

Funding the Future

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I did not work this weekend. That was a deliberate choice. It's been a deeply fatiguing few months. I don't regret the effort. I am incredibly lucky to do something that I enjoy. But, reflection does no harm. The trouble is, there is relatively little that is giving cause for optimism right now.

Covid-19 is not the fundamental root of my concern. Of course, suffering a pandemic is a disaster. What worries me is, however, how we react to it. Here, three issues seem to be apparent.

The first is that we seem to be moving to a state of denial. The language is about 'returning to normal'. We are not, however, doing that. There is still a pandemic. Covid-19 is not being defeated. There is no vaccine. And yet, deliberately led by the government, whose messaging is about as confused as it is possible to get, the pretence is that the Covid-19 threat is almost over. Nothing symbolises that more than the absurd £500 million 'eat a meal in August' scheme.

Some, of course, believe the government. That is their right, except for the fact that when defeating a pandemic everyone has to be involved.

What seems more apparent, from simple observation, is that a great many are disbelieving of the government's claims. There is no desire or willing to rush back to normal, precisely because people are still worried, and rightly so, in my opinion.

I am in this category: I spent some time over the weekend trying to persuade myself that this could be the moment to book a week away, self catering. I didn't succeed. I cannot, as yet, believe it the responsible thing to do. Like so many others, I am suffering from a crisis of confidence in the messaging from Downing Street.

What is also apparent is that there is, underpinning the disquiet on pandemic management, an extreme concern about the economy. The sense that 'I am furloughed so I am OK' is rapidly dissipating. It is being replaced with the idea that 'I've been furloughed, so my job must be in doubt'.

This is then coupled with the belief that the government is moving from doing

'everything possible' to the newfound position that 'we're right out of money and you're on your own now'. Since this is the messaging that's now emerging, that's an entirely reasonable presumption to make, but it feeds an underlying sense of impending crisis.

After which there is the government's own behaviour to worry about. I am aware that many do not think about this. If they did then opinion polls would clearly not be showing the results that they are. But amongst those who engage with politics and who believe that democracy only thrives when there are appropriate checks and balances in place between the various forms of government that must, necessarily, coexist within any functioning state, there has to be rapidly rising concern about what is happening in the UK right now.

I never expected Brexit to be good. But I also did not expect it to be totally chaotic, and also almost entirely lawless in the sense that just about every international requirement to make it work, including for customs checks, is apparently being ignored, or even denied to be necessary (in the case of Northern Ireland). It is simply not possible to run a state without due regard for the considerations of others, including your trading partners, who must expect common standards of behaviour to be upheld, and yet this is what is happening. Our government is treating almost everyone with total disregard and that is going to have a heavy cost.

The same is true of the government's almost total disregard for the civil service. You cannot run any organisation when holding its staff in contempt, and yet it is very apparent that this is what the government is seeking to do. Chaos, disorder and failure will be the almost inevitable consequences.

And the same contempt is being shown towards all governments outside Westminster. So, the devolved governments are being ignored, or are having their power stripped from them. It is apparent, for example, that much of their power over the economies in their countries is to be stripped from them, but the responsibilities for failure will, of course, remain.

Much the same is true with local government, where it is clear that financial maximum stress is to be put in place with underfunding to be the norm, but blame for failure to supply services will still be heaped upon them. Something will break now, of that we can be sure.

I am quite certain that Dominic Cummings is justifying all of this as a policy of creative destruction and the necessary precursor for a process of change that will, in his opinion, deliver some new order that will achieve his goals. It does not help that in his case the goal in question appears to be enriching his friends. But, important (and disabling) as that apparent corruption is, what matters as much is the sheer incomprehension on the part of Downing Street as to the level of disorder that is sustainable within our society.

Of course we can manage some chaos: societies always can, albeit always at some

cost. But the degree to which any society can sustain chaos depends on the resilience within that society. Some of that resilience is financial. The knowledge that children can be fed, come what may, is of considerable comfort to any parent. Keeping a roof over heads is the next requirement, and so on. Eventually the resilience is about the maintenance of social networks, and so on. And what Downing Street thinks, I believe, is that such resilience exists in the UK.

They are wrong. Those in Downing Street might have never known the fear that the money right run out, but an increasing number in this country now realise that it might well do so.

And at the same time they see a government in chaos.

And they see the collapse of international relationships.

What is more, many know that Covid 19 is still with us, even if some pretend otherwise.

I don't think that fear is pervasive yet. But I don't give it long until it is. And then what?

I don't know. I am not pretending that I do. But I just cannot see compliance lasting. And nor can I see the power of the government to impose compliance lasting either: when the army and police are as much at risk from the actions of this government as anyone else - and they are - I cannot see them imposing its will in the long term in the event that there is mass disobedience, as I think there might be in reaction to the contempt in which people are now being held.

I wish it was not like this.

It need not be like this.

But it has been created this way. And we will have to live through the consequences.

I fear that the worst is yet to come.