

Not another lock down

The Prime Minister is right to say he does not want another national lock down. The Chancellor is right to warn of economic damage were the government to impose one.

It appears that the Cabinet is arguing over what is the right balance between encouraging people and businesses back to school and to work, and advice or controls over conduct to seek to limit the spread of the virus.

The government needs to ask itself why it wants more of a lock down, and what purpose will be served. The first national lock down had two specified purposes. The first was to save the NHS which was not ready or equipped to handle an upsurge in CV 19 cases. This problem has surely been solved by the addition of many more intensive care beds and the arrival of the Nightingale emergency hospitals, along with billions of pounds of extra funding.

The second idea was to squash the sombrero or flatten the hump in the graph of cases. No-one said they could eliminate the virus. The terms of the lockdown implied a subsequent increase in virus cases as it came off, but at a more acceptable rate and below much increased NHS capacity to cope. It also meant spreading out the virus outbreak reduced the time to the arrival of a vaccine if one is going to emerge this winter.

Now it appears some are moving closer to the idea that we need to eliminate the virus. That would be great. Unfortunately it seems they think this can only be done by imposing very intrusive controls, doing lasting damage to all businesses that rely on social contacts, and keeping the controls in place for a long time. There does not yet seem to be any country worldwide outside China that has imposed draconian lock downs that has avoided a second coming of the virus after relaxing some of the controls. If one country could do it they would need very tough border controls to stop it coming back in from elsewhere.

Yesterday I made some suggestions on how to stop the current spread of the virus leading to more deaths, by stronger safeguarding for those most at risk. I think it unlikely further controls on social contact either for business or within groups of family and friends will be sufficient to end the virus. Test and trace becomes more difficult as we enter the flu and cold season, leaving many more with symptoms. The rate of false results on tests and delays in getting them and finding the results also makes it difficult to guarantee success in stopping the virus by this means.

I have not lectured people on how they should live their lives or respond to the virus. I think the government needs to repeat clear advice on how the virus spreads, what the risks are and what actions might reduce the risk, and leave more to individuals to decide how they wish to respond.