


It's vital that the House of Commons scrutinises these harsh restrictions

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 Chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance (left) and Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty (right), with Prime Minister Boris Johnson

The announcement on Saturday afternoon that large swathes of the country were being placed into the new Tier 4 has plunged families into despair as Christmas for so many was in effect cancelled. Much of the despair comes because we have only very recently come out of a nationwide lockdown, one which was intended to bring the infection rate in England down far enough that a period of looser rules could be allowed over Christmas. As it turns out, that strategy has been proved wrong. Once one sweeps away the newspeak that George Orwell wrote about so perceptibly, it is clear that Tier 4 is much the same as a third lockdown. It's too easy just to blame Government ministers for all these decisions – what about their scientific advisers, who have a vital role in deciding these restrictions but are adept at stepping back into the shadows when it suits them?

As I listened to Sir Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty speak at their press briefing on Saturday, nothing they said was different from what they told the Government only at the beginning of the week.

So why did they not alert ministers to the dangers earlier? Especially when, as we now know, scientists learnt about this mutation back in September. The old rule that advisers advise and ministers decide is of course true, but when it comes to an issue as complex and far-reaching as this pandemic it is only fair to do all we can to understand what role Sage has played in creating the present situation. That is why I believe it is vital for the House of Commons to debate these new restrictions so we may test the rationale behind them, as we did the previous forecasts that plunged us into lockdown.

From the start, Sage has taken a number of different positions on a number of different forecasts. I recall early in the year, before we locked down, when Sage didn't think testing was vital or that face masks were important. Then there was the infamous modelling from Prof Neil Ferguson which suggested huge numbers of deaths if stricter measures were not taken. That is not to mention the dodgy 4,000 deaths a day graph which helped plunge us into the last lockdown. Now we are told that this new variant is 70 per cent more transmissible than the old variant.

Science is exact, but it is apparent that when epidemiologists try to produce forecasts they are no more accurate than economists. That we should follow the science, as the Government says, is true – but I wonder at times if the scientists advising the Government are doing so themselves. That is why, I believe, the Prime Minister hung on to the hope that families could meet at Christmas for so long. He instinctively understood, as some of his most senior ministers and Sage seemed not to, that there are wider issues here.

Beyond Covid and beyond the collapsed economy, he gets that it is vital for our personal well-being to have something to hope for at this desperate time and that there is nothing we might hope for more than seeing family. After all, Christmas speaks not just to Christians, but to people of all faiths and none, critically because at heart it is a festival built around the “holy ground” of the family – our most vital institution and from which we draw renewed strength.

Beyond the politics, dashing the hope of family is the toughest decision the Prime Minister has had to make. That’s why it is vital that MPs have the right and chance to scrutinise how that choice was made.

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