

How many lives would have been improved in 2020 if No. . .

Published: January 14, 2026, 3:55 pm

I listened to the evidence given by Helen MacNamara, the former deputy cabinet secretary who was in office as the Covid crisis developed, given to the Covid inquiry yesterday. As I did, one overwhelming thought occurred to me. It was constructed in the form of a question, which was “How different would things have been if number 10 had been more woke in March 2020?”

I know that the term woke is not universally appreciated or understood. However, if we simply think of it as a description of those people who have an understanding of the impact of discrimination on others, and who wish to act to mitigate that effect, then I think it can be of use.

What Helen MacNamara suggested was that the cabinet, the prime minister and their advisory teams were seemingly more aware of the impact of lockdown on football, hunting, shooting and fishing than they were on women, those (including children) subject to domestic violence, otherwise vulnerable children, pregnant women, the sick, minorities, and others who are all too often the subject of discrimination within our society. Helen McNamara made clear that she thought that very few of the people who gathered in the macho environment of Downing Street had any real awareness of the needs of these people - who between them are the majority of society

We will never know what might have happened if she had succeeded in raising awareness of this discrimination, as she said she tried to do. Real life does not include controlled experiments of that sort. It is, however, not hard to think that outcomes could have been substantially better than they were. In some cases risk for vulnerable people could have been significantly lowered. In others, mental health might have been protected. And as she specifically pointed out, many pregnant women would have had a much better birth experience, and their children would have had a better start in life, if only a little more sensitivity had been applied in their case. More broadly, the women working in health and social care, who are the majority, might have had PPE that was designed to fit them. That did not happen, however.

What it is important to appreciate, however, is that if that was the case then it was not

only because of the particular, and very odd, profile of people in Number 10 at that point in time. The failure was very obviously systemic. As Helen, MacNamara pointed out, much of the required information to support decision-making on an inclusive basis did not exist. If it did, those meant to be using it were not interested.

The lesson to be learned from this is obvious. Firstly, we simply cannot afford to be indifferent in this way. Certain parts of society, usually associated with right-wing thinking, have created a considerable prejudice against those who care for others. That prejudice has a considerable cost in terms of human suffering. That was apparent during the Covid crisis.

Second, the whole idea of government should be based upon the idea of concern for others. When it is not, as was so obviously the case during this period, government fails everyone.

Third, the failure to collect data that highlights the causes and impact of discrimination is in itself an act of discrimination which is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Fourth, codes of conduct and warm words are insufficient to address this: active elimination of the indifference that causes harm to others has to be a core function of government, whatever the Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph might wish to represent.

I do not care if some people think I am woke as a result of saying this. If that is the case, I am proud of it. The catastrophe is that there is a narrative within our society that condemns those who are.