

CONFESSIONS OF A LOCKDOWN SCEPTIC

by SIMON FAIRLIE

From the outset of the pandemic I have instinctively leaned towards the so-called “herd immunity” approach rather than to the policy of lockdown and suppression that has been the dominant response. By the 14 March, I was so perplexed at the way things were going that I wrote a letter to the *Guardian*:

“Could somebody please explain why we do not advise vulnerable people, and anybody else worried about catching the coronavirus, to self-isolate, while the rest of low risk humanity carries on with business and leisure as usual. Would this not be a better way of building up immunity for the next time the virus crops up?”

They didn’t publish it; but an answer to my question came two days later when Neil Ferguson and his colleagues at Imperial College published their report on the Covid-19 virus, which predicted that 250,000 people would die if the nation followed the course outlined in my letter, and the National Health service would be overwhelmed.¹ Who was I to doubt the eminent professor – he who had helped provide the rationale for the Government’s slaughter of 10 million animals during the 2001 epidemic of Foot and Mouth and who in 2009 predicted that 65,000 people could die from Swine Flu, when the final toll turned out to be less than 500?²

And who was Boris Johnson to argue with him, for that matter? Britain joined most other countries in a social experiment that was unprecedented in both scale and global reach. Nothing of the kind had been envisaged during the flu epidemics of 1957 and 1968, which targeted younger people, and resulted in UK death tolls estimated between 30,000 and 80,000. In the school I attended in 1958, a girl of about ten years old died from Asian flu. We prayed for her in Assembly, but no one thought to shut the school down, or take any other precaution.

In the devastating Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-9, which had a case fatality rate far higher than Covid-19, schools closed, various social distancing measures were advised, but there was no centrally imposed lockdown; many pubs and churches stayed open, football matches were well attended and the House of Commons continued to meet. A Royal Society of Medicine report at the time advocated “the avoidance of aggregation of large units”, but questioned whether “we are prepared to pay the heavy price in personal restrictions which prevention – if even then it be possible – will necessarily imply”.³

A century later, the medical establishment has decided, with the support of most of the mainstream media, that we are prepared to pay that price.



Battle of Britain 2020, as depicted by Banksy.

A Call to Arms

On the very day that Imperial College issued their game-changing report, Johnson addressed the people in Churchillian tones:

“We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy . . . This enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable . . . However tough the months ahead we have the resolve and the resources to win the fight.”

On 23 March, the prime minister abandoned any prospect of the nation achieving herd immunity, and ordered a national lockdown on the draconian terms that Ferguson had proposed and that radically undermined the national economy.

Johnson (who has written a book about Churchill) was not alone in employing wartime rhetoric. President Macron was widely seen as trying to emulate De Gaulle when, on the same day, he included the phrase “we are at war” six times in a 20 minute televised speech to the French nation. A few days later, Donald Trump, a Vietnam draft dodger, styled himself a “wartime president”. Some days later New York honoured its health workers not by banging pots and pans, but by flying a squadron of F16 bombers over the city.⁴

Johnson’s speech heralded a propaganda campaign in support of the lockdown the like of which has not been seen since the Second World War. The Prime Minister sent a personal letter to every household in the country; advertisements warning people to “stay @ home” monopolised the front pages of national newspapers; 1940s retro-style posters were distributed advising people how to maintain social distance and how to wash their hands; the Queen gave the nation pep-talks. The intensity of the propaganda was what some of us had demanded the government should be issuing if it were serious about meeting its climate change targets.

The military rhetoric was also laced with a faintly nauseating dose of gerontophilia. Keir Starmer sang the praise of “the VE generation”. Our 94 year old monarch, borrowing the words of 103 year old Vera Lynn, reminded us that “we will meet again”. Instead of our brave Tommies with their eponymous submachine guns, the hero of the day was Captain Tom and his zimmer frame.

“We have today the healthiest most active elderly generation of all time,” stated Sir Graham Brady, head of the 1922 Committee,⁵ though he could equally truthfully have claimed that “never before have we had so many old people dependent upon the NHS for their survival, and draining its resources.” In fact we have never had so many old people, full stop. No wonder the coronavirus, which targets the aged, has had such an impact.

The campaign to address global warming requires baby boomers (such as myself) to make sacrifices for the benefit of the generation represented by Greta Thunberg. The war against Covid-19 requires younger people to make sacrifices for the benefit of the few remaining representatives of the VE generation and their baby boomer offspring.

Hawks and Doves

The first casualty of war is truth, and those who employ bellicose rhetoric to instill fear and buoy up morale are not necessarily to be trusted. Over the weeks following the 16 March I spent much of my time trying to determine whether a lockdown really was the optimum response to the threat posed by Covid-19.

The mainstream press was not much help. The *Guardian* maintained a militantly one-side support for the lockdown, publishing articles like the one entitled “I’m an Epidemiologist: when I Heard about Britain’s ‘Herd Immunity’ Coronavirus Plan, I Thought it was Satire”.⁶ On 20 April it pursued the military theme further in an article entitled “Who are the Doves and Hawks of UK’s Covid-19 Lockdown Policy?”, in which, perversely, the “hawks” were those in favour of relaxing the draconian restrictions upon people’s freedom, and the “doves” were those who wanted to keep them in place. The only rationale for this nomenclature seemed to be that the *Guardian* supports a stringent lockdown, and *Guardian* readers like to think of themselves as doves. Only its veteran columnist Simon Jenkins had the decency to express a measure of doubt: “there is clearly more than one side to this argument”.⁷

The *Independent* kept its head down. Amongst the dailies, it seemed that only the *Telegraph* was prepared to publish searching critiques of the lockdown agenda; but since its website has a paywall and the libraries were closed, these were not accessible unless you subscribed (God forbid). It was left to the *Spectator* – the stable that spawned Boris Johnson – to publish accessible articles by one of the UK’s leading critics of lock-down, pathologist John Lee.

On the internet, on the other hand, there was no problem locating critiques of the lockdown approach from scores of qualified scientists.⁸ There was agreement among many of them that:



- many more people have been infected than the figures indicate;
- analyses of infected populations (eg Iceland, Gangelt in Germany, Santa Clara CA, and the cruise ship Diamond Princess) indicate an infection fatality rate much lower than the 0.9 percent relied upon for their projections by Imperial College;
- the Covid-19 virus behaves like a flu virus and naturally peaks and then fades in virulence over time whatever measures are employed;
- lockdown policies slow down the course of the disease, heightening the risk of infection for the vulnerable and causing more deaths through poverty, depression, failure to attend to other diseases, etc – especially in poor countries.

- focussing resources on isolating the vulnerable would have been more effective than isolating everybody;
- a vaccination will be hard to develop and, like flu vaccines will have limited effectiveness and lifespan.

Of course there are just as many voices on-line arguing the opposite. The success of certain countries in suppressing the disease quickly and keeping their death toll low speaks in favour of the lockdown approach. And every newspaper report of a young person or a health worker in Britain dying lends emotional weight to the argument.

The New Normal

But the lockdown cannot be judged solely by the speed and efficiency with which the disease is suppressed. What happens in the future may be of greater importance: Will the virus return? Will a vaccine be found? Will we keep resorting to lockdown measures? Will the economy recover? Unlike previous pandemics, the response to Covid-19 carries with it the perception that things will never be the same again: when the worst is over we will be facing a “new normal”.

Many people have been pleasantly surprised by the impacts of the lockdown: the absence of airplanes and contrails, the 1955 levels of car traffic, the reduction in carbon emissions and air pollution, the rising interest in local foods, the resurgence of nature, the readiness of the Tory party to embrace socialist policies and the chilled atmosphere of economic indolence. For supporters of green de-growth, the Government has been doing the right thing, but for the wrong reasons. Unfortunately, it is a leap of faith to expect that, once the epidemic subsides, it will continue in the same direction for the right reasons. It has billions of pounds’ worth of loans to repay. The best one can hope for is that more people have had their eyes opened to the charms of economic contraction.

But the prospect of a “new normal” also suggests that we are never going to rid ourselves of the mark of the virus. Having chosen to suppress the disease, rather than submit to the age-old process

A Breath of Fresh Air

President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, seen here teaching Gérard Depardieu how to use a scythe, is not a popular figure in Western Europe. The former boss of a collective farm, he is known as “Europe’s last dictator”. It was hardly surprising, then, that the unconventional reasons he gave for refusing to put his country into lockdown were greeted with derision in the Western press. “There’s no need for any panic,” he was reported as saying:

“We just need to work, especially in the countryside. The tractor will cure everyone there, the fields cure everyone . . . Go to the sauna, that’s also healthy, once or twice a week.”

“Though I’m not a drinker, I joke now that you shouldn’t just wash your hands with vodka, but each day have the equivalent of 40-50 millilitres of pure alcohol to poison this virus . . . It’s better to die standing than live on your knees.”

In April, when visiting a clothing factory repurposed for making face-masks, he took the opportunity to criticise their use in schools:

“Utter nonsense. Children cannot wear these masks, especially in schools. There was no such requirement. It’s better to open the window and let fresh air in.”

While it is hard to find any support for the vodka and sauna cure, his advice about working in the fields and fresh air may be not too far off the mark. People hospitalised for Covid-19 are put on mechanical ventilators, but in the 1918 flu epidemic they were prescribed natural ventilation. Throughout the 19th century medical experts had noted the benign medical effects of fresh air for people suffering from pulmonary disease. George Bodington, in his 1940 treatise



on tuberculosis noted that people who worked outside, such as farmers, shepherds and ploughmen were usually free of the disease, and advised that:

“The application of cold pure air to the interior surface of the lungs does more to promote the healing of cavities and ulcers of the lungs than any other means that can be employed.”

Other 19th century experts, including Florence Nightingale, prescribed copious amounts of fresh air, and during the First World War outdoor tented military hospitals performed well.

As a result, during the 1918 flu pandemic a number of tented hospitals were established to deal with victims. One of these, Camp Brooks near Boston, Lincolnshire, was set up in just seven hours to receive merchant sailors who had contracted the disease. (see photo, right). In little over a month, 351 sailors were admitted, and 36 died, a ten percent death rate compared to 40 percent in conventional hospitals.



Fresh air was also valued as a prevention measure. The photo below shows women from the UK War Department taking a prescribed 15 minute walk to breathe in fresh air to ward off influenza.

In 2009, a paper published in the *American Journal of Public Health* drew some lessons for modern influenza treatment:

“If droplets are the main mode of transmission, the isolation of patients in private rooms and the use of ordinary surgical face masks may suffice. . . . However more might be gained by introducing high levels of natural ventilation or, indeed, by encouraging the public to spend as much time outdoors as possible.”

This, of course, is the precise opposite of advice given during the coronavirus crisis, which has been to stay at home.

Observers are doubtless waiting for the virus to pounce upon Belarus and exact revenge for Lukashenko’s cavalier attitude. At the time of writing it hasn’t happened yet: Belarus, if the figures are to be believed, has suffered 32 deaths per million inhabitants, whereas the tally per million in the UK is 611.



Meanwhile, paradoxically, there is evidence that smoking tobacco helps to ward off the malady, a view also held in 1918, when smoking rules were relaxed in some factories for this reason. Perhaps scientists should be examining infection rates amongst cowboys, who, Waylon Jennings tells us, “like smokey old pool rooms and clear mountain mornings.”

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I.D McLaughlin, ‘Belarusian Leader Prescribes Sport, Sauna and Vodka to Beat Covid-19’ *Irish Times*, 31 March 2020

RA. Hobday, and JW. Cason, ‘The Open-Air Treatment of Pandemic Influenza’ *Am J Public Health*, 2009 October; 99 (Suppl 2), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4504358/ *Coronavirus: How they Tried to Curb Spanish Flu Pandemic in 1918* BBC News, 10 May 2020.

‘Smokers Seem Less Likely than Non-Smokers to Fall Ill with Covid-19’, *The Economist*, 2 May 2020.

of acquiring collective immunity by paying the required toll in deaths, we risk alienating ourselves from nature and from each other. A community, it has been said, is a group of individuals who share the same diseases. The legacy of the lockdown is that people have become biohazards, to be avoided “like the plague”. To hide one’s face behind a mask – be it balaclava, burqa or hoodie – was until recently viewed by liberals as an offence against community; now it is a social obligation, the new normal. Humanity is facing an existential crisis, because it can’t come to terms with death: *l’infection, c’est les autres*.

Into the vacuum of human intercourse created by the crisis – and enforced by the state – step the purveyors of digital communication. The lockdown is only tolerable, and hence enforceable, because in their isolation people are able to tune into on-line platforms and social media. In this favourable climate the moguls of digital capitalism have not been slow to press home their advantage. “Every American should be asking where we want the nation to be when the Covid-19 pandemic is over,” Eric Schmidt, founder of Google, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*. But he already had the answer: “a future economy and education system based on tele-everything,” requiring the government “to make a massive investment to convert the nation’s digital infrastructure to cloud-based platforms and link them with a 5G network.”⁹

As Naomi Klein observed

“Pre-Covid, this precise app-driven, gig-fueled future was being sold to us in the name of convenience, frictionlessness, and personalization . . . Now, against a harrowing backdrop of mass death, it is being sold to us on the dubious promise that these technologies are the only possible way to pandemic-proof our lives.”¹⁰

The new normal, it seems, may be one in which virtual communication rather than acquired immunity will be our wall of defence against infectious disease and human biohazards.

Strange Bedfellows

Time will no doubt be the judge. Meanwhile all eyes are on Sweden, the only country in Western Europe brave enough, or foolish enough, to reject a lockdown. At the time of writing, Swedish schools, bars, restaurants, public transport and the majority of workplaces remain open; the advice is to stay at home if you feel ill, or if you are over 70 (though you can still go out for walks); social distancing is advised, but the recommended distance is “arm’s length”, not two metres. Opponents of a lockdown observe that Sweden has a lower death rate per million than the UK; lockdown advocates point out that the UK was slow to lock down and Sweden has a higher death rate than other Scandinavian countries.

Belarus and Nicaragua have both refused to implement a lockdown and at the time of writing their official death toll

is very low, though not everyone believes the figures. Critics allege that Nicaragua’s President Ortega is passing off Covid-19 deaths as diabetes or pneumonia; On 18 May, Ortega responded that 309 people had died of pneumonia since January, 87 more people than in the same period last year, but that only some deaths were linked to the coronavirus.¹¹

Excess deaths are regarded as the most accurate measure of the total impact. By the 20 May, the total in the UK had reached 55,000 – compared to a record 89,000 in England and Wales alone in the icy winter of 1962-1963.¹² So-called “doves” argue that it is thanks to the lockdown that the figure is lower than the 250,000 predicted by Imperial College, but we will never know whether that forecast would have been correct.

A curtain of uncertainty surrounds this epidemic, but one thing is apparent. Much of the left-wing establishment, led by the *Guardian*, has given its unquestioned support to the “war effort” and ignored critical analysis, leaving this to the right wing press and to the on-line community. If you are a left-of-centre lockdown sceptic, it is uncomfortable to find yourself aligned with Latin American dictators, gun-toting Republicans, and the *Spectator*. But you do not have to be a supporter of Trump and Bolsonaro to question warlike propaganda, nor do you have to be a supporter of the capitalist economy to query the wisdom of locking up most of humanity to deal with a commonly occurring natural phenomenon.

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A robot policeman looking for lockdown resisters on the streets of Tunis.