

My question to the Secretary of State for Health & Social Care during the Urgent Question on Covid-19: R Rate and Lockdown Measures, 8 June 2020

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given the Secretary of State's great success in expanding the number of tests, will we soon have more precise and accurate R figures, along with the other information now accumulated, and is there not a danger, in interpreting back trends, that they are unreliable because of differential test rates?

Secretary of State for Health & Social Care (Matt Hancock): The answer is yes and yes. Survey testing is the most reliable way of assessing the prevalence of the disease and its downward trajectory, because it takes into account a randomised approach to working out where the disease is—much like the opinion polls that we are familiar with in this House—because as testing has gone up, inevitably more cases have been found. It is a good thing that more cases have been found, but we need to know the prevalence, which is best done by surveys.

Living with our past

The past is another country. We are linked to it by past members of our families, by the buildings and works of art they left us, and by the language, heritage, culture and institutions they helped fashion. We can enjoy the best of their inheritance, and change those parts of it we do not like or approve. The works and deeds of those who came before cannot be undone, just looked at in different ways. We have the precious gift of life, which means we can help shape the world around us, the world we will pass on to our children in due course. The dead can no longer change our world from the grave. Their believers and helpers who are alive can join our democratic process as we battle over their legacies .

I am glad I live in a country which usually respects the past whilst having sometimes passionate debates about it. I remember taking a Russian visitor around the Palace of Westminster shortly after the Berlin Wall was torn down. After I had described a few of the characters portrayed in pictures and statues he grasped a fundamental truth. He said how lucky I was to live in a country that could live at ease with its past. His country had been one where each successive tyrant who grabbed power rewrote the history as he wished and ordered the tearing down of pictures and statues of those who no longer

pleased.

Each generation has difficult decisions to make about the built and artistic inheritance. I think it is right to conserve sufficient of the past so all interested can see examples of the buildings for themselves, and can find likenesses of the leading figures that helped shape the UK of their day, for better or worse. I have never thought I should with like minded people be able to win an election and then purge our cities and galleries of memorials to those we oppose. My disliking Marx cannot change the historic importance his thinking has enjoyed, nor wipe out the millions of deaths carried through in the USSR and elsewhere by following his ideology. I fought my battles against Marxist social and economic thinking with my pen as a young man. I never suggested defenestrating his statues.

In the UK we have proceeded by evolution rather than revolution most of the time. The English Church or house evolves, with extensions and new facilities added as the generations pass. So it should be with our approach to the built environment. There are times when adapting what we inherit makes sense. There are times when need and commercial logic points to replacement, building anew. Then should we record and photograph what is lost, so those interested will in future know how we changed the world.

Towns and cities with statues on public ground have democratic processes to decide whether to maintain or replace them. Where a City no longer wishes to remember in open space a former leader who gave money or ran parts of public and commercial life the statue could be moved to a private place that did wish to remember, or to a museum where it can form part of an historical display and account.

I share the hatred of many of slavery and enforced occupation of a country by a military power. I have always resented the way the Romans invaded our country, placed it under a brutal military control, and made a market in slaves to give the senior Romans a wonderful lifestyle. It has not made me want to remove all the Roman statues of the thinkers and leaders of the imperial and colonial government which enforced this system on us. I do not deny that alongside their belief in slavery and military rule they also produced some important academic work and technology. The Romans who delighted in the torture and cruel death of animals for sport were good at building large structures. We can debate what if anything they did for us without throwing their statues into the nearest river or sea.

Living in a democracy means respecting and being tolerant of other's views. Today none of us are tolerant of slavery, but we can be tolerant of each other's approach to history. The academics who are often most engaged against the statues of former donors today often depend on donations and fees from China. Are they sure their own deeds are as morally pure as they think those of the past should have been? How do they rate China for civil liberties, freedom of expression and of religion?

Postings to this site

A few people are sending in many posts a day including some long ones. I have just deleted a lot From multiple posters without reading to catch up . For this to work Please keep your contributions to a sensible number and length. One poster now sends in so much I automatically delete everything apart from the occasional one or two liner that catches my eye as I go to delete.

The Transmission rate and the lock down

On Monday I was at last a winner in the lottery to get to ask a question in the Commons. The occasion was the Urgent Question on the government's approach to the lock down.

I followed up the work I have been doing and the issues I have been raising with Ministers over the scientific advice concerning the transmission of the virus and how we arrest it. The Secretary of State confirmed my argument that I have been putting for some time that to get a more accurate estimate of the transmission rate the scientists need a run of numbers of how many people in the country have the virus, based on sample tests that seek to capture the population as a whole.

He also confirmed my other point, that it is difficult constructing an accurate trend for the UK for the early weeks of the disease, because this sample testing was not then carried out. There is a danger that the numbers collected then are misleading, or that the presence of many more tests later detects more of the virus than was detected in the period of few tests.

It must also follow that as they move to more localised lock downs they will need even more accurate sampled testing to see what is going on town by town or smaller area. It appears that infection control in hospitals and care homes is also crucial, as these centres may have spread the disease more intensely than social gatherings.

There is a good case to relax the social distancing requirement from 2 metres to 1 metre as soon as possible. The evidence is very little extra protection is offered by the longer distance, though the economic impact of the reduction would be most helpful to hospitality and travel businesses.

Food standards and future trade deals

I enclose a copy of a letter I have today received from the Government. They rightly confirm that they have no intention of compromising on our high food standards or animal welfare.

Dear John

Food standards and future trade deals

I know that many of you will have been contacted by constituents concerned about recent media reports that UK food standards will be lowered as part of future trade deals.

This UK Government will not compromise on our standards. Our manifesto is clear that in all of our trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards. We remain firmly committed to upholding our high environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards outside the EU and the EU Withdrawal Act will transfer all existing EU food safety provisions, including existing import requirements, onto the UK statute book.

These import standards include a ban on using artificial growth hormones in domestic and imported products and set out that no products, other than potable water, are approved to decontaminate poultry carcasses. Any changes to existing food safety legislation would require new legislation to be brought before this Parliament.

The UK's food standards, for both domestic production and imports, are overseen by the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland. These are independent agencies and provide advice to the UK and Scottish governments. They will continue to do so in order to ensure that all food imports comply with the UK's high safety standards. Decisions on these standards are a matter for the UK and will be made separately from any trade agreement.

All parts of the UK should be proud of our world-leading food, health and animal welfare standards and we will not lower our standards as we negotiate new trade deals.

Best wishes,

THE RT HON ELIZABETH TRUSS MP

Secretary of State for International Trade & President of the Board of Trade

THE RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP

Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs