

## How many U turns can a government make?

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No one is surprised that this government made mistakes when dealing with coronavirus. Everyone would have done. Dealing with the unknown is always going to be a problem.

But equally, no reasonable person would have expected this government to make so many mistakes with regard to coronavirus.

From the moment when they ignored the compelling evidence to shut down the country; to their so obvious failure to anticipate the economic crisis coming when presenting the budget in March; to adopting herd immunity as a strategy because Cummings really did not believe that people cared about old people dying; to failing to manage track and trace so many times that it's almost impossible to track the failings; to making a complete mess of schooling, exams, university admissions and much more, the Laust of debacles just grows. And what is so apparent about these failings is not that some mistakes happened but that so many were basic political blunders that had almost nothing to do with Covid-19 at all. Instead they revealed basic political inability to deal with a crisis, when that competence is the basic test of political leadership.

I think it pretty fair to say that only the most wide-eyed of Tory believer would really think that Johnson's government has done well over the last few months. But the real questions is what happens next.

No one knows if schools can successfully reopen when the Covid 19 R rate is already likely to be over 1.

The same can be said of the supposed return to work that is claimed will happen next week.

The start of the university year poses at least as many challenges, and is also an exercise in mass migration that is bound to increase risk.

And in the middle of all this the people tasked with tackling this crisis at what was Public Health England are now wondering what their own future holds as, no doubt,

most within any responsibility wait to discover if they have a job left under the new regime of Baroness Dodo Harding. It takes the most massive arrogance, or the greatest level of incompetence, and maybe a mix of both, to think that reorganising the entity tasked with managing public health when the next wave of a pandemic is near certain is a good idea that is bound to bring the best out of the staff who will actually have the task of dealing with this situation.

And on top of this, all the signs are that it is going to be government policy to move straight from 'flash the cash' to full on austerity to balance the books, starting with a budget still scheduled for this autumn.

Then just add Brexit to the mix.

And in all that remember the two things that this government has proved itself capable of over the last few months. They are delay and U-turns.

The original reaction to Covid-19 was deferred.

The number of U-turns is now staggering. School related climb-downs and the very welcome move to defer the date when evictions from rented housing might take place are just the latest in a long line in the only identifiable trait that can be discerned within government behaviour, barring incompetence, during the course of this year.

So, let's imagine the autumn. How long will schools stay open before it is apparent that socially distanced, en-masse education with current resources in the middle of increasing R rates is not possible?

How soon after the tuition fees have been cleared will it also be before universities admit that face to face teaching of students may not be possible after all?

And as for the furlough scheme, as the redundancy notices increase as September progresses, what chance then that there will be no U-turn when the surest sign that one might happen is now the confident claim that none is on the cards?

That, though, still leaves the big one, which is Brexit. It's as if this has almost been forgotten. In time honoured fashion it is assumed that an EU deal can be done. And it is true, the EU has an amazing ability to deliver deals when it wants, and between its own members. But we're not a member. And there is no incentive to do a deal for the remaining members, at all. This, after all, is a situation not of their choosing from which they will suffer little harm if all goes wrong for a few weeks.

But that's not true for the UK. We face food shortages at the worst possible time of the year when our dependence on imports reaches at least 70% of UK food supply.

That risk of shortages will be accompanied by substantial short term food price inflation in all likelihood as panic buying commences. People will also appreciate that come what

may, food prices will, because of tariffs, be more in January than they were in December. And they won't be happy. And then, just to add to matters, as the peak demand for NHS services happens there will be maximum disruption in NHS labour supplies. On top of which there are also likely to be medicine shortages. And there will not need to be many for the Daily Mail to get very angry.

Talking of which, the Mail is already very angry. And it has very clearly already switched sides on Brexit, to which it is now very obviously opposed.

What's going to happen this autumn? U-turn, after U-turn, after U-turn, right down to the point where I think it possible that an extension to the Brexit transition period might be applied for by a government by then so deep in uncontrolled panic mode that even its most treasured policy will be abandoned.

And if that is not the case? If Brexit does continue? Heaven help us, is the answer. The Mail has read the runes correctly and swapped sides at the right moment. It realises how ugly a great many issues will turn out to be this autumn, with people dying as a result of the prevarication and indecision that will be witnessed. But nothing will be as bad as imposing a No Deal Brexit in the middle of all this.

One can only hope that by then U-turns will be so normal that the government will be ready for another one. But that's as good as hope gets to be right now. And that's not good.