

The Covid crisis is very far from over

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I watched much of the PM's press conference on Covid passports, or not, and mass testing, or not, yesterday.

The uncertainty within that sentence is deliberate. Apart from the fact that the reopenings planned for April 12 will happen I learned little from what was actually said, but much more from what was not said.

I think there is good reason for that. The only impression I got from this session was that the government is now beginning to panic. We were promised that vaccines would deliver post-Covid freedom. Now it seems that they do not think that. Testing is instead the new pathway to something else that is much less optimistic.

That something else seems to involve a continuing acceptance of coronavirus. There is no elimination strategy of any sort now apparent. The end of the impact of the pandemic is no longer anticipated. The idea that this might be over has gone. Instead the only goal is to keep the NHS functioning.

The aim is no bigger than that. It is simply containment. In other words, we as individuals and the risks from Covid that we face are the bargaining chips in an equation that is all the government thinks it has left available to it because despite all the bravado no strategy, including vaccination, has yet worked.

That this new containment strategy is based on desperation is indicated by the fact that it is based on lateral flow tests that are not licenced for the negative testing role they are being given, and for which they are not well suited because of their well known false negative rate. Will that really work then? And will people want to partake? And why will they unless there is compulsion from an enforced use of an app based on those tests?

Given that it is thought that only one in four people with Covid symptoms are currently thought to ask for a test the chance of a serious uptake on this new scheme which is targeted at those without symptoms seems low, especially with such poor support

being made available for those required to isolate. The government must know that.

In that case it seems like the government is running around like a headless chicken. It knows that the implied promises made in February cannot be delivered now. They know that this crisis is not over. The new message is emerging. That is that we must live with this.

Worse though, I think that the government has set itself up to fail again. It seems certain that SAGE does too. They forecast another wave of Covid in July and August at least as serious as that we have just been through. They could be wrong, of course. But logic is on their side.

Ending lock down, as planned, releases the chance for the virus to spread. The government's logic is that it can be contained below a fixed level. Presume that is a straight line across a graph. The difficulty for them is that this virus grows exponentially. And exponential growth is explosive, and too late to control when it comes apparent, which is forecast for about late June, with a peak in July and August.

No lateral flow testing will prevent that. It seems like SAGE does not expect that vaccines will either. The moment of liberation that they have supplied will be gone at that point. The euphoria could easily become despair as another lockdown is required at the height of summer. I think the government knows that now. And it is clueless about what to do. So, as ever, it is buying time with another meaningless plan that only profits its friends.

Can Johnson survive another lockdown?

When will investment in elimination become the demand?

When too will the realisation that changed behaviour is inevitably required going to be accepted?

And what does the realisation that there is, after all, an externality that imposes a constraint on us going to mean for an entire political philosophy built on the idea that this is unacceptable?

This crisis is far from over as yet. And one day we might even begin to address it in the UK.