

In praise of small business and the self employed

Yesterday in Parliament the government confirmed its renewed scheme to offer some money to the self employed who are banned from working by lock down rules.

In the exchanges I welcomed the government's acceptance of a simple proposition. If government prevents someone from earning their living or from trading their business for a public health reason, they should compensate them.

I went on to ask given this common ground between us, why didn't the government follow through and make sure all categories of self employed who have lost their livelihoods to lockdown are in receipt of some substitute income for the duration of the controls?

I was not the only one to ask this. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury gave us the same answer as during the first Furlough scheme. They find it too difficult, for example, to distinguish between a self employed person working only for his own small company and paying himself a dividend, and a rich individual receiving dividends from other companies where he or she does little or no work. I find this bizarre. The Treasury should already know from tax records that the individual just has the one source of income, and works in the company he runs. They can always check it if they are suspicious. They could demand some certification by the individual when claiming the money. They rely on the individual to make an honest declaration of the dividends for tax purposes anyway.

I and others will keep pressing the government, though they seem unwilling so far to be fairer and more flexible. As I explained again to the Minister we will need all the entrepreneurs, small business people and small companies we can get when lockdown is over to power the economy back to life. Our small business sector deserves better. The Treasury should also abandon its tax attacks on people who work for themselves where the tax authorities want to claim they work one of their customers.

The hard questions that must be asked about forecasts, numbers, data and treatments

Throughout this pandemic, I have been dismayed by the poor data and the

misleading forecasts produced by some of the official advisers to the government.

On Saturday evening, like many people, I was left trying to read graphs purporting to give the reasons to justify a major curtailment of personal and business freedom, only to be unable to see the varying scales, the sources of the data or the relevant dates. There were as often glaring omissions. Why, for example, are we never given up to date figures of bed occupancies for the NHS either nationally or regionally?

Over the last six months, we have been shown some gloomy forecasts that proved wrong, regular changes in the way figures like the numbers of deaths are computed, misleading international comparisons with countries that compile data differently and a refusal by the advisers to engage in public with legitimate professional concerns of other medical and scientific experts who take a different view.

We hear a stupid mantra that we must follow the science. There is no single agreed scientific view of this disease because it is new and talented scientists and medics are wrestling to understand it and to work out how best to treat it. There are healthy disagreements between them as they seek better knowledge.

It is the worst kind of talking down to tell us there is one perfect settled scientific view which leads to one simple policy prescription of lock down. When I asked about the forecast of four thousand future daily deaths and the huge range in estimates for both deaths and cases into December, there was no convincing answer. The truth is that the government advisers do not know how many cases or deaths there will be next week or month.

I fully accept that for a minority this is a dangerous and potentially lethal disease. For most, it is at worst a flu-like illness; for others, there are no symptoms at all. I am seeking changes to the way that the government responds to the pandemic. I wish them to do all that a government can to save lives, and to help the vulnerable find the protection they need and want from the disease.

I also wish to see the Government avoid measures which do substantial damage to jobs and livelihoods. As we saw, the last national lockdown was unable to stop the virus spreading again come the autumn. The Government's own advisers who think the lockdown itself brought down case numbers and deaths substantially accept that a tough national lockdown does not solve the problem. They recommend continuing with various lockdown measures as long as we have no cure or preventative vaccine. Others think the virus had peaked at the point where the lockdown was imposed, and maybe the weather and other factors played a part in its temporary demise.

I am urging the government to work closely with medics and pharmaceutical researchers to identify more treatments to cut the death rates. There are various steroids, anti-virals, clot busters and antibody treatments that have now been found to help, or may emerge from trials as useful additions to treatment.

Health professionals have also now discovered using non invasive ways of administering extra oxygen are often best. There are also issues about whether Vitamin D and zinc supplements can help. I have urged more emphasis on qualified people seeking new ways of treating and preventing. There is much medical and pharmaceutical talent in the UK, and it may well make more breakthroughs, as it did with the introduction of steroid treatment.

I have urged better data. The basis of defining a death has been changed several times during the pandemic, and there are issues about whether Covid-19 deaths have been overstated whilst understating other lung infections and serious co morbidities in the mainly elderly people dying. In the early stages, the authorities boosted death numbers from Covid-19 by directing its inclusion on a death certificate even if there was no confirmatory test for its presence, based on reported symptoms.

There was also a wish to ascribe all deaths to Covid-19 where it was present, even though the elderly person concerned may have died from one or more of several other bad conditions they had. Some of the most common tests for the disease may also report false positives, which needs to be taken into account when examining figures for deaths and cases. The latest forecasts for cases and deaths take the form of very wide ranges where the upper figure is three times the lower figure, making them meaningless as planning forecasts.

There is an absence of reliable public data on hospital bed occupancy, which seems to be the main worry of NHS management and the scientific advisers. We must not close the economy down to save the NHS if it can now cope thanks to the building of the Nightingales, greatly expanding intensive care facilities and recruiting many more staff. Why are we not using some hospitals as isolation hospitals specialising in Covid-19, and leaving the rest of the system free of the disease to reassure patients needing many other treatments?

What we do know is a lockdown is very damaging to jobs and business. The first national lock down took around a quarter off our national income and output – an unprecedented fall. We cannot afford to do that again, as government rightly spent a fortune on subsidising public services and private sector employment to cushion the blow.

I am pressing for substantial changes to lockdown plans. I see no need to close outdoor sports facilities. I think a range of specialist retailers should stay open with suitable measures to cut risks of infection spreading. Pubs and restaurants should be allowed to sell drink as well as food for take away. Government should work with business and offer help to improve air extraction so more can function safely indoors.

I do support the schools staying open as this is important to the development and future prospects of children and teenagers. This disease is usually very mild in young people. I have urged the resumption of non Covid-19 work by the NHS as Ministers seek, as many more people die of causes other than Covid-19 every day.

In order to reduce, the spread of the virus everyone needs to reduce the

number of social contacts they have in enclosed spaces with poor air. This requires buy-in by the public. There is no agreed set of laws and controls on our everyday movements that will guarantee success. Government needs to persuade people to reduce social contacts rather than try to find a set of laws they can enforce against the wishes of a significant minority. It could also help by assisting more people and businesses to live with the virus for all the time we have no cures and vaccines.

Can we have more UV sanitising systems deployed in public places? Can we have more assistance to adapt air systems in commercial premises to extract dirty air promptly to make them safer? Can we have some better understanding from government that we need all the small businesses that serve us, and they are the ones that are in danger of being hounded out of work by clumsy generalised lockdowns.

We can adapt our lives to living with the virus by many small steps of a practical nature. This battle cannot be won by taking too many liberties away, and lecturing people to stop their social and business lives. My constituents want the government to work with them to help protect the vulnerable and make normal life safer for the rest. There is no silver bullet or single answer. We all need to help, and that requires a general spirit of collaboration, tolerance and commonsense.

This article was originally published on ConservativeHome:

<https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2020/11/john-redwood-covid-19-and-the-hard-questions-that-must-be-asked-about-forecasts-numbers-data-and-treatments.html>

New National Restrictions – Economic Support

I have received this update from the Chancellor:

I wrote to you in September highlighting the positive impact of the comprehensive and generous £200 billion package of support we have brought in since March to protect jobs, livelihoods and businesses.

In response to the new national restrictions announced by the Prime Minister to help tackle the spread of coronavirus, we are today confirming what support the Government will offer to help support businesses and individuals during this period.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

I am confirming today that the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) will be extended until 2 December 2020.

The scheme will operate on the same terms as the previous scheme and mirror the levels of support available under the scheme in August – this means that the government will pay 80 per cent of wages up to a cap of £2,500 for hours not worked.

Employers will not have to make any contribution to their employees' wages for the hours not worked – they will only be asked to cover National Insurance and Employer pension contributions, which for the average claim accounts for just 5 per cent of total employment costs (or £70 per employee per month). Claims can be made from next week and as previously, paid within 6 working days.

The extended scheme will be open to new entrants; specifically, employees must have been employed and on an employer's PAYE payroll on or before 30 October 2020. This means a Real Time Information (RTI) submission notifying payment for that employee to HMRC must have been made on or before 30 October 2020.

Neither the employer nor the employee needs to have previously used the CJRS to make a claim. Employees employed as of 23 September (day of the Job Support Scheme announcement) and notified to HMRC by RTI on or before that date, who have since been made redundant can be rehired and placed on the Scheme.

Support for the self-employed

Today, the Government is also announcing that we will provide more generous support to the self-employed and will pay that support more quickly. We are increasing the support to the self-employed from 40 per cent of trading profits to 80 per cent for November. As SEISS grants are calculated over 3 months, this increases the total level of the grant from 40 per cent to 55 per cent of trading profits for November to January and the maximum grant will increase to £5,160.

This provides broadly equivalent support to the self-employed as we are providing to employees through the government contribution in the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in November and then the Job Support Scheme in the two subsequent months. HMRC will pay this more generous grant sooner than planned and in good time for Christmas – the window for claiming a grant will open on 30 November, two weeks earlier than previously announced.

Loan extensions

We have announced that we plan to extend our loan schemes – the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Future Fund – to the end of January.

We will also adjust the Bounce Back Loan Scheme rules to allow those businesses who have taken out less than their maximum (i.e. less than 25 per cent of their turnover) to top-up their existing loan giving businesses greater flexibility and support. Businesses will be able to take up this

option from next week; they can make use of this option once.

Mortgage payment holidays

Mortgage payment holidays will continue to be available for homeowners. Borrowers who have been impacted by coronavirus and have not yet had a mortgage payment holiday will be entitled to a six-month holiday and those that have already started a mortgage payment holiday will be able to top up to a maximum of six months without this being recorded on their credit file. The FCA will announce further details on the scheme, including how customers can continue to apply for this support.

Support for local businesses in England

Throughout the crisis, we have provided support for businesses. We are today confirming that businesses which are forced to close due to the new restrictions will receive up to £3,000 per month – this is worth over £1 billion a month under the new national restrictions and will benefit over 600,000 businesses.

Businesses in the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors that have been suffering from reduced demand for a while due to local restrictions will receive back dated grants at 70 per cent of the value of closed grants (up to £2,100 per month) for this period.

We are also providing one off funding of £1.1 billion to local authorities to support businesses more broadly over the coming months, who are a key part of our local economies.

More funding for English Local Authorities to support their local healthcare response

Up to £500 million will be provided to local councils for local public health initiatives, such as additional contact tracing, testing for hard-to-reach groups and communications.

The Contain Outbreak Management Fund has already supported several English Upper Tier Local Authorities to fund local public health initiatives. Where necessary, they will have this funding topped up to a maximum of £8 per head of population. If they have not received any to date, they will be entitled to the full £8 per head.

We are also providing additional funding to local authorities to support the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable now that revised guidance is in place nationally. Funding will be provided of up to £14.60 per Clinically Extremely Vulnerable person for the 28-day period that the restrictions are in force. We will review this funding after the 28-day period should the strictest guidance remain in place in any one area once the initial 28-day period is over.

Alongside our £200 billion package of support committed since March, these announcements will give businesses the support and flexibility to adjust and plan over the coming months.

Dear Constituent

I am seeking changes to the way the government responds to the pandemic. I wish them to do all a government can to save lives, and to help the vulnerable find the protection they need and want from the disease. I also wish to see the government avoid measures which do substantial damage to jobs and livelihoods.

I am urging the government to work closely with medics and pharmaceutical researchers to identify more treatments to cut the death rates. There are various steroids, anti virals, clot busters and antibody treatments that have now been found to help or may emerge from trials as useful additions to treatment. Health professionals have also now discovered using non invasive ways of administering extra oxygen are often best. There are also issues about whether Vitamin D and zinc supplements can help. I have urged more emphasis on seeking new ways of treating and preventing.

I have been very critical of the data and forecasts used by government advisers to urge Ministers into adopting lock downs. The basis of defining a death has been changed several times during the pandemic and there are issues about whether CV 19 deaths have been overstated whilst understating other lung infections and serious co morbidities in the mainly elderly people dying. The latest forecasts for cases and deaths take the form of very wide ranges where the upper figure is three times the lower figure, making them meaningless as planning forecasts. There is an absence of reliable published data on hospital bed occupancy which seems to be the main worry of NHS management and the scientific advisers. We must not close the economy down to save the NHS if it can now cope thanks to building the Nightingales, greatly expanding intensive care facilities and recruiting many more staff.

I am pressing for substantial changes to lock down plans. I see no need to close outdoor sports facilities. I think a range of specialist retailers should stay open with suitable measures to cut risks of infection spreading. Pubs and restaurants should be allowed to sell drink as well as food for take away. Government should work with business and offer help to improve air extraction so more can function safely indoors.

I do support the schools staying open as this is important to the development and future prospects of children and Teenagers. This disease is usually very mild in young people. I have urged the resumption of non CV 19 work by the NHS, as many more people die of causes other than CV19 every day.

If you are suffering particular problems with your job or business from the proposed lock down please let me know as I am pressing for change from Ministers. Without serious change to this policy I am unable to support it in

a vote.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood

Remembrance

Last year Remembrance Day fell during the General Election. As a result there were no serving MPs and I was not able to lay a wreath.

This year there will be no official wreath laying owing to CV19 precautions. I have therefore delivered a wreath to Wokingham Town Hall so the staff can add the wreath from me as MP to the wreaths laid last year by others. I also agreed to attend a much slimmed down Church service next Sunday which I assume will be cancelled given the likely new lockdown rules.