

Accountability is at the core of good government. The C...

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The government has got itself into a complete mess over the Covid inquiry. There is no one to blame but itself.

As I noted yesterday, the government set the terms for this inquiry, demanding that it investigate the decision making that took place. Since the quality of that decision making is the basis of concern given that it led to so many seemingly unnecessary deaths, this is hardly surprising.

Absolutely anyone with the slightest knowledge of how decision making is reviewed will know that it starts with an appraisal of formal minutes and then moves to the letters, notes, emails and other electronic communications that help explain how a policy evolved. To presume it stops at the formal minutes is absurd: almost everyone knows that meetings rubber stamp what has already been decided, meaning that the focus of attention was always bound to be elsewhere.

It should be no surprise to anyone as a result that the inquiry team want government ministers' notes and WhatsApp messages, given that this was how they communicated. And yet, seemingly incredibly, ministers have been taken by surprise by this. As a measure of their own lack of real world experience that is significant.

The difficulty for ministers is that they cannot win from this.

Blaming Boris Johnson will not work. These events happened during this parliament and Sunak was his number 2 at the time, and a key decision maker. The buck cannot be passed.

Claiming the inquiry does not need the data will not work. Setting up an inquiry to found out what happened and then saying it does not need to know looks like a massive admission of guilt.

And going to court just risks defeat, which is likely as the judiciary are mostly likely to a) side with one of their own and b) read the law as Lady Hallett has done and agree that she has the right to this data.

Meanwhile, seeing a minister head to jail for refusing to comply with requests will not be a good look.

Worse, the defence looks very weak. To claim that documents cannot be disclosed because this impinges on the free speech of ministers and would impair future decision making appears to make little sense. First, ministers were at work. Rules of free speech do not apply. What is said at work may be used by your employer as evidence. Making sure it does not cause offence is rule number one. Ensuring it is competent is rule number two. Presuming it will be shared is rule number three. And recognising it is not your own is rule number four. If ministers were unaware of these basics, that is their problem.

What is more, if ministers knew the decision making was so bad they should not have set up the inquiry in the way that they did. They must have been able to take advice on the terms of reference from people who could have predicted this would happen. The feeling that everything happening here points to incompetence is overwhelming.

So what will happen now? My prediction is delay, piled on claims of lost records and phones, to be followed by diary clashes preventing appearances by key witnesses, to be followed in mid- 2024 by an adjournment to ensure that the inquiry does not conflict with the election. Ministers are bound to think that essential given how bad all this is going to be for them.

My suspicion is that few ministers who were in office during this period will survive this unscathed. Whether some will face further penalties will be the appropriate question to ask.

As importantly, if the inquiry reveals the indifference to life that I suspect existed I hope the Tories will be shattered, maybe for good.

That would not be the end though. What we really need to know is how we get good governance. And at the core of that is accountability. It seems that the Tories never presumed that this existed: they give the impression that they believed they could make decisions and not be responsible for them.

They were wrong. If government is about anything it is about responsibility. And so it is about accountability. At the heart of that is transparency. Each is fundamental. Labour should take note. Unless they understand this they too are not fit to govern.