

The hysterical reaction to Covid19 & public support of lockdown is scary & dangerous

Peter Hitchens talking to Peter Whittle of the New Culture Forum

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PW: Something seems to have happened over the past couple of days. Suddenly coverage in the media seems to have sort of changed to much more overtly economic things. Do you perceive that?

PH: I think I think it began last week with Fraser Nelson's extraordinary article in The Daily Telegraph which was obviously the fruit of very high-level briefing, expressing serious alarm at the economic consequences of the government's policy.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/04/09/boris-worried-lockdown-has-gone-far-can-end/>

I think it almost certainly expresses a very strong view at a high level in the government that things have gone badly wrong economically and that they didn't predict what happened.

The difficulty for the government is this. They have persuaded the public that the threat of Covid 19 is so great that the public have responded with far more enthusiasm than they ever expected. Indeed the public is probably now more committed to the government's program than the government itself, who increasingly feels that if this goes on for much longer, then we face something closely resembling national bankruptcy and they want to find a way out of it.

PW: You've been writing pretty much from the start of this thing that this was maybe the wrong way to go.

PH: There was no doubt about my position at the start. I felt at the beginning that the government's response was disproportionate.

It's not wrong to try and prevent the spread of disease if you can. It's not wrong to take any rational action to reduce harm if it's within your powers to do to it, but it just seemed to me that closing down a very large part of an economy was very dangerous.

I also thought that the assault on personal liberty which was involved in it was intolerable and should not have been attempted by any government of the free country and also that people should have objected to it more.

I don't think that it's the business of government to interfere in the private lives of people to the extent going on and the economic thing just seemed to me to be quite obviously very dangerous. I said again and again, there is no evidence that crashing your economy saves a single life, whereas there is a great deal of evidence that severe economic damage costs lives in the near term and in the long term.

In fact from the beginning I quoted Professor Sucharit Bhakdi, (Professor of Microbiology and Epidemiology at the University of Mainz, Germany) who made this point, particularly about the danger of long-term isolation to the healthy old which has been a major part of this.

I mean an awful lot of all people in this country, who up to now were living productive interesting and active lives and are now confined to their homes and prevented from making contact with their friends except by electronic means, are actually suffering in mental and physical health as a result of this in ways which will cost greatly.

As for the economic cost it doesn't take much imagination to work out what will happen to the National Health Service if the tax base collapses.

You've certainly can't afford to have a National Health Service on the scale which people want if you have a lower tax base.

What will happen if more and more people are unemployed, a key factor in the development of ill health? There are so many ways in which this this threatens health

Therefore as I say repeatedly, this isn't a matter of money against life. It's a question of life against life. Both the calculations involved lives

If the thing now does begin to moderate and reverse, then that will be good and I think it may have something to do with the fact that some of us raised a small banner of protest against it from the start, which in any free country was our duty and something which we were absolutely entitled and right to do.

PW: The fact that possible economic consequences are being emphasized, seems to have come from this new report from the Office of Budget Responsibility yesterday. These were quite horrifying figures.

PH: The world, particularly the Western world, was already on the on the brink of the serious economic crash anyway. So yes, I think that the danger of something very bad is there.

The problem is, people simply can't imagine it.

We've had so for so long as so much security and safety and prosperity that it is very, very difficult for people even to imagine the possibility that they might live through a period of a serious penury, very large-scale unemployment, downward pressure on wages, taxes intolerably high, even levied on the poorest. I think that is a great difficulty which people have a huge problem in imagining.

PW: At the beginning it was said that actually of course it would be terrible, certain people would be badly affected, but that most people indeed would get rather mild symptoms from this thing. You no longer have those reassuring voices in briefings now. Is that something that you've noticed?

PH: Actually the predictions so far have largely been borne out. Some people were always going to suffer very badly from this disease and have done and some were going to die and have done and are still doing. This has always been that a major concern and we want to try and prevent it.

But a very large number of people will have the disease without symptoms. I think that remains true.

I think that the great difficulty here is in working out what is the proportionate response to what is going on.

I find that almost all figures which were given, were given without a context. At the beginning of this I was shocking people by stating the fact that 1600 people died normally every day in the UK. This happens. It's grievous for those involved and distressing and not to be taken lightly but it happens, People do die.

So when you look at the figures which were given for the numbers of deaths you have to take that into context.

I've never thought to predict a level of death. I've never minimized the danger of the disease. What I have that is doubted in the extreme all the predictions that came from Imperial College, the 510,000 deaths prediction if we did nothing, the quarter-of-a-million prediction if we did mild shutting down and the fewer than 20,000 prediction if we did a tight shut down.

The last one is probably the most realistic of the three. I thought the five hundred and ten thousand was probably based on guesswork.

That was that figure which impelled the government into adopting the ultra strict policy of an almost total shutdown

It was that figure or something similar which the Swedish government examining and decided was not something they wish to follow, so they chose a more a more moderate policy of encouraging social distancing and isolation when necessary but not going for the almost total shutdown of the economy that we've chosen.

The interesting thing is that Sweden, having taken what appears to me to be thoughtful and rational policy, is constantly depicted in the media as some kind of wild eccentric outlier. Every report that's written on Sweden is written on the basis that any minute now Sweden will be engulfed in hecatombs of death and will regret its decision.

Well maybe that's so. Who can predict the future? I think that there's been an almost total dismissal of any thought of any policy other than the one adopted by the government. That dismissal began to come to an end over the weekend when we began to discuss much more seriously than before the economic dangers of what's going on.

PW: Why would there be that dismissal? We are talking presumably about the media?

PH: No. My experience is that the opinion polls which state around 93% support for what the government's doing, are pretty much right.

I've come up against people whom I regard as intelligent and thoughtful. They have completely and utterly bought the government view that the threat from the Corona virus is so serious that the only proper response was to shut down the country. It's very, very widely believed.

I don't think that the danger justifies it. I think we are overdoing it. I think there is a

there is a danger from this disease but there's no evidence whatsoever from any of the countries that the sort of measures adopted by the British government will save any lives beyond those which were being saved in Sweden.

There is a fascinating example on the continent. There are two neighbouring and very similar countries, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has adopted a lighter touch, Belgium a much more heavy-handed regime. Both of them are suffering deaths, but in fact the one which is suffering more deaths is Belgium.

I don't think this actually has anything to do with the policies, it will be some other factor which we don't actually understand. There is nothing which seems to me to demonstrate that this policy is effective in reducing deaths, but people have bought it.

One of the ways of getting people to support a government is fear and I think people are very afraid, especially of things they can't see. That's one of the reasons that nuclear power is frightening.

You can't see radiation and you can't see a virus either. This is not just a wholly selfish thing. If people think they might take home a virus which will kill somebody they love, people will be captivated by this and will take it very seriously.

Again, I think what Fraser Nelson wrote was the government was amazed by just how much voluntary support its policy caught.

Fear is the basis of this sort of Hobbesian pact between state and people where people cluster round the skirts of government begging to be saved from danger and almost nothing will persuade them to stop.

For someone like me who was brought up very much to be a free person, who was sceptical of government and never believed what he was told without checking, to see people I know, educated, intelligent, experienced people taking this stuff as all certain and true has been actually quite frightening for me.

I thought that I lived in a society of free confident people concerned to protect their liberties and I find out I live in a country which actually longs to swoon into the outstretched arms of big brother.

PW: In that case what has changed?

PH: I think huge numbers of things have changed. This is the nature of the cultural revolution which I'm constantly going on about.

An education system which previously taught, certainly at least an to an educated elite, how to think rather than what to think, has been largely dismantled.

The enormous power of electronic and then social media to enforce conformism is always underestimated but this is one of the things they do. Very, very quickly they create a mob feeling or they create a feeling of emulation.

When colour television first began to be important people wanted to look like the sort of people they saw on television and sound like them: the same sense of humour, the same jokes, the same taste in clothes and food and the same tastes in thought as well.

Social media have an even more powerful effect on this, especially Twitter but other places as well. Those who do not fit in with whatever is the agreed and accepted point of view come under quite unpleasant attack. I mean I can speak of this because it happens to me.

It is a kind of thought policing.

People are afraid of it and if you take it seriously, then it will indeed frighten people and it can destroy people.

Employers are frightened of it and they will sack people who come under certain forms of pressure, so it is a conformist force.

I think though those are the two main things. Firstly, the collapse of old-fashioned elitist education which believed that you needed in the country a group of people who would stand up responsibly, think for themselves, not be told what to do, and say to a government "you might be wrong". That's gone.

And secondly a hugely and toughly enforced conformist idea of what everybody should think.

PW: If one talks about a kind of British belligerence, if you like, about liberty and questioning authority, if that's gone then presumably this is because people don't really know about it. They don't know about the traditions, maybe of Magna Carta and this sort of thing in Britain.

PH: Well they don't. David Cameron, this is an Oxford graduate supposedly with a first class degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, kept on saying that we ought to have a British Bill of Rights. He apparently didn't know that we had one and I doubt very much whether he'd read it or knows the history of it. He claimed not to know what Magna Carta meant. Maybe this was an elaborate Cameronian joke, I don't know, but I have a horrible feeling it might have been true.

A lot of people don't know very much about what I was brought up to call the Glorious Revolution and the constitutional effects of that. They don't understand the importance of jury trial and the presumption of innocence. The police increasingly don't and lots as people in the legal profession seem not to grasp it either, so it's not very surprising if these things die.

Liberty exists in the hearts of the people who have it.

PW: What would be the course of action we should take now if it were up to you?

PH: Well, I think we've done this thing of mobilizing a huge and, as I say fundamentally benevolent, public opinion.

People believe that they're doing good and right by engaging in this, so it's going to have to be brought to an end gradually.

I personally I would love it if it could be ended very swiftly because of the damage I believe it's doing and the good it's failing to do, but I accept that it's a difficult political problem for the government to march people back down the hill having marched them all the way up. They're not going to be able to do it easily or quickly.

So I think there will be a continued official shutdown with various bits and pieces of it being relaxed.

PW: What do you think the permanent marks will be on our culture?

PH: I think that it will be very, very hard for us to continue to claim to be a people particularly concerned with our own Liberty.

I think that what will preoccupy people will be living in a world which we will be economically actually so much poorer than the one we had before this began. I think people will be shocked when they discover just how much poorer.

People are going to experience such things as pay cuts, something not experienced in this country since the 1930s. I can't see how the tax increases which will be necessary to sustain public services will not affect the poor as well as the rich because he won't be able to raise enough money otherwise.

People just going to be living in a bleaker and bleaker state than they were before and quite a lot of people will have no jobs.

People who spend years getting into debt and working all the hours that God sent building up flourishing, but narrow margin small businesses will have been destroyed by this and will frankly have no way back. What will happen to them?

I think that will be the most profound difference and I don't know what the long-term political consequences will be. Who will be blamed and what form will that blame take?

It worries me because it seems to me to threaten the stability of the state if you have a lot of people who have in effect been deprived of perfectly reasonable livings by government actions which may well in time be seen to have been precipitous and mistaken.

PW: Do you perceive in any way any kind of political divide in response to this between left and right?

PH: it's been interesting how many people on the left who six months ago would have treated Johnson with contempt are now rallying behind him.

I think that the performance of the official opposition in Parliament has been supine. That's one of the things that has struck me about this.

All the supposed brakes and safety valves in our constitution designed to prevent foolish decisions and prevent wild downhill rushes into dangerous politics completely failed. The opposition didn't oppose, Parliament didn't debate and accepted the highly suspect coronavirus laws.

The legal profession where were they? All the people who were so ready to take the government to court over the European issue were silent over very considerable

limitations on personal liberty, which are the business of the courts it seems to me. Not a word.

Much of the media silent or again supine.

Civil society in general, faced with a determined government wanting to impose measures of quite radical importance on the population, did nothing. So I think our own self applause as a great democratic state, it's going to have to stop.

I would like to see a re-examination of that but I'm not sure it would do all that much good because you will still have the huge forces for conformism which helped to bring this about.

I don't see a good future for politics in any of this. It makes me if it's possible even more pessimistic than I was before.

PW: When one talks about the reaction of the British, then quite often the answer you get back is yes, but the whole world is in this position, the whole world is responding like this.

PH: It's not true. You look at countries including Japan where there's been a lot of formal passing of states of emergency but in fact the people have largely been allowed to act responsibly on their own behalf.

There's certainly no current indication that Japan's policy has caused more difficulty and more deaths than our policy.

The Netherlands as I say has been has used a lighter touch than its immediate neighbour Belgium and I don't think there's any evidence that that has caused any great danger and there remains the great example of Sweden.

If the Swedish government finds that it was wrong and that its policies can be shown to have produced more danger to the population, then I have no doubt whatsoever the Swedish government will change its policy

But if that doesn't happen and Sweden gets through this without a terrible number of deaths and without trashing its economy, then that seems to me to be a reproach to those who behaved otherwise.

That's why the whole Swedish issue is so important and why almost all the media coverage of Sweden in this country is hostile and says that any minute now it's all going to get terribly wrong and that they are wildly eccentric.