

Wow. Rishi also proposed £20 billion in outright grants and tax cuts for companies at immediate risk of collapse. Who would have thought that the Tory Party would preside over the biggest programme of state intervention in the economy since 2008? Unlike almost any other economic crisis, this hardship is directly driven by our own policies to save lives, so it's only right and fair to put policies in place to help people through.

The point is that liberal individualism is a great political philosophy – probably the most successful in the history of mankind – but no use in a pandemic, when the problem is essentially communitarian, stemming from the fact that we all catch the same disease because we're all human. Anyway, Rishi got Cabinet's full support. As Boris put it, 'We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy.'

Later a senior civil servant came over from the Cabinet Office, charged with getting agreement across government for what's going in the emergency Bill. I've worked with him on a host of projects and he's a first-rate generalist classic civil servant, but he nonetheless took some time to adjust to the notion that this new legislation needs to be drawn up and enacted right away. I was not at my most patient best, and our exchange quickly became somewhat heated as I told him in no uncertain terms that we can't delay, and that if any departments don't get their act together by Thursday, we'll have to publish the Bill anyway. There are some measures I simply won't countenance – like a bonkers proposal from the Ministry of Justice to let prisoners out, as they'd be easier to manage if they're not in prison. Yes really: they actually thought this might be a goer.

I was emphasising this point so hard that all of a sudden my chair could take the strain no longer and ripped, tipping me unceremoniously onto the floor. Humiliating as it was, it broke the ice, and the stony-faced mandarin finally cracked a smile. After that, we came to an agreement pretty swiftly.

Continuing to work through the practicalities, Steve Oldfield updated me on the huge stocks of PPE in a warehouse in the north-west:



a billion items. Just one problem – we can't get it out. It turns out that when they laid down the PPE stockpile in the 2000s, no one thought about the circumstances under which we might need it, i.e. an emergency, in which time is of the essence. It's in a huge storage unit which only has one door. Ergo, only one lorry can pull up at a time. Shame nobody looked at Amazon's warehouses for inspiration – they have dozens of lorry bays. What a classic government fail.

Lack of doors notwithstanding, we have a real moral responsibility to sort this out. It's about protecting everyone who is putting their own health at risk to look after others. I called Ben Wallace to ask if the army can help get this stuff out to hospitals, and he was immediately on board. Overnight 150 trusts had PPE shipments and I'm promised that by the end of the week all trusts will have had at least one delivery. Care homes are desperate, and I've insisted they also each get a load. It doesn't matter if they are private businesses: it's an emergency and we need to do our best to protect everyone in the country.

As instructed, Steve and his team have been buying from abroad. He told me our plodding procurement processes are a massive hindrance. The rules say they have to buy at the bottom quartile of the market, which in normal times is vital for value for money, but prices are shooting up and we are losing deals. I told Steve to throw everything at it. 'Anything out there – you buy it. Identify it and buy it. We need tiger teams across China seeking and buying the PPE we will need.' How ironic that only a few weeks ago we sent a plane load of our own PPE to... China. The right thing to do at the time, and only a tiny quantity in the grand scheme of things, but if we'd known what was coming, we might not have been as generous.

We are at least finally making significant progress on testing. David Halpern plus Will Warr, the health policy lead in No. 10, organised a crunch meeting with potential testing providers, with PHE, NHS officials and everyone else we needed in the room to make things happen. Boris opened the meeting, stressing the importance of the mission, and then passed to me to chair. I listened to the private