

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Larry Elliott, in the Guardian, deplores the economic consequences of lockdowns. Lord Sumption, in the Telegraph, abhors the use of fear and emergency powers to curtail liberty and democracy.

LARRY ELLIOTT

The Guardian / 15 October 2020

“BRITAIN'S COVID-19 STRATEGY SIMPLY ADDS UP TO MANY MORE JOBLESS PEOPLE

Every country wants to fight the virus with minimal economic damage. Our attempts have created the worst of all worlds

It's the textbook example of being caught between a rock and a hard place. The number of people being treated for Covid-19 in hospital is rising fast and is currently higher than it was when the UK went into full national lockdown on 23 March. Worse is to come.

Simultaneously, the threat of mass unemployment looms ever larger. More workers were made redundant in the three months to August than at any time since the period when the banks almost went bust a decade ago. Worse is to come here, too.

Opinion is divided on what to do next. There are those who think the second wave of Covid is potentially so serious that a full national lockdown is necessary, whatever the cost. Labour's plan for a two- or three-week circuit breaker is really a national lockdown, merely a time-limited one.

Then there are those who question the wisdom of pushing the economy back into deep recession when young people are the main victims of unemployment and the average age of those dying from the virus is 80-plus. For this group, the answer is to shield the vulnerable and let everybody else get on with their lives.

The government's desire to avoid another total lockdown in England is understandable. Shutting schools harms children, especially poor children. Millions of routine cancer scans have been cancelled so far this year. The 25% contraction in the economy between February and April has been hardest on the youngest and most vulnerable workers. Who is to say that one circuit breaker won't be followed by a second, a third and a fourth, given that it might be years rather than months before a vaccine is available?

What's more, the idea that the whole country should be put into lockdown simply to show that we are all in it together makes little sense. Forcing a hotel in the south-west of England, where infection rates are low, to go out of business would do nothing to engender a sense of national solidarity. Quite the reverse, in fact. Ideally, the response needs to be more local and more granular, rather than broad-brush and national.

It is also a mistake to imagine that there is a binary choice between saving lives and saving the economy – that the only way to prevent an exponential increase in the number of Covid-19 cases is for the government to keep people penned up in their homes.

There are two reasons for that. The first, as Prof Paul Anand of the Open University noted in a letter to the Guardian, is that there is evidence that transmission is linked to living in shared accommodation, and is most marked in cramped housing, where physical distancing is a problem.

The second is that epidemiological models come up with scary forecasts for death rates because they assume no change in people's behaviour in the absence of government-imposed lockdowns or other restrictions.

Yet the world doesn't work that way. Confronted by a pandemic, people do change the way they live. They go out less, and when they do venture from their homes they take more precautions. They do their own risk assessments, based on the available evidence.

Scientific models suggested that Sweden would suffer 96,000 Covid-19 deaths in the first wave, owing to its government's decision to have only mild restrictions, but they presupposed that Swedes would carry on as before. They didn't, with the result that the death toll is fewer than 6,000 – a figure that would have been substantially lower had it not been for problems in Swedish care homes.

That doesn't mean Sweden has been immune from the recessionary fallout from the pandemic. According to forecasts from the International Monetary Fund, Sweden's economy will contract by 4.7% this year. That, though, contrasts with the 9.8% pencilled in for the UK.

Every country in the world is trying to find the sweet spot where the virus is suppressed with the minimum amount of economic damage, and most are making a better fist of it than the UK. Take South Korea, which has so far had just 438 deaths. It has had clusters of cases, and is projected by the IMF to see its economy contract by no more than 1.9% this year.

There are, clearly, lessons to be learned. Sweden shows the merits of a clear strategy and sticking to it. This is in marked contrast to the UK, where the government initially downplayed the threat, imposed some of the world's toughest restrictions, eased up as the economic cost mounted, actively encouraged people to eat out to help the hospitality sector, and is now back to where it started. Here the mixed messaging has left people confused, and in the circumstances it is surprising compliance with the restrictions is as high as it is. That, though, may have more to do with people taking steps to safeguard themselves voluntarily than any faith in the government.

The lesson from South Korea is that an effective track-and-testing system is the key to limiting the number of Covid-19 deaths and protecting the economy. Boris Johnson's government has had seven months to provide something comparable, and has failed to do so.

The UK has so far had the worst of all worlds: a high death rate and colossal economic damage. This unfortunate combination looks set to continue.

On past form, Johnson's government will no doubt insist that it is committed to its current strategy up to the moment it hits the panic button. Blanket restrictions will then be imposed, and will be more than likely to remain in place for the rest of the winter. There is no guarantee that the virus will have been finally defeated by the time restrictions are lifted in the spring. The dole queues, though, will be a lot longer. That is for certain.

By Larry Elliott
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CHARLES HYMAS

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“LORD SUMPTION: MINISTERS STOKED FEAR TO JUSTIFY LOCKDOWNS

Retired supreme court judge will say Government imposed draconian measures on public by instilling fear about the dangers of the Covid-19

A former supreme court judge will accuse the Government on Tuesday of “propaganda and stoking fear” in order to justify Covid lockdowns.

Lord Sumption, a retired supreme court judge, will say the Government has been able to impose draconian measures on the public by instilling fear about the dangers of the Covid-19 virus.

Giving the Cambridge Freshfields annual law lecture he will say ministers sidestepped Parliament through the Public Health Act which, unlike other legislation, allowed them to introduce lockdowns and other measures without the same level of scrutiny by the Commons or Lords.

In announcing the first lockdown, he will accuse the Government of “tendentiously” presenting guidance – such as two metre social distancing – as if it was law.

At the same time, he will say the Government has given the police “unprecedented discretionary” enforcement powers, some of which have been used to suppress opposition to its policies.

Lord Sumption will argue the way ministers have gone about creating new criminal offences, sometimes several times a week on the “mere say-so of ministers” and with fines of up to £10,000, is in constitutional terms “truly breathtaking.”

In Britain's traditional liberal society, police should not have such arbitrary enforcement powers without them having been properly debated, amended or rejected by a democratic legislature, he will say.

This has been achieved through ministers' “language of impending doom,” “alarmist” projections of mathematical modellers, manipulation of statistics and claims that Covid is an indiscriminate killer when it affects identifiable groups like the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.

This propaganda was necessary to justify the Government's extreme steps and to promote compliance but the use of fear of an external threat, he will say, has been a “potent instrument” historically of authoritarian states.

Lord Sumption, an author and medieval historian, will warn that the actions of the Government during the pandemic threatens to re-shape the relationship between state and the public in a dangerous way.

He will say it marks a move to a more authoritarian model of politics which will outlast the present crisis. It may be a “desirable outcome” for some ministers and their advisers but Lord Sumption fears it will fracture and have a corrosive effect on the societies they govern.

By Charles Hymas
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