

Comment

Can anything cure us of our addiction to the fridge?

ROWAN PELLING



If Jules Verne were alive today he could pen a uniquely modern tale of derring-do titled *Journey to the Centre of the Fridge*. For who can tell what iced mysteries lurk at the heart of your average refrigerator? The modern consumer, untrained in the way of the larder, tends to bung most of their week's groceries straight into cooler departments, no matter whether this is the advised method of storage or not.

One good friend persists in putting jars of pickled gherkins in his fridge, even though the whole point of pickling is to embalm veg for future consumption. Don't start me on those who chill jam, even though its accepted synonym is "preserve". Half the people I know keep ketchup in their fridges, despite the fact Heinz tomato ketchup is like edible Kryptonite (if you've ever used some to clean a brass doorknob, you'll know what I mean). I found a bottle on my in-laws' shelves once that was 12 years old and perfectly delicious.

But it's only this week I've learnt there are real, unrepentant humans out there who keep their coffee in the fridge. Why anyone would take dry goods from a hot land and place them in a cold, moist cabinet that reeks of cheese and fish defies reason. It also defies the existence of the Kilner jar, which has been keeping coffee and loose tea fresh for over 150 years.

In some ways it's the lesser fridge crimes that trouble me most. I could not share my life with anyone who put tomatoes in the fridge, for instance. It would signal they valued longevity above flavour, and utility above delight. A tomato that has had its innards cooled never returns to the sweetness of a plucked fruit. Ditto apples. I'm sure I don't need to tell *Telegraph* readers that parsnips are a no-no. You don't need Mrs Beeton to tell you root veg should be kept in a cool, dry storage spot, rather than

chilled into submission.

Although I can't pretend my fridge-freezer is without eccentricities. If you manage to make your way past the crème fraîche, you'll find what appears to be my secret opiate stash, but is, in fact, three syringes of teeth-whitening gel. My granny would turn in her grave to find me keeping sourdough in the fridge when I own a perfectly good bread bin. But, after years of experimentation, I can safely say cold bread beats stale bread every time, and nothing much is lost when your passion is for toast.

But it's the freezer section that freaks out my husband and sons. They stick their hands in for fish fingers and retreat clutching icy cardigans. This is because the best way to kill clothes-moth larvae is to give them the Arctic treatment. I've even been known to squish a coat in with the peas.

You can tell rather too much about a person from the stuff they put in their refrigerator. I was reminded of this last week when my sons, who are racing through *Sherlock* on BBC iPlayer, laughed when Mrs Hudson found a bag of severed thumbs in Holmes's icebox. I was instantly reminded of the pal who keeps white mice in hers to feed the family's corn snake.

My late mother's fridge should have borne the notice "Abandon hope all ye who enter here". There were endless cracked pottery dishes holding what appeared to be a concoction of lard, beef dripping and botulism. And there was generally an old ice-cream tub full of dog food that could be mistaken for mince. Half of one such batch once fell in her carrot soup and she served it to my vegetarian husband anyway.

On balance, perhaps cold coffee beans are just the right side of insanity.

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Time to cast aside the dangerous illusion that tax increases can wait

Just like Pitt in 1797, the Government needs to raise taxes to prove that its debt burden is sustainable

WILLIAM HAGUE



I know I will be in a small minority when I say that the approach of tomorrow's Budget brings to mind the Budget delivered on November 24 1797. That was the work of one of my favourite figures in history, William Pitt the Younger. On that day he announced that, despite the nation's great burden from being at war, he was going to increase various taxes – on windows, servants, carriages and horses – to give confidence that the ballooning national debt could still be financed in the future.

Pitt's tax increases were savagely attacked in Parliament, and were evaded so widely that he had to invent income tax the following year. He nevertheless achieved his paramount objective, which was to keep Britain creditworthy even while borrowing on a vast scale. Being in good credit enabled the country to finance the long wars against Napoleon, and, along with being a home of innovation, was the foundation of British supremacy in the 19th century. Ensuring debt was sustainable proved more important than avoiding some immediate tax rises.

If press briefings and speculation are to be believed, Rishi Sunak, the

Chancellor, will announce some such rises in the Budget, and at the same time add to the colossal support he has given to households and businesses since the pandemic began. Rumour has it that he will increase corporation tax, and possibly decline to raise the thresholds of the income tax bands. He has left no doubt that he will still be pumping money into the economy, on top of a record splurge of spending and borrowing that has resulted in the UK running a deficit of more than £300 billion in the current financial year.

Already, however, a wide range of MPs from Left and Right have declared that there should be no imminent tax rises at all. The Labour Party has decided that it is against all increases, and some distinguished Tories have joined in. Many of my old colleagues have argued that this is not the time for raising any taxes and that freezing thresholds would be a mistake. They also say that the revenue from corporation tax has increased since the rate of it was reduced, so that shouldn't be raised either.

It has been left to the former chancellor, Ken Clarke, to defend what remains of fiscal conservatism. He said at the weekend: "This is the taxpayers' debt we are piling up now. If we don't actually get it under control, signal how we're going to get back to fiscal common sense before inflation comes back and interest rates go up, we will face a financial crisis once the burden of paying interest rates begins."

He is right. It pains me to say, after spending much of my life arguing for lower taxes, that we have reached the point where at least some business and personal taxes have to go up. To maintain the opposite view, you have to believe in one or all of the following three arguments: that we need a smaller state, and it is spending that

should be cut as soon as possible after the crisis; that higher tax rates generally produce less revenue anyway; or that we can go on borrowing at very low interest rates for so long that all tax increases can safely be postponed. All three of these arguments are now dangerous illusions.

Most of us Conservatives have spent decades arguing for a smaller state. In the 1970s, and for a long time afterwards, we were right. But in the 2020s this argument is already lost. Austerity was jettisoned at the last general election. After the pandemic, the British state is certain to be bigger, spending billions more every year on healthcare, vaccinations, stockpiles of equipment and much-needed support for apprenticeships and opportunities for the young people and others who have lost out most heavily in the crisis. For the foreseeable future, the state is going to be bigger.

So what about lower tax rates generating more revenue? There are certainly circumstances where this holds true, but usually those apply when a tax is highly complex or set at such penal rates that people will go to great lengths to avoid paying it. That is not the case with, for example, UK corporation tax. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the increased revenues from this tax, after the rate of it was reduced from 2010 onwards, were due to the recovery of the economy from the global financial crisis and the simultaneous abolition of many allowances and reliefs. If the Chancellor chooses his measures judiciously, he can certainly raise more revenue with some higher tax rates.

It is, however, the third illusion that is the most dangerous, and much the most prevalent in Britain and abroad. This is that economics has

fundamentally and permanently changed; that we are in an age of low inflation with ultra-low interest rates for decades to come; and that the state can borrow so cheaply that any day of reckoning is for another generation, if ever. In its more extreme form, this way of thinking embraces Modern Monetary Theory, including the idea that central banks can finance government deficits by creating money, not merely for the moment but indefinitely.

This illusion is wonderfully convenient for everyone who wants to argue that we can continue to spend without ever having to raise any taxes. It is dangerous because inflation can easily return, particularly when pent-up demand for goods and services follows release from lockdown. And it is particularly dangerous in Britain because so much of our debt is index-linked – about a quarter of it, compared with an average of 3 to 8 per cent across major developed nations.

If you have savings and your rummage in your files for your National Bonds or certificates, you will be pleased to find that many of them are indeed linked to prices. That is also true for our creditors around the world. A rise in inflation would mean our debt getting out of control.

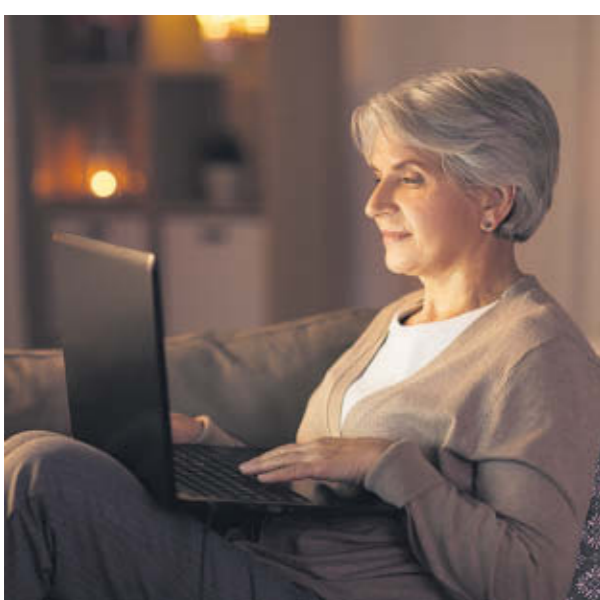
When the Chancellor gets to his feet tomorrow, he will no doubt continue to spend on a massive scale. But it is also time to rediscover and reassert some basic truths of fiscal conservatism and cast illusions aside. That Labour will oppose this is perhaps not surprising. Conservatives need to remember that for 200 years, from Pitt in 1797 to Thatcher and Cameron in our own day, keeping the country creditworthy has stood them in very good stead.

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For Germans, Britain is now the grown-up

The UK's vaccine success compared with Germany has led to unfamiliar feelings of post-Brexit envy

THOMAS KIELINGER



As far as a national malaise goes, it doesn't get much worse. I'm not talking about Covid itself, but rather Germany's failure to get to grips with it via an orderly vaccine rollout while Brexit Britain races ahead, a malaise that has hit Germany at the very core of its psyche.

You might have thought that it would be Germany, with its much-attested organisational skill, that would have excelled in this field, rather than the Brits and their alleged love of muddling through. But Germany is a federalised country with 17 governments – a national one and 16 regional ones. Under such conditions, organisational skill can quickly turn to chaos. A cacophony of different

opinions has arisen, with Angela Merkel having to hold successive summits with the 16 regional, finger-wagging chiefs to find out how best to move forward. Tomorrow, another summit of this kind will be taking place, yet another attempt to cut through a mountain of confusion.

This turmoil has been exacerbated by the AstraZeneca debacle. Some wit let it be known that the vaccine was useless for the over-65s, and within days the "news" had spread like wildfire. A whopping 85 per cent of the 1.5 million doses available in Germany is being stored unused and Angela Merkel has said that she herself wouldn't take it. President Macron of France has sounded cautious, too. Trust the British, he seemed to argue, in their gung-ho post-Brexit flush of excitement, to run ahead.

Initially, this played well among Germans who by nature pivot towards worrying endlessly; there is a beautiful moniker for it, "Bedenkenträger", or "doubt carriers". But now the overload of scientific disputation has led to an atmosphere of utter helplessness as people veer between resignation and feisty incredulity.

In any case, Germans wonder, why couldn't their leaders come up with an orderly way of distributing the

vaccines? But a multiplicity of authorities are all competing for prominence and even their family doctor is so far not allowed to administer the jab. Ursula von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, has hardly improved matters, overseeing a mess in Brussels even worse than that in her homeland.

Nobody waxes enthusiastic about the EU any more, and the notion of ever-closer union has evaporated. But Germans are accustomed to Europe as their ersatz identity and political job description, quite apart from enjoying a club with such significant, if endangered, economic clout. Thus they have only ever conceived of Brexit as an act of extreme, self-inflicted harm. Lately, however, they have been disabused of this notion. John Kampfner's 2020 book, *Why the Germans Do It Better: Notes from a Grown-Up Country* has virtually been turned on its head.

Look how the foolhardy Brits are coping with Covid and the road out of lockdown. Over 20 million British people have been vaccinated since December, compared with around four million in Germany, which is the larger population by about 15 million. Eat your gloomy predictions, ye staunch anti-Brexiters. No wonder Germany's

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Bild, Europe's largest circulation tabloid, is growing more excited by the day on account of such breath-taking success. "We envy you British", was their headline last week.

In my own paper, I referred to it as a national crusade, appealing to a deep-seated instinct to prevail against an invisible invader. Of course, the reality of over 100,000 Covid deaths is a fearsome reminder of Britain's need to get its act together. But getting it together is precisely what has been happening as the vaccine rollout runs along at unremitting speed.

Trust, that's what it boils down to. Trust is a process of delegation: individuals have to be able to base their judgment on responsible authority. Trust can be cruelly exploited, but a complete lack of it kills. To use Johnsonian rhetoric: "Germany vacillates, Britain vaccinates". Angela Merkel should go on national TV and have herself vaccinated with the AstraZeneca jab. It is the only way to restore trust in the vaccine and her leadership, and start turning around Germany's woeful record.

Thomas Kielinger was a long-time UK correspondent of the German daily *Die Welt* and has written biographies of Elizabeth II, Churchill and Elizabeth I