

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 14TH MARCH, 2021 PROFESSOR SIR IAN DIAMOND

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UK CHIEF STATISTICIAN

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AM: This week the Office for National Statistics released the first data showing how trade's been affected since we left the EU. Exports to the EU have dropped by 41% and imports from the EU have dropped by 28%. But with so much of the economy stagnated by the pandemic, how much of that is because of Brexit and how much because of the pandemic? Earlier I spoke to Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Head of the ONS and the country's National Statistician. But I began with the under reporting of crimes against women. How common is this?

ID: What we have reported over many years through the Crime Survey that we do jointly with the Home Office, is that there is a very larger under reporting, both of rape and of assault which includes penetration. Indeed, in some of our more recent figures we show that really only about a third are reported to the police and then very many few of those go to prosecution. One of the reasons why we think it's incredibly important to do these crime surveys because it gives people a chance to have a voice.

AM: Let's turn, if I might, to post Brexit trade and the figures the ONS released this week. A really sharp fall, both to imports and to exports. How do you account for this?

ID: Well I think there's a number of reasons, Andrew, and it's worth saying that we do have a trade imbalance with the EU so we would expect imports to be bigger than exports, but I point to two reasons. Firstly, you may recall there was border disruption at the end of December and beginning of January, partly due to Covid and partly due obviously to the end of the transition period, and secondly, a number of companies in preparation for certainly

the end of the transition period had stockpile. So a number of reasons which means I don't think we should take January as if you like really indicative of the long term future. Indeed I would say, Andrew, that from our Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey and also from data we have on lorry flows, some of the data from the end of January and beginning of February are starting to see a pickup.

AM: I suppose that's what I'm focusing on, because there was a 40% drop in exports which is an awful lot. The government emphasises the stockpiling side of it, but if you talk to British Chambers of Commerce or the Road Haulage Association they say no, no, there is a deeper problem here and they talk about this being ominous for our future trading relationship with the EU, and points out of course that a lot of the lorries coming from Britain into the EU were empty. So again, how can you as it were umpire this conversation.

ID: I think it is important, Andrew, simply to say that it is too early to say and what I can assure you is that we will be absolutely tireless in looking at the data, all sorts of different sources of data, as I say we look at lorry flows, we look at surveys of businesses to get business sentiment and over the next couple of months we will see things start to work through to a long term place and please invite me back and I'll give you chapter and verse in a couple of months. But I do think at the moment it's too early to say.

AM: I would love to talk again about this because trade to the rest of the world has gone up very slightly in the same period which suggests it's not all Covid. And indeed the overall figures for the British economy during this period are relatively speaking, and I emphasise relatively speaking, not too bad. We were expecting a 5% drop I think at one point and it's 2.9 or something like that.

ID: Yes, it was about 3% in January Andrew, and I do think that was better than some economists were predicting results. I would also say it is a drop which is much, much less than in the first

lockdown. Having said that, all sectors of the economy were impacted with the exception of construction which was the one area that went up. It's not surprising to say that the big drops were in hospitality, travel and retail, but I do think potentially we can say that businesses have become better at adapting and enabling people to work from home and therefore the drop that we saw in GDP was not in any way as big as expected. Question now as we move out of the restrictions over the next few months, will we see the increase that we would hope.

AM: Well, coming directly to that, hospitalisations and deaths are now down very, very sharply all across – not all across the UK, I'm so sorry.

Let's turn directly to the pandemic. Deaths and hospitalisations sharply down. You sit on SAGE. Do you think this is a time to look at an earlier opening than we've been hearing so far?

ID: Well any decisions about earlier openings or later openings are down to the policy makers. What I would say is that the message is good. If you look at our large survey, 400,000 people taking part, we are currently reporting in England, .37 of a percent, Andrew. That's about 6,000 cases a day. Those are rates that we haven't seen since late September with slightly lower numbers in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland but equally they're coming down. So all that is good news. But let's just remember that number of .37 is still very, very much bigger than the sorts of numbers we were seeing last summer at about .04 of a percent. So there's a way to go. I think we're making really really good progress, we'll be looking very carefully over the next few weeks and the one thing I can assure you is that we will do everything we can to provide the data to ensure that those people making decisions have all the information they need.

AM: Now of course will remember that happened after the summer to infections and hospitalisations and indeed deaths. Professor Chris Witty has spooked quite a lot of people by talking

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about the inevitability of another wave of hospitalisations and deaths going forward. Do you think it's inevitable?

ID: Well Chris Witty is someone to whom I defer on many things and I think we do need at the moment properly to understand how the data is moving forward and we need to be really looking at the impact of the wonderful vaccination roll out that we are seeing. But having said that we need also to recognise that this is a virus that isn't going to go away and I have no doubt that in the Autumn there will be a further wave of infections.

AM: Is it simply too early to know how much of the fall across the UK is down to the vaccine roll out?

ID: Well I think we've got a number of moving parts here, Andrew. The vaccines, the restrictions and everything. I mean I would say though that this has been an incredibly impressive vaccine roll out and we've been looking at antibodies that's in the population and we've been scaling up our survey in order to be able to take many more blood tests so that we can look at the impact and what we're seeing is quite remarkable increases in the level of antibodies in the over 80s and increasingly in the over 70s, so I'm very, very confident that the vaccine roll out is really starting to provide some real protection. At the other side we see relatively high levels amongst young people which just shows how much of the young people have been affected by the virus. I'd finally just say on this, that there is a lot of regional variations so we find 30% of London have antibodies whereas only 16% in the south west, so we need to recognise that as well.

AM: Now the ONS was in the High Court this week about the way that you treated gender recognition in the Census. In effect you went further than the government in allowing people to self identify using driving licences and so forth. Do you accept you went too far?

ID: What I would say we are asking exactly the same question Andrew, as we have done since 1801. It's a very simple question:

what is your sex? There is then some advice for people who wish to have a advice and in that what we did was have some advice which said that you could, and we didn't use driving licence so we clearly say you could use passports. Judge has taken the view that we should simply have the advice being that your sex is that on your Birth Certificate or a Gender Recognition Certificate and we accept that.

AM: The point being that a passport is a document on which you can, as it were, have an influence on how you are identified whereas a Birth Certificate you clearly can't. Do you accept that you got it wrong as the ONS?

ID: What I would say Andrew, very very clearly, is that we will accede to the judge's request.

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