

## The next U-turn will be on Covid-19

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Boris Johnson has now proved himself capable of U-turning on his own legislative decisions, passed only months ago. In that case it has to be asked where the next U-turn might be, and the answer seems to be obvious. It will be on coronavirus.

As Larry Elliott has noted in the [Guardian](#), it is easy for economists to come up with figures showing that the cost of the coronavirus lockdown exceeded the benefits in terms of lives saved, and it should not happen again as a result.

I am quite sure that the government always thought this: the debate on herd immunity during March did not happen by chance. But now I suspect that they will be back on this theme with a vengeance, fuelled by their overriding desire to balance the government's books. So, I expect another U-turn, and soon.

In this U-turn the government will say that it got coronavirus wrong. They will claim that they followed the science in March, but the scientists misled them. The government will say that the risks were of nothing like the scale that scientists claimed, and that the excess deaths were significantly less than forecast is evidence of that.

They will also now say that the risk from COVID-19 has virtually disappeared unless you are (to quote Donald Trump) "a sucker". This will include the foolish, of course. More significantly it will (without it being explicitly stated) include those who have to go to work because they have no choice, most of whom are on lower pay; those who live in more crowded households, because they too are on lower pay, and those who cannot afford home testing kits and other protective measures because, once again, they are on lower pay. All of these groups will, in the event of the U-turn I predict, just have to accept the risks that their situation brings and get on with it. That's because what I am now expecting the government to do on coronavirus is to back away from any responsibility for it.

They will, of course, still issue some public health warnings, created at considerable cost by agencies run by their friends. But thereafter they will not be providing any further additional funding to the NHS, or to education, or to any other public service

that is suffering extra costs as a result of the reasonable desire to protect staff, patients, pupils and others from the risks of infection. Instead I very strongly suspect that the government will say that coronavirus is now the new normal, and that the government has no funds available to it to cover the costs that it gives rise to and that they will, therefore, have to come out of existing budgets.

To put it another way, the government U-turn will be to say that we are all on our own with regard to coronavirus. This will now be an issue for individual, and not collective responsibility. And if anyone cannot afford to take steps to protect themselves, well, so be it.

Am I being harsh? I very much doubt it. Nothing is beyond this government. No U-turn is now impossible. And the desire to protect the Treasury budget is overwhelming. The willingness to tell a lie also knows no limit. And, anyway, this is what they always wanted to do. It was a massive shock to Cummings to find that people worried about their relatives dying. But now they'll just say experience has shown that the state cannot afford to prevent that now, so it's all down to us, after all.

At the heart of this claim is a lie, of course. The state can afford to protect us from Covid-19. All the money required is available at a drop of a finger on a keystroke in the Bank of England, just as it was when £300 billion was made available to save financial markets earlier this year. But there is a difference. The government wanted to save financial markets. And this government is indifferent to saving us. That means that we must pay the price even though financial markets did not.