

Funding the Future

Article URL

Published: January 12, 2026, 6:24 pm

The FT [has reported this morning](#) that:

Boris Johnson has been urged by an influential Conservative MP to end all Covid-19 restrictions in England by the end of this month, or face a massive revolt within his party and the prospect of a leadership challenge later this year.

They noted that the demand from Mark Harper MP, who is the chair of the Covid Recovery Group, is that all restrictions should end on 26 January when most current rules expire and that Johnson must then commit to never bring them back.

The reason given by Harper is that unless this happens hospitality businesses will not have the confidence to invest in the UK and, according to him, we must commit that whatever happens with regard to Covid businesses will never be shut down or face impediments to trading ever again.

This is a quite extraordinary demand to make. I admit to having to struggle to understand the mindset of Mark Harper and those who think like him. As a result, I may get his logic wrong but it does seem worth a little effort to try to work out what that logic is by working out the underpinnings of this demand.

There is, of course, at the heart of this demand a simple rejection of the role of government. It would be easy to assume that this explained everything about this position. After all, the heart of the supposed libertarian right-wing Tory is dedicated to three things which might be summarised as small government, the elimination of regulation and the reduction of taxation.

Brexit was, of course, meant to deliver all three. It has in practice done no such thing. In fact, as is daily becoming more obvious, the exact opposite is true. Perforce, government has been bigger of late; overall levels of tax revenue as a proportion of GDP are high, albeit that much of that is because of the destruction in GDP created by both Brexit and Covid rather than the actual sums demanded; and Brexit is dramatically increasing the amount of red tape within the economy contrary to all the claims ever made for it.

In that case one very obvious reason for this Covid demand from the almost identical group of MPs who promoted the Brexit cause is to provide an alternative vehicle for their political fantasies when their first venture intended to achieve this goal has so clearly failed. And, given that these MPs are very simple people, by which I mean they appear to have a very limited range of issues of concern on which they appear to have binary views, to think that they have moved from one project for the promotion of their fantasy to another of similar type is far from unreasonable.

However, that explanation is insufficient to suggest how they reached this position. There are other assumptions that have to be made about their mindset if their demand is to be understood. In addition to their dedication to small government, the elimination of regulation and the reduction of taxation they have, as Harper's comments make clear, to be more interested in the well-being of profit-generating businesses than they are of the well-being of the people who either work for or who are the customers of those enterprises. Certainty for business is apparently much more important in Harper's worldview than is the protection of the people who elected him from short and long-term illness as well as death.

Leaving aside for a moment what this says about the empathy that Harper and his colleagues have for their fellow human beings, what it also reveals is an extraordinary lack of understanding of the integrated nature of an economy, let alone a society. Harper's assumption is that letting Covid rip through society as a consequence of taking no public health precautions to prevent that happening will have no consequences for the businesses that he says he is so desperate to support. To describe this as naive as to be kind. As we know at present, there are very large numbers of people off sick with Covid, and most of those will actually be suffering the symptoms of the illness. In other words, in itself this disease is deeply disruptive of the business environment about which he says he is so concerned. It is absurd to pretend otherwise. Either because people are sick or because they have locked themselves down as a consequence of quite reasonable fear of the consequences of becoming sick (the long-term implications of which are now becoming more apparent by the day as new research is published) Covid is a very real threat to business and the only way to prevent that is to take proactive measures to reduce its transmission within society to the greatest possible degree. I have explored those required measures already and will not do so again here. Instead, read what I had to say [here](#) and [here](#). From Harper's point of view my suggestions are, of course, a nightmare: I cannot see any way in which business can enjoy the reassurance that it needs without a larger role for the state in eliminating the threat from Covid.

And then there is something else to consider. There is an assumption that organisations like the NHS can do whatever is demanded of them without ever considering the people who work for them. I suggest that this is not an accident. Harper and his ilk believe that people of value only work if there is a profit motive involved in their activity even if almost everyone engaged in such an enterprise takes no entrepreneurial risk when

doing so and enjoys the benefit of a fairly secure salary paid each month as a consequence of their employment, and therefore has the same type of incentive arrangement as any state employee. I really doubt that Harper understands this, or perhaps, more accurately, suppresses the fact that he does so that his beliefs can be aligned with his assumption that only profit-driven activity is a benefit to society and everything else is parasitical upon it, including those who work for the NHS and other public services.

Put all this together and Harper's claim might make sense, at least to him. If you subjugate everything to the god called profit, including human life, concern for the well-being of Others, and the interest of all participants in the economy except those who actually enjoy the reward from profit-making activity, then you can come to his position.

In the real world where profit drives very few people - including the vast majority of self-employed people who are simply working for a living - and where concern for others dominates our lives - then his opinion is rightfully incomprehensible. But we live in a world where it seems that the right-wing echo chamber is intensely powerful, largely because of the grip it has on the Tories, and so the prime minister. As a result a form of madness grips the land. This is profoundly worrying, most especially when the demands that climate change create will be so much greater than those we now face. Changing mindsets of those like Harper seems unlikely. But in that case how do we persuade people that people like him are really are deeply opposed to their well-being? That seems to be the relevant question.