

Getting the numbers right

I am glad to read today that the government is dropping the Chinese death figures from CV 19 from its deaths graph, as they cannot be sure about the basis on which they are compiled.

They might like to adjust the other country death figures to numbers per million of population to make them a bit more meaningful. There will still be differences in basis for regarding a death as a CV 19 death, and differences from density of population and other factors not related to disease management and healthcare.

I also read that London paramedic advice is being altered to ensure a higher proportion of Covid 19 cases are taken to hospital. If this is true, then the London figures for hospital admissions becomes a useless guide as recent figures will clearly be relatively higher than older figures.

The government needs consistent and accurate figures as a basis for decision making. Hospital admissions was the best series they showed, as I assume they have in place the right procedures for counting patients actually in hospital. They also said they tested the patients to see if they had CV 19. No-one has any idea how many people in the community have or have had CV 19.

Silence over the collapse of the car industry

During the long debates about Brexit Remain MPs and campaigners centred much of their argument on the plight of the car industry in the UK. They falsely claimed Brexit would disrupt supply chains from the continent, ignoring the fact that substantial numbers and volumes of components come into UK auto factories today from non EU sources with no border issues.

They often alleged we would end up with EU tariffs against our cars whilst presumably imposing the same 10% tariff against theirs. That is the tariff the EU makes us impose today on EU vehicles. They wrongly said this would be very damaging, refusing to accept that were that to happen UK factories would sell more to UK customers whilst losing some sales to continental ones.

They wanted to create the impression that an important industry would lose sales heavily and suffer loss of investment and jobs as a result. Instead major motor manufacturers pledged their continuing support for making cars here.

Over the last year or so there has been a large collapse in car sales,

especially of diesels. This is a big loss to the UK which has done much to improve the cleanliness of diesel engines . The UK is a major diesel engine producer. This sales drop has nothing to do with Brexit. It is the direct result of the EU/UK policy of trying to get diesel and petrol cars off the road as part of the decarbonisation policy, and to switch as many people as possible from personal transport to public transport. In the last few weeks the impact of anti virus policies has exacerbated this trend and further worsened the plight of the industry.

In the first quarter of 2020, mainly before the lock down, sales of diesel cars in the UK fell by 51% and of petrol by 36%. In March the trend grew worse with a fall of 62% for diesels and 50% for petrol vehicles. There was scarcely a word from all those Remain campaigners and MPs about this disastrous plunge in sales and output by the industry, yet it has been on a scale out of all proportion to their falsely pessimistic forecasts about Brexit. Why the silence? If they truly cared about the car industry why are they not demanding policy change?

The government increased new vehicle taxes in the 2017 budget which harmed the industry. The Bank of England tightened credit for car loans which harmed output. Government announcements about the need to move on from diesel and petrol put people off buying new ones. Isn't it time those who shed false tears over a Brexit impact that was never likely to happen, shed some genuine ones over the current situation? All our car factories are presently closed. There will be reduced working re-opening of some next month. The problem is not just the virus, but also the underlying policies towards modern petrol and diesel cars.

Well done Dominic Cummings

I am pleased senior advisers go to hear the scientific advice at SAGE meetings and ask questions about it. Good policy advisers listen to specialist advice in order to use the wise bits of it in policy.

Making the decision to relax some controls

Everyone agrees it is a big call. Most agree it has to be made by the Cabinet, preferably with the PM present and guiding.

Some say it should be left to the scientists. They have given us some criteria to do with death rates, cases in hospital rates, and capacity of the NHS. They think we should not lift any controls until these figures show a decent decline in deaths as well as in new serious cases, and plenty of surplus NHS capacity. They also often add they wish to see a capacity to test on a large scale, to resume the original policy of test and trace as the controls are relaxed.

If we leave it to the current scientists closely advising the government it appears we will be locked down in whole or part for a long time. They do not wish to take risks with the virus and do not have to weigh the dangers of not lifting on everything else. The easiest call for a scientist with the sole preoccupation of reducing the virus spread is to keep as many people at home as possible for as long as possible, pending development of a vaccination.

Most think it should be a decision made by the government with a heavy emphasis on the scientific advice. The Cabinet also has to weigh up the enormous economic damage being done by the current dislocation of around half the economy. It should be made with suitable critical examination of the science and the figures.

The Cabinet should insist on the death figures in hospitals being attributed to the correct days. There does seem to have been some attempt to improve the figures, as they are often reported with deaths from varying days reported together on a particular day. They also need to be checked for double counting, given the different points at which deaths seem to be reported. A death should not be both reported near the time of occurrence at hospital and again when it is registered.

If deaths outside hospital are going to be considered it does need to be taken into account that many death certificates were made out by doctors who did not have a test result for Covid 19 and who may not have been much engaged with the patient in their final weeks. There seems to have been a growing awareness of the need to put possible Covid 19 onto death certificates as the pandemic mounted.

The Cabinet also needs to review the models which aim to predict the path of virus cases on varying assumptions. It will find that there is professional disagreement amongst epidemiologists, and quite a wide range of forecasts of outcomes.

There are some who think the Cabinet needs to put more weight than so far on the impact the current policy is having on everyone else. They argue that we have to recognise there is no vaccine nor cure for the time being, but mercifully there are many groups who are unlikely to get a serious version of the disease. They favour getting on with relaxing controls.

I have never thought there is a hard choice, health or the economy. Government has to promote the better health of the greatest number, and the economic wellbeing of the many at the same time. The decision should revolve around the conditions to be imposed on people and businesses to allow them to

resume more of their normal life, whilst taking precautions to continue to limit the spread of the disease.

Lessons for the Bank of England from the ERM, the banking crash and Brexit

I recently published a study of the damage done to the UK economy by the boom and bust policies of past decades. It was part of a series of papers commissioned by the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) and published on Capx. I posted the study on the website earlier today.

The CPS webinar event with will be held over Zoom on Wednesday 29th April at 17:00. The link to register

is: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_9_SvbNUhSGGmUje7SJWBow

Participants will need to have a Zoom account to join the meeting, which is free, and at the time of the event, they will be able to put questions directly to me.