

Returning to work?

To many people working long hours at home to do what they used to do from an office it is strange to be told now is the time for them to go back to work. It is even odder to be urged back by the Head of the CBI who then concedes that she has not herself been working from the expensive HQ of the CBI in central London in recent weeks. She may decide to work just two days a week from the London office from next month to show willing or to get through the obvious interview questions about her advice to others.

Something has changed in the mood of both employers and employees as a result of the CV 19 crisis. Yes, the immediate reason for the mass exodus from city centre offices was a combination of government instruction and fear of the virus. As the virus has receded and as companies and transport systems have tried to reassure about safety other issues have come to the fore that were there long before the pandemic hit.

More people were seeking and gaining flexible contracts which allowed them to work just part of the week in the office and have more time off work for family and domestic reasons, or to work some of the time from home. There was a growing expectation that employers would allow parents to take time out of a working day to attend school events or care for their children. Employers became more flexible about everything from dentist appointments to weddings and funerals, and from sports sessions to shopping. They allowed some of this to fit into the working day. Office computers were used by staff to plan holidays or buy items on line, so staff were not always working for the employer when at the employer's premises.

The lock down crystalised a couple of things for employees. They found in many cases they could do all their work from home given on line technology and an office in the cloud. It was a huge bonus to save the large amounts of time and money taken up by the daily commute. They could punctuate the working day at home with the drinks, meals and domestic chores of their choice. They could extend their working time into the travel and home time of their old lives to compensate if they took some of the day time for a personal need.

It also surprised employers. They found that many employees worked just as hard or even harder when trusted to work from home. Many of the employers themselves came to value the freedom it gave them in their own personal lives, no longer under observation from employees of how much time they spent in the office. It could lead on to economies for the company, though most so far are paying the rents on the largely empty offices and delaying big strategic decisions about how much space and what type of space they will in due course need.

Of course there are issues that need managing with a workforce more at home than in the office. Those who gamed the system in the office can game the system more easily when at home. Good managers stay in regular touch with homeworkers and assess their contributions and send sufficient work to them.

Meetings and informal discussions can be an important part of resolving problems, innovating and improving service. People have to be encouraged to pick up the phone or the on line link as regularly as they had informal talks in the office. In practice in offices colleagues increasingly talked to each other by email anyway. Teams need to get together in person as well as on video link , which managers can decide and supervise.

Homeworking and the virus should not become an excuse for reducing service levels or building inconvenience and delay in for the customer. Some of the most competitive businesses, like the on line retailers, have shown you can raise service standards and take on more work even against the background of the virus and enforced social distancing.

It is difficult to forecast what might now happen. Some think there will be a gradual return to five day office working and we will restore the rush hour, the five day commute and the busy city centre in due course. Some think employers and employees will over the next few months evolve new ways of getting the work done and dividing up their time, with on line emails, conference calls and video meetings playing a permanently larger role in our lives. If sufficient businesses decide to allow substantially more homeworking in the mix then we will see lost jobs and lost businesses in city centres, along with lower office rents and some office conversions to other uses. There will also need to be big changes to trains, buses and tubes as they adjust to the two or three day week season ticket and the staggering of hours.

Meanwhile the parlous situation in city centres for small businesses is also the result of continuing social distancing rules, the absence of tourists and the cancellation of many events and entertainments.

Who is trying to divide the UK?

One of the worst features of the hopeless 2017 Parliament was the way the government with no majority seemed to think it needed to reach out for the Union to the SNP in Scotland and to the Republic of Ireland. In both the Brexit talks and on wider issues the government revealed a fear that the Union was in some way in danger, and then thought it could strike a deal with political forces pledged to break up the Union or following a policy of trying to split it for their own advantage.

It was first strange to think the Union was in danger. After all, as good democrats the Union Parliament had recently provided a once in a generation referendum on Scottish independence to the forces in Scotland that did want to break up the Union. After a long and lively debate the Scottish people decided by a healthy majority to stay in the UK. The SNP themselves confirmed this was something you only did once in 20 or 30 years.

The UK always made clear to the Republic of Ireland that they could keep the Common travel area with us when we left the EU, so they would have a special relationship with the UK. The UK always offered tariff free trade to the whole EU, so Ireland could work with her partners to secure that prize she wanted. All the time the government kept the goodwill of most Northern Ireland MPs – and its own backbenchers – it had a majority. Many of us wanted a more robust approach to the EU's attempt to force us to a bad settlement by unsettling the Union.

The more the Prime Minister genuflected to the Republic of Ireland and to the SNP the more the EU reckoned the UK was nervous and weak, so the more they held out for unreasonable terms in the withdrawal talks. The EU saw Scotland and Ireland as ways to keep the UK under EU laws., making concessions on fish, budgets and much else. They worked well with those who wanted to break up the UK.

The more the agenda was settled by the EU and the anti Brexit forces, the more the government's natural unionist allies in all parts of the UK felt sidelined.

The EU of course had much form in trying to damage the Union. It always wanted to play up differences between Scotland and the UK. It promoted lop sided devolved government. It tried to deny the existence of England, seeking to split our country into regions and even experimenting with a region which put Kent and parts of Northern France together.

One of the EU's biggest mistakes which led to the historic vote to leave was its refusal to recognise England in the way it promoted Scotland. One of the previous governments biggest mistakes was to panic in public about the Union and then deny England a proper place at the table over the EU. As I regularly asked when the UK government rushed to consult Scotland about the negotiations, who spoke for England? A successful union depends on the goodwill of all parts of the Union including England. The more that is devolved, the more England needs her own voice in government to keep the balance.

At peace with our past?

I remember showing a visitor from the recently liberated USSR around Parliament. He remarked that it was a pleasure to see a country "at peace with its past". For he saw in the statues and paintings, the memorabilia and the stories, all the nation's past represented – good and bad, insiders and outcasts, establishment and rebels. They are on display for all to see. We cannot change the facts that they lived, held their own views and made their own impact. In his crumbling superstate the government told you what to think about the past, and threw out the statues and paintings of people and events they disliked.

Few of the figures from our past would have shared our preoccupations or held similar views to our present consensus where it exists. Some will look at the statue of Cromwell and see a tyrant and a butcher. Others will see him as the embodiment of a rebellion to tame the arbitrary power of the monarch and to give the generations to come a say in how they are governed. He is still part of our present as well as our past, as we still react today to both the good and the bad of his legacy.

Some will look at the great merchants and business people of the eighteenth century and see there generous donors of civic improvement at home. They will acknowledge their contribution to the betterment of many in the UK who gained employment and advancement from their enterprise. Others will dwell on those that made money out of the slave trade and rightly condemn that source of wealth.

It is true in a way that the past is a foreign country. Many attitudes and assumptions were different then. It is also true there is considerable continuity. Some of the past is an important part of our being a community. Tradition means enjoying what was best about the past and learning from what success our ancestors had in promoting a better life for many. Just as we celebrate our own landmarks of birthdays and anniversaries, so nationally we celebrate or remember important events in the life of our nation. Our nation above all made great breakthroughs for democracy and freedom at home and abroad.

Living in a great democracy means we all need to show some tolerance to each other and cut some slack to our past relatives who had different views from us. It is best to study them in their full range, and accept we will find things we do not like as well as things that showed they cared about us, the ones who came after. The thinkers of the Enlightenment thought they were “dwarves on the shoulders of giants”, who could see further because they could add to the visions of the ancient philosophers and scientists before them. Today too we should accept that we can see further, enjoy greater prosperity and assert superior morality to the past partly thanks to what they achieved and passed on to us.

I have got used in politics to the gross discourtesy and aggressive personal abuse adopted by some on the left. I assume that is because they have such a bad case. I do not like to see the same style adopted by people who I might otherwise wish to agree with.

Freedom now

The BBC's wish to avoid singing “Britons never never never shall be slaves” speaks volumes about how hostile to freedom many in the establishment have become.

There is nothing colonial nor racist in this iconic chorus. It is a paean to the liberty of the British, a reminder that we sided against continental tyrannies and opted for the course of freedom.

It records the success of the British against Spanish invasion and planned conquest, and against French expansions. Later we were to offer the same resistance to German attempts at the unification of Europe by military force.

Today our liberties are under pressure. Government in the name of tackling the pandemic has made unprecedented inroads into our personal freedoms for peace time. Now the threat is much reduced and medical understanding of the virus increased, it is time to relax the controls further and restore more dignity and judgement to us all.

Schools should make more of their own decisions about how to keep their staff and pupils safe, and not expect a detailed government blueprint about how and where they hold classes. Businesses need to set out their own approach to hygiene and safety, explaining it to customers who can decide whether to go there or not.

Local and national government places more and more restrictions on people getting about in cars in ways which sometimes make town and city centres more dangerous for all involved as well as more frustrating for pedestrians as well as drivers.

Government is in danger of taking too much to itself. Leaving more to a free people and their private and public sector institutions beyond central government is the right way forward. It will produce better answers, a more prosperous society and see off the threat of a new slavery.

Jaguar the brand

I would like Jaguar to succeed as a UK manufacturer and have been worried by recent news reports of poor sales figures and issues over a possible partner. The value of the brand rests in part on the loyal following of past Jaguar owners which they need to consider as they plan their future products.

The company needs to ask itself why it is selling so few Jaguars. Did it lose past customers by the way it treated them in its search for a new generation and style of customer?

When they dropped the S type and went to the XF they allowed the press to write that they were looking for a new younger breed of Jaguar buyer. To find these new buyers they changed from a car which was clearly part of the Jaguar design heritage in modern idiom, to a vehicle that did not have much Jaguar about it. The shape of the XF was similar to the Vauxhall Insignia which did that design well at cheaper prices. They then decided to make the legendary

XJ into a stretched version of the smaller car. Maybe that did not work as they hoped.

Did they do some selling down? Were they seeking to get established owners to buy smaller and cheaper variants to boost the sales of newer products?

In recent years the Land Rover and Range Rover brands have powered far more sales than Jaguar. There the company has managed to preserve the essence of the old whilst creating cars that are clearly new. They have kept more past customers whilst attracting new ones.

I read that Jaguar have decided to delay the entry of their electric XJ Jaguar. I presume they have carried out sales research and decided there are too few potential buyers. They should do a bit more research into what people who have liked the brand in the past might buy, as that could still be a useful reservoir of potential custom.

What some like about the brand is its past ability to harness great British design and to produce the cars in a UK factory. Some are not looking for a clone of the great Jaguars of the past, but a modern embodiment of the design inspirations that made past vehicles iconic and distinctive in their day . The theme was Grace, Pace, Space. It is important that when they launch a new car it has some of the flair and brilliance of the E type or the Mark II Sports saloon. They were radical new cars on launch, but they kept alive the tradition of beautiful lines, good performance and a more affordable price than many luxury car competitors. The ageing XF and XJ do need replacement. Bring on a proper Jaguar. We need that to restore the sales. There is no fundamental reason why Jaguar should be so far behind BMW or Mercedes in selling cars.