

Message

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Sent: 10/07/2020 07:50:44
To: Simon Case [SCase@no10.gov.uk]; Oliver Illott [oliver.illott@cabinetoffice.gov.uk]
CC: P.Vallance1@go-science.gov.uk
Subject: Speech

Dear Simon

You said the PM was intending to make a speech about the next year and COVID-19, which is great as this will make it possible to lay out the strategic framework into which tactical decisions and announcements fit. He will want to be both optimistic and realistic, and chart a course back to normality.

I have framed this optimistically within the realities of the virus; there is a darker version. If the speech can be used by the press to imply we can just return to normal, or does not warn of the risks of winter, it is unlikely to wear well. And if it can be used to justify a reckless approach to lifting or flouting restrictions it will be a serious problem for our ability to combat the virus and for the PM. Resurgences are likely, and there will of course be people wanting to point to the PM's speech as a cause of them even when there is no causal link.

As you know I think there are 4 risks that are the short term backdrop, and several opportunities from science in the longer term. Resurgences may occur in winter/early spring (seasonal advantage to the virus and disadvantage to the NHS test and trace), autumn (schools + season), because we lift restrictions too fast or too completely, or because another global wave hits us. On the other hand we will get more drugs, and may get a vaccine, fairly soon and incrementally science will give us enough tools to get on top of this. But fairly soon in science terms does not mean before spring next year. So up to next year it is hard to paint a particularly optimistic picture; from next spring that becomes a lot easier to sustain.

Therefore for the speech the following points are probably worth making:

-The UK has got through the first wave through collective action, cases are massively down from their peak, and mortality rates are now back to their seasonal normal for summer. The NHS has responded magnificently. This form of collective action to combat a virus has not been attempted on this scale before and was a remarkable national effort.

-In the short to medium term (next 9 months) it will be necessary, and possible, to find a balance between letting the virus back to growth, and changes to our way of life.

-We all want to minimise the social and economic disruption, but a return to exponential viral growth will happen if we collectively get this balance wrong. We can see around the world how different societies have tried to get a balance that works for them. A complete return to normality this year is not a realistic prospect; social distancing will be a feature of 2020.

-It may well be that the balance in the UK will have to be different at different times of the rest of this year, and late autumn and winter is likely to present a particular challenge. The combination of things we have to do to keep the virus at bay as we go about our lives may have to be adjusted if it looks as if the virus is escaping control, or gets a seasonal advantage in winter.

-Looking to the next year, once we are through the winter, which may require more restrictions to be imposed, we can expect a more complete return to normality. And eventually, and possibly as early as this time next year, a near complete return to normality.

-Science, at which the UK is a world leader, will ride to our rescue. Science has helped us defeat multiple infectious challenges- Ebola, HIV (etc, long list); it will allow us to defeat this one and return to our normal way of life. We will find tools to prevent disease, and to treat it, without having to resort to social distancing. The UK has probably the leading vaccine candidate in terms of time, and produced the first evidence of a drug that reduces mortality. Science is a global endeavour, and there is an unprecedented scientific effort around the world. The question is not whether we will find tools to defeat this, it is only what and when. It is likely that we will go into spring next year with the risks reducing and many more tools at our disposal, and although many currently promising vaccines and drugs will not in the end work, we will find ones which alone or in combination will. Whilst we cannot predict with certainty when developments will arrive summer of 2021 is likely to be a much brighter prospect than now.

-We will however have to assume we go into this autumn and winter with the tools we have now, and they are the societal restrictions which make it hard for the virus to get a hold. We must be self disciplined about social distancing, self isolation etc, because the virus certainly has not gone away, and as we see around the world a period after restrictions are eased has significant risks. Let down our guard too much or too fast and resurgence is not just likely, but inevitable. Local flare ups will occur, and need to be addressed as they arise, and a national surge may well happen at some point requiring a national response, and is particularly likely over the late autumn and winter months. In that case we will not hesitate to act. We need to think of this as a battle fought over many months, not weeks.

Chris