producers.

If the EU persists in denying the UK a Free Trade Agreement with no tariffs by insisting on there being a high price for such an obvious thing to grant, then there will be tariffs against EU food imports. We will presumably choose to lower our food tariffs compared to the high EU ones. As these tariffs come to apply to the EU it will give our own farmers a huge incentive to increase their capacity to supply us with much more home grown food, and to cut the food miles as they do so. It would be good to get back to the market share we had in 1970, and to think about restoring those orchards that were ripped out.

Why the single market damaged the UK economy

As a young man one of my first votes was in the original referendum on whether to stay in the EEC, misleadingly called the Common Market during the campaign. I was against the language in the Rome Treaty that warned us this was much more than a Common Market in the making, and disliked the Labour government's lies about the nature and long term aims of the body. I also was asked to produce a decade forecast of the outlook for the UK if we stayed in by my employer.

As I drafted it five problems became clear. The first was the burden of our financial contributions was too high, and these would produce a nasty dent in our balance of payments as we sent that money away and it was converted into foreign currencies. I did not know or forecast Margaret Thatcher would become PM and negotiate a better deal, which limited the damage a bit – or that I would help her.

The second was the UK's industry which had management and Union issues, some old capital stock and poor nationalised industries like steel and shipbuilding that were not cost effective. This meant it was going to have to face the full frontal assault of German and French competition with the full removal of tariffs before it was ready to withstand those pressures. My forecasts rightly assumed we would lose a lot of capacity in areas like steel, cars, foundries, ship building and textiles. Our car output halved in the first decade of membership.

The third was in the areas of services where the UK had a good competitive advantage the considerable barriers to trade were going to remain in place. As a result I reported a major and long lasting deterioration in our balance of payments as imports of foreign goods surged, exports of services were still limited and as we had to make new large payments away.

The fourth was the dreadful deal on fish, bound to damage our industry substantially.

The fifth was the complete removal of tariffs from EEC food, the imposition of tariffs on Commonwealth food, and the hugely damaging impact the EEC would have on areas like fruit and market garden produce.

Later policies as the EU emerged and increased its wide ranging legislative grip also drove us into importing everything from defence equipment to electricity. It was a great scheme for continental exporters. In those days running a balance of payments deficit required stringent credit and money control which slowed growth.