

Neera Vyas – Written Evidence (LBC0041)

Firstly, please ditch party politics and work with anyone and everyone with the relevant expertise and experience to move forward in all areas. Build on the good work of Cross Party Committees by including innovative thinkers such as Mark Stevenson ('We Do Things Differently'). Learn from and imitate successful strategies in other countries, such as the Dutch prison system.

Most urgent at present is of course dealing with the consequences of Covid19. Many people recognise this is an opportunity to rethink and renew the way Britain works and what we value.

Having recognised (at last! We could all learn a lot from Douglas Adams' example of the telephone sanitizers here, 'The Restaurant at the End of the Universe') that our key workers, far from being 'unskilled' are extremely proficient and essential to the country functioning well, we need to foster a societal change of attitude about what is a meaningful and successful career. Years of steering young people towards office based jobs together with poor pay for what have turned out to be crucial roles needs redirection. Those currently working in these areas, particularly the care sector, must receive commensurate and much better pay; and both society and education should celebrate and encourage careers in care, medicine, farming and fishing, manufacture, the trades and building.

Building is in fact central to recovery. With foresight and ambition, we can create a thriving industry that promotes and utilises green build technology, creates careers and helps to address the problematic shortage of quality affordable housing. Please let's move away from reliance on contractors whose main motivation is profit and instead create a nationwide, yet locally focused, programme of builds that are designed to meet the needs and geography of communities. So no more shoddy estates on flood plains for a start.

Instead, work with experts in eco-builds and green technology, such as Solway and Kedel that make 'timber' from recycled UK plastic and encourage much more (aim for 100%) of UK plastic recycled in the UK. In fact, please let's create a properly researched and effective recycling policy across the UK that is clear and creative. The chaos of different councils having totally different systems, together with 'box ticking' schemes that have led to plastic waste just being exported to pollute other parts of the world has to stop. As does the sheer waste of gases from landfill being burnt off instead of used as fuel (as has successfully been done in Coventry for example). Another example of easy and immediate action is mandating compostable alternatives to plastic based products (e.g. nappies) and packaging (e.g. fruit trays) being used far more widely. There urgently needs to be a joined up and impactful plan of action regarding waste.

Also, where possible renew older buildings and brownfield sites as priority over new builds. With all, using full insulation and renewable energy options as standard; and even more with new builds, such as Ground Source Heat Pumps

and home or street wind turbines. The costs of these will reduce as more are used as well as the initial outlay more than paying for itself in the long run, both financially and in benefits to our environment.

In addition, building much needed new homes will provide jobs, both for young people looking to learn a trade and older folks in need or want of a new career. This must be a Government led initiative though, in collaboration with local councils and communities – the priority has to be creating housing, not making money. Yes, the Government paying wages to the workers is a cost, but much better to pay that and reap the social benefits and income tax, than bear the cost of mass unemployment and consequent financial, social unrest and mental health costs. Whilst the majority of such housing needs to be social housing, there could be some community projects, where people wishing to undertake a self-build could have a stake in or fund the build.

With housing in general, house prices and rents have to drop significantly, and/or there has to be a meaningful hike in salaries. The number of working poor is not only shocking but also massively unfair. Those very same key workers identified as crucial to the country running well are also in many cases (especially in some cities), facing real hardship due a disproportionate percentage of their salaries going towards rent or mortgage. This is compounded by the unreliable income of zero hour contracts (yes, some people prefer the flexibility but many who do not are still forced to accept the system!) and barely there pay rises for the most public sector workers. A starting point is rent controls and more checks on private letters, but also successive governments have allowed house prices to rocket out of line with incomes, leading to the current situation.

The crash of 2008 is still affecting everything of course, so perhaps one way forward is to insist on separation of savings/lending and current accounts from investment banking. Explore the Ecology Building Society model for mortgages to extend the bigger picture of a green and financially stable country. In addition, allow those who have worked hard to save and paid their taxes, the cushion of say £150,000 in assets or savings before they are forced to use these towards personal care or care home costs. This relatively small inheritance will significantly help young people to get a 'step up' with housing or small business projects, which will benefit the economy overall. The current focus on having a cap on what is paid only benefits those with already better incomes, which seems nonsensical as well as unfair, as for many people, £150,000 is quite literally their life savings.

Looking at creating jobs, we need not only to overcome the impact of Covid 19, but also to encourage less reliance on service industries and global travel. It's a massive hit to the airline industry in particular, but for the sake of future generations and to avoid more swiftly spread pandemics, it makes sense to look at utilising the talents of engineers, crew and service workers in different industries rather than bailing out airlines and funding a return to often unnecessary, heavy polluting air travel. In a similar vein, given that another pandemic is a real and urgent threat to our safety, money set aside to replace

Trident missiles could be much better used in protecting the economy and environment.

We have seen during the pandemic that a huge amount of business travel is easily replaced with online meetings, saving companies time and money as well as lowering pollution. In addition, we can look to creating a proper 'world leading' rail service, replacing jobs in air travel and opening up more of the country for business and pleasure. Please work at reviewing plans for HS2 and instead use that funding to benefit the whole country for a much longer time. Slightly quicker North/South trains will serve only a limited purpose, whereas investment in sorely needed East/West rail routes and lots more local branch lines will enable many more people to expand their businesses and to take their custom to more places.

At the same time, the horrendous experience of many commuters (both road and rail) in the past is I hope something that can be assigned to history. One of the benefits of the lockdown has been to force people to embrace technology and flexible working. Many companies have found there has been an upturn in productivity, as staff are not already exhausted by the time they arrive to work and have more time to devote to actual work, as they are not travelling. It makes good sense therefore to look at all businesses (where feasible) offering staff the option of flexible working hours and location. In addition, places of work with over 100 staff on site (or over 50 dependant on the demographic) would really benefit from having on site crèches. These could be co-funded by the employer and staff who use the facility (and could even make money by offering places to other workers in the locality). Having your child on site would save staff considerable time and stress, thereby increasing productivity and well-being.

We of course need new business, but instead of 'sweeteners' for multinational companies, please use the same money to support and encourage home grown projects and companies. There are fantastic initiatives out there that should be nurtured and expanded, such as the Liverpool Guild of Students' Green Guild Grow Food project, Growing Underground in London and The Severn Project in Bristol, which not only provides locally produced salad ingredients but a successful ex-offender rehabilitation programme.

Further, there is now a real thirst for local and UK produce, so support for potential as well as existing farmers is essential – and will again pay for itself in environmental, health and social benefits. I welcome the current proposals to award subsidies for positive environmental impact rather than the amount of land owned, (it was incongruous that James Dyson received massive subsidies) and urge legislation to prevent supermarkets driving prices down and wastage of food simply because it does not look right. It's great that finally, steps are being taken in the right direction, but it is important to keep up the impetus, for example, Riverford Organics is a great model for future farming. Rather than farmers and fishers reliant on supermarket contracts, there could be a network connecting producers to sellers and consumers so that all of every crop or catch is used well. This could be sold from shops or farms and directly to hospitals,

schools, care homes and other places that need to provide nutritious and relatively cheap meals regularly.

Cheap food itself though is an issue and connects back to the issue of expensive housing. People are being forced to spend such a large proportion of their income on rents and mortgages, there is little left for food. With 'junk' food being so much cheaper and easier to access for many people than nutrient rich options, together with a culture of convenience food, it is little wonder we have an obesity epidemic. Another link here is city based food growing projects like those listed above, which will help address the issue too, IF people have enough money left from scarce salaries to spend on quality food. For the sake of the nation's health (and food producers), we urgently need to enable and embrace spending more on good food that is nutritionally and ethically sound. 'Eat local' as a key message will benefit our food industries and the nation's health. We most definitely do not need to buy in any fish, dairy or meat products, nor to export. It makes no environmental sense at all, for example, that many UK farmers and fishers rely on selling to Europe and other global markets, when at the same time, we buy in meat and seafood (just of a different type), from right across the world. All it takes is effort to re-educate people in eating seasonally and locally.

Hand in hand with enabling more people to access better food, there is a requirement to embed basic cooking skills. 'Old hat' I know, but despite the best efforts of Jamie Oliver and others, there are still too many people who believe they cannot cook or feel they do not have the time to. TV programmes on this are great, but the basics can and should be embedded through school and workplaces too. Education has to be education for life, including self-awareness, self-care, interpersonal skills and citizenship on all levels, (local, national and global).

For too long schools have been pushed into being exam factories, judged on random and overall meaningless results rather than on the calibre and confidence of the young people they nurture. We have many examples of 'successful' entrepreneurs and artists (in many fields), who left school with zero or few qualifications but achieved their goals anyway. I use 'success' with the caveat of not just meaning material gains, but being happy in what they do. In fact, we need to really get away from the social obsession (it seems at times) of money being what counts, to job satisfaction being the key to success.

Of course, there needs to be a balance of commensurate pay for all. This is achievable if we look at all the studies that clearly show, past a certain threshold - so basic needs are met with a bit spare for treats - (in the UK that currently happens to be close to the average salary), more money does not contribute to overall happiness; in fact in some cases it is the cause of distress. Legislation to help reduce the pay gap - be it due to gender, ethnicity, age or other issues, can help with this. The ideal of the highest and lowest earners in a company having no more than a ten times gap would help too. In the public sector, senior salaries need to be reviewed and much can be done to reduce costs.

A key example of this is central purchasing. Currently a huge number of hours (and thus money) are in effect wasted, with individuals in schools, hospitals, police forces etc. completing ordering and administration for supplies. In many schools, different departments order individually, so that involves even more specialist teacher time spent on what is an administration task. In addition, there are costly anomalies such as one police force paying three times as much as another for the same equipment due to different suppliers. For the vast majority of all these orders, it would save valuable time and money to have a centralised system whereby e.g. exercise books, printer ink, rubber gloves etc. (the everyday basics for each place) were sourced and sent out by specialist admin staff. This would create jobs but also reduce overall costs in terms of e.g. teaching or nursing hours spent on these things and the benefits of bulk purchasing where it applies.

My caveat to the above is that every effort is made to source from UK companies and green products. Tying in with creating a new green economy, manufacturer of e.g. easily and locally recyclable pens, syringes and so on needs to be encouraged and supported. The innovation and ideas are already out there and more skills can be nurtured through apprenticeships and retraining for workers from 'old' industries.

To build a better future there needs to be an intensive review of the education system. We can learn much from countries like Finland and Denmark, where the focus is nurturing skills and talents. In fact, following the Danish model, we could look at schools also fostering enterprise and generating income through in house design, development, manufacture and marketing of products. These could be of varied types to suit the individual situation and facilities, including items 'invented' by students. This approach will enable students to develop confidence and expertise in areas of interest from an early age, encouraging a well-motivated and productive workforce.

There really needs to be a move away from the current obsession with paper qualifications to much more training in the field; so sixth forms are not filled with unmotivated students forced to be there and employers can train up workers in the skills they (both the employer and the student), need. Having more young people earning and learning means the economy benefits from their taxes and spending as well from the income generated by their skills and labour. In addition, honing home grown manufacture and laboratories in particular, is essential to securing immediate testing and research facilities and the correct equipment should we be hit by another pandemic.

Students who wish to pursue academic study can focus in lessons without distraction from those who do not share that motivation. I must stress here this is not about the traditional separation based on perceived ability. Instead, we should both trust young people to make choices for themselves and appreciate that with the right nurture and facilities many more young people can achieve a sense of fulfilment. In almost thirty years of teaching, I have seen many examples of students both constrained and limited by a sadly narrow interpretation of intelligence and success.

Some of the brightest philosophers I have come across have been consigned to bottom sets in most subjects, but when given the chance to work in a different setting, have blossomed. Both personally and academically, achieving way above their forecast (which is based on KS2 tests and other factors, different to 'predicted' which is what their teachers think they will get) grades. Equally, some very able students end up 'failing' in school and/or (worse in my opinion) damaging the learning opportunities of others; but could, if allowed to, flourish in a more practical setting, be it industrial, the arts, agricultural or any other.

There needs also to be a move away from pushing too many people into degrees. If that standard of study is required for a career or academic progress, fair enough. However too many people are either in long term debt or, (worse in terms of the cost to the economy), never able to repay their student loans, because so many others have the same qualifications the degree doesn't really help secure the well paid job imagined. Employers are increasingly crying out for skills and experience – hence the way forward is on the job training (see above). Further, whereas gaining a degree helped social mobility in the past due to only 5% of the population going to university, many of whom received a grant, the onus on paying for degrees now has led to those with the means to fund being far more likely to attend.

At the same time, one area that needs many more applicants and retained workforce is healthcare. Of course, nursing bursaries need to be reinstated, but degrees should be part of career progression, not the first step – this will massively help in retaining qualified staff. With all medical professionals though, without a forward thinking review and revision of working conditions and practice, we will continue to lose quality staff. It is essential to work with professional bodies, clinical experts and social psychologists to ensure the best possible progress. For example, rotating shift work negatively impacts cognitive ability and mental health, so how about allowing staff to choose regular shifts as much as possible? Whilst the success of minor injuries units is welcome and should be built upon, it will also reduce pressure on A&E enormously if GP practices are open at least 7am-7pm and 7 days a week; which could be achieved if more doctors feel specialising and staying in this area is not extremely stressful. There have to be proper conversations and focus on health, not costs. This includes an honest offer to the population of raising income tax by 2p in the pound with that money ring-fenced for spending on the NHS.

The costs will reduce anyway IF there is much more public health awareness and responsibility. This of course connects with comments above about food, but also applies to investment in helping everyone to help themselves. Media campaigns alone is not enough. Prescriptions for exercise classes and meditation groups are beginning to emerge and should be encouraged. Again, work with experts in the field to create a real HEALTH service. To this end, reintroducing convalescence homes would greatly reduce pressure on hospitals, where beds are too often taken up with people who need help with personal care and only basic nursing, such as dressings being changed, whilst they recover full health.

Service to the nation is also an idea that has been mooted in parliament several times, but is rejected. I urge you to consider a system where all people (not just the young) are encouraged (and in some cases instructed) to give time to helping with environmental and social care projects, (such as helping in convalescent homes). Mark Stevenson has interesting ideas on this. Which kind of brings us full circle, as I referred to 'We do things differently' at the start of this missive.

I do not belong to any political party myself and have no agenda other than hoping for a healthy and happy environment and society.

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