

...from 70,000 in 2010, to 40,000 in the first years of coalition when tax minister David Gauke's department (under austerity minister George Osborne), and came on top of "efficiency" cuts by the previous Gordon Brown. As Gauke tweeted last week: "Big task ahead for HMRC." In fact, Gauke probably hadn't even heard that 9m employees are expected to be in HMRC's not so good offices when the system opens for claims this week. Somewhere between 2m and 4m of workers will qualify for grants to help, with no small difficulty, from the Treasury. The arrangement is a strict "we'll-call-you" deal, with the Treasury to apply due to go out in May. In fact, HMRC announced it was to start its investigations into tax dodging in the workload. As this supposedly cost the chequer by around £16bn a year, it was a big hit for taxpayers and a big win for the Treasury. Whether Sunak's schemes go through, and what happens when millions of jobs flood in, remains to be seen. In a recent parliamentary hearing, HMRC chief Sir David Harra reported that 80 percent of staff are working from home. Sensible, but unlikely to help mobilise the huge effort needed.

The Department for Work and Pensions is struggling with it, dealing with an additional 100,000 universal credit applications, with a staff level over staff than a decade ago (around 108,000). Sunak had the staff in advance "staff at HMRC and the DWP will be under enormous operational pressure in the coming weeks and months". The staff used by his predecessors might be unmanageable.

KETTLE NEWS

...a few weeks for the... of lobby reporters. From... questions to indulging... or grandstanding, they... the watching nation. But... get any worse for them?... living saint of governmental... fair Campbell, offering the... tips on how to extract the truth... g Street! With the architect of... odgy dossier" lecturing them,... lobby's reputation needs its... intensive care.

...in tender in emergency circumstances when there is not sufficient time to do so, as is clearly the case here".

AS NEW chancellor Rishi Sunak reaches the top of the political ladder, he's wasted no time hiring one of his old banking chums: Richard Sharp, his mentor from Goldman Sachs, who will be advising him on Covid-19 economic matters.

Sharp was a regular donor to the Tory party, from 2001 to 2010 giving more than £400,000 from his juicy earnings running Goldman's private equity business and sitting on its European management committee until 2007. The latter role gave him a share of responsibility for one of the larger tax avoidance schemes on record. For many years stretching back to the 1990s, the bank paid its bankers bonuses via offshore trusts and companies to avoid national insurance bills.

When, in 2011, the *Eye* exposed the cushy deal HM Revenue & Customs had given it to settle an investigation into the scheme (despite the Goldman managers' obstructiveness with the taxman), MP Jesse Norman led the Treasury committee's scrutiny of the affair. Norman, who back then was a new Tory MP, is now one of Sunak's junior ministers as financial secretary to the Treasury, responsible for HMRC and, oddly enough, the beneficiary of Sharp's renewed generosity to the Tories. In the run-up to December's general election, Sharp gave £2,500 to Norman at his Hereford constituency.

The Goldman tax scheme wasn't the end of Sharp's offshore interests. As well as running his own investment fund, in 2014 he became a partner in Roundshield, a Jersey-based investment manager. This raised the question of independence. At the time he was also an external member of the Bank of England's financial policy committee (until March 2019) and had not declared the job, which forced a tightening of the Bank's rules.

The new role at the heart of government won't harm one of Sharp's other positions, either. He remains a director of and significant shareholder in Oncimmune, a company working on cancer detection based on immune responses. The company keenly tweeted news of Sharp's government job and changed its website homepage to read: "How Oncimmune can help Covid-19 vaccine response validation by studying the antibody profiles in patient samples."

Since news of Sharp's government Covid job came out, Oncimmune's share price has risen by more than 20 percent, netting Sharp a gain of more than £500,000. That might just constitute a vested interest.

...politicians refused to listen, and... – Ward took a dim view of Downing failing to listen to the experts and the importance of preventing the spread of coronavirus.

She may well be right; but what is the effect of one said expert – namely, my colleague Neil Ferguson, whom I mentioned in her article – going into No 10 until before realising he was experiencing a cold? Some in Westminster even speculated that he himself was the "superspreader". Health secretary Matt Hancock, chief of staff officer Chris Whitty and even Boris Johnson. Perish the thought!

HORSING AROUND

CANCELLATION of the Grand National at Aintree, scheduled for 4 April, is a major blow to the race sponsorship of the laboratory firm Randox – as well as to its paid consultant, Tory MP Owen Paterson.

As *Eye* 1481 revealed in 2017, the environment secretary Paterson was paid £100,000 a year by Randox. Between Randox, the MP and his wife there: Paterson's wife Rose is a member of the Jockey Club, which owns 14 of the leading racecourses, including Aintree, and she is also chairwoman of Randox. Indeed, Randox founder Peter Paterson told the *Times* in 2017 that the no-nonsense discussion while he was out of office was the Grand National had first been discussed while he was out of office.

Still, while Randox may be out on its grand day out at Aintree, it stands to make a bundle from selling private coronavirus tests to a pop!

LAD CULTURE

HOME secretary Priti Patel's bemusement at a Downing Street conference when she announced a question would be coming from Ladbible's editor Simon Field.

Ladbible, a social media company known for viral video sharing and entertainment, seemed to be alongside the BBC, Channel 4, and others. et al. Could this left-field company have anything to do with Peter Field, the 10's deputy director of digital marketing who joined the Johnson team in his former role as PR chief?