

Sunak's playing Canute on Covid

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Chancellor Rishi Sunak really is seeking all the headlines today, and all for the wrong reasons. The [FT has noted](#) he did not understand the tax deal he signed at the weekend. And now he and the Treasury are really trying to make themselves look very stupid on Covid. [As the Guardian reports](#):

Rishi Sunak is willing to accept a delay of up to four weeks to the final stage of England's reopening roadmap, the Guardian understands, as the government considers extending restrictions beyond 21 June.

I love the word 'willing' in that paragraph, as if they have any control at all over this. That they think they have is apparent from this follow on comment:

Sunak, the chancellor, has in the past been regarded as more keen to lift lockdown constraints than some cabinet colleagues. But a Whitehall source said he was not fixated on the 21 June date and was more concerned that when restrictions are lifted, the move can be permanent. "The Treasury's main thing is that freedoms are irreversible and businesses have clarity," the source said.

I have no doubt that this is well-sourced. What it reveals is troubling. The Treasury has long held the view that only its opinion matters, and all must respect its wisdom. But what these comments reveal is that the Treasury really does think it operates apart from the reality of the world that we live in.

Covid is expanding very fast at present. The growth is exponential. No vaccine rollout now will prevent that. The time lags make that impossible. It is possible that there may be fewer deaths amongst the elderly as a result of the vaccinations that have happened. But that will not prevent very serious illness in the under 64s, where cases and hospitalisations are rising rapidly. There are worrying impacts for children.

But, the Treasury finds this all terribly inconvenient. It wants certainty. And it wants that certainty to fit its pre-ordained thinking, which dictates that this crisis is over. It isn't. It isn't by a long way, in fact. And what is really required is the type of thinking on

a new order that embraces the fact that Covid might well have an impact for some time to come - and certainly until after the time the whole world is Covid vaccinated, and maybe well after that. This will not be until some time in 2023 at the earliest. And, I stress, who knows what might have happened by then? [I discussed that new required thinking earlier this week.](#)

Instead of showing such flexibility Sunak and the Treasury are 'doing a Canute' (and I know all the stories and interpretations: I know Canute might have been much wiser than Sunak by making the opposite point to that which legend suggests). They are suggesting it is now time for nature to buckle down and fit in with their plans. It really is, in fact, time for it to deliver certainty.

Nature does not do that. Nor will it ever do so.

The fact that the Treasury does not know this is profoundly worrying. It is for Covid, but it also reveals how far removed from reality they must be on climate change.

The truth is that what we have at the heart of government is a ministry that lives in the early twentieth century when it comes to economics and the ability to think. All evidence from any era post-1929 appears to have passed it by. But they think they rule the roost, and by and large, they do. That is profoundly worrying and deeply dangerous. Add a compliant Chancellor, more than willing to parrot their views into the mix and we are in deep trouble. And that's where we are.