

What precautions should people take for covid?

The government's latest policy is allow us all much more discretion about how we protect ourselves and others from covid 19. Most have accepted the double dose of vaccine or will do so as the second dose becomes available for the youngest adults. This appears to have brought the death rate down massively from the two previous waves of the disease. We can all now decide for ourselves if we wish to go to events and hospitality settings with other people or not, whether we invite people to our homes or not and whether we will wear masks or not.

I would be interested in your response to these restored freedoms. Are you going to avoid busy places and public transport given the prevalence of the delta variant, or not worry as you are vaccinated? Are you going to wear a mask in busy places as a reassurance to others, or not bother as you are sceptical of the value? Are you going to want some distancing from others, or are you happy now to jostle in crowds and prop up a busy bar?

Yesterday the Minister announced he would not be changing the sensitivity of the NHS app. Do you think it is useful? Is it pinging too many healthy people? How many people do now use it all the time?

The state of the employment market

There are plenty of stories about a lack of recruits for hospitality and travel businesses reopening after lockdown, a shortage of truck and van drivers, and even shortages of people to run various types of factory. Meanwhile there are still a substantial number of people on furlough, where we need soon to find out if their jobs are safe and about to be restored or not. If some are not going to be welcomed back into full time employment now would be a good time to have that conversation so they can start to find an alternative amidst all the vacancies or set about the training needed to get into one of the scarcity activities.

Some in business want to blame Brexit for a shortage of people coming from the continent to get jobs here, a model many businesses relied on. The government has had to reveal that instead of there being around 3 to 4 million EU citizens working here as they used to tell us, there are at least 6 million now as they have applied for settled status under the new scheme. Another part of the government has also wondered aloud if there are over 1 million people in the UK from various parts of the world who are not being vaccinated for fear of it triggering an enquiry into their migration status, as they are not registered with GPs. All this implies there are a good number

of people from abroad in jobs, and of course the new immigration system allows people to recruit from abroad in specified scarcity areas and for higher skilled higher paid people.

I have raised with the government the need to expand driver training and testing as they say they are now doing, given the big expansion in home deliveries across the pandemic. Wages at the bottom end are picking up a bit to send a clear signal to people already resident here that they are needed in various scarcity occupations. This should also stimulate the application of more machine and computer power to business activities to raise productivity to allow higher wages and fewer employees per unit of output. There has also in the last year or so been a welcome expansion in the numbers of people setting up new businesses or working for themselves, greatly increasing flexibility and innovation in our economy.

Floods in Erftstadt, Germany

I was sorry to read of the serious floods on a couple of tributaries to the Rhine. Erftstadt was among the cluster of badly affected towns and is twinned with Wokingham. Wokingham sends condolences for the loss of lives in this disaster, and sympathy for all whose homes and lives have been disrupted. The pictures reveal the brute force of too much water scouring away roads and foundations, tossing cars into heaps of wreckage and reshaping the landscape in an unwelcome way. We wish the rescue services well and hope early action can be taken to restore essential services and provide homes for those who are suffering.

What Parliament agreed concerning the EU and Northern Ireland

This week the Commons passed unanimously an important motion to sort out the issues with the EU concerning Northern Ireland. Noting that this got very little attention in the media, I need to set out here what was agreed. I assume the BBC ignored it because it did not offer them the usual opportunity to interview a lot of Remain MPs willing to slag off the UK and put the EU case. To the BBC many pro Brexit MPs speaking for the majority view are non persons unless they can be damaged by a story.

The motion stated:

“That this House

supports the primary aims of the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, which are to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions and to respect the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets;

recognises that new infrastructure and controls at the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic must be avoided to maintain the peace in Northern Ireland and to encourage stability and trade;

notes that the volume of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland far exceeds the trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;

further notes that significant provisions of the Protocol remain subject to grace periods and have not yet been applied to trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and that there is no evidence that this has presented any significant risk to the EU internal market;

regards flexibility in the application of the Protocol as being in the mutual interests of the EU and UK, given the unique constitutional and political circumstances of Northern Ireland;

regrets EU threats of legal action;

notes the EU and UK have made a mutual commitment to adopt measures with a view to avoiding controls at the ports and airports of Northern Ireland to the extent possible;

is conscious of the need to avoid separating the Unionist community from the rest of the UK, consistent with the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement;

and also recognises that Article 13(8) of the Protocol provides for potentially superior arrangements to those currently in place."

So Parliament agrees with the majority in the country at last over this issue, agrees that there is no need to bring in over the top measures the EU wants which have not yet been brought in, and recommends alternative arrangements to the current EU style Protocol. The government Ministers who replied to the debate welcomed the views of those of us who drafted and backed the motion, and the Opposition parties allowed it go through without too many pro EU complaints.

To some of you the wording will be too soft, but the significance is the wording was accepted by all. More importantly the actions that follow are also clear. The grace periods on further excessive EU intervention in NI trade should be permanent as there is no need for the powers and inspections they threaten. The EU and UK should look for an alternative to the Protocol. Parliament sees that the current EU version is alienating the Loyalist community in NI and is therefore contrary to the Belfast peace Agreement. The UK proposal of mutual enforcement and continuing checks as needed away from the border makes sense. Imposing a disproportionate number of checks at NI ports on GB/NI trade makes no sense and is illegal under the Agreement,

The government was committed to protecting the integrity of the UK internal market, and has reaffirmed its commitment in accepting this motion. If there is no early success in EU/UK talks along these lines then it is clear the UK has to take unilateral action, as it is legally entitled to do as set out in the debate. The EU should stop belaying and obfuscating and see that it has at last united the UK Parliament against its view and actions.

Levelling up

On Thursday the PM gave a speech setting out his vision of levelling up. It rightly concentrated on the differences in lives in different parts of our country, drawing attention to big variations in average life expectancy, in likelihood of getting a degree and obtaining a well paid job, and the differences in ability to buy a decent home. The speech both accepted that governments of all persuasions in the post 1945 world have tried to reduce these inequalities, and that the divergencies have remained.

The new ground in the speech was the understanding that successive governments have in practice reinforced the success of the richer areas, drawing ever more talent into places like central London . This has led to the need to invest heavily in public transport and other public services there to cater for all the extra numbers going to work and living in such places. In a vivid topical analogy he said investment has followed success creating a world where you “hang around the goalmouth rather than being the playmaker”. The draw of London has meant many people facing long, expensive and often vexatious commutes, and relentless pressure for more housing investment and development in the South East. As a result two thirds of the country’s graduates from the top 30 universities end up in London.

He was clear that a socialist egalitarian agenda which entails levelling down as well as levelling up is not the way to go. “We should not want to decapitate the tall poppies. We don’t think you make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer”. What you need is more of the potential playmakers to stay in or move to other cities that can as London does attract talent, investment and new jobs.

The big issue is how we help create these new success stories. The digitalisation of the UK is part of the answer, where the PM tells us 60% now enjoy the benefits of faster broadband, up from 7% two years ago. I will return to these issues and examine the government proposals to help level up. Central to it all, as this speech states, is to help many more people on their personal journeys to success, to home ownership, to business creation or to better skilled and better paid jobs.