

**The effect of Covid 19 on UK Politics:
Discussion led by George Thackray**

Summary

The discussion commenced with a timeline of the major events in the development of Covid-19 in the UK. With the benefit of hindsight the pattern of failure to comprehend, followed by ineffective response, became apparent.

Whether this was due to incompetence of the persons in the positions with responsibility or a fundamental inadequacy of the UK political system to respond to the challenges was less clear. Several characteristics of the UK and its people were put forward as descriptions of why what occurred did occur rather than justifications.

Discussion

An account was given of the course of the pandemic in the UK, noting major events. The pattern of lack of response to what, with hindsight, were clear trends was evident. For example, the failure to implement the 2016 SARS epidemic report. Sports and social events continued. For example the important event in the horse racing calendar at Cheltenham early in March continued, as usual attended by those with social connections. This and many other continuing events probably caused a significant leap in the onward transmission of the disease.

The idea of herd immunity ie that if the disease were left to take its course there would be some inconvenience and consequential fatalities, but relatively quickly people in general would become immune seems to have been the underlying if unstated foundation of government policy in the earlier stages. The decision to discontinue the track and trace policy, because it was ineffective was the way the cancellation was justified at the time and might have been influenced by 'herd immunity' thinking. However the political impact of the increasing numbers of infections and deaths forced a change.

Protection of the NHS became the stated basis of policy. Quite why allowing people to become infected, to suffer and some to die without care, protected the NHS and from what the NHS was being protected is not clear. There was similar disregard for people sent to poorly equipped care homes. The photographs from Italy of overflowing hospitals seems to have provoked in politicians a fear of something; the NHS must be shown to be coping even when it clearly was not.

So came the policy change to lockdown. Effective in the sense that reducing contact between people reduces the possibilities of onward transmission. With the consequence of much reduced economic activity and therefore work and income for people.

The economic consequences were alleviated to an extent by massive government intervention in policies like furlough, relief for debt repayments, and grants and extensive loan guarantees to business. These all based on the hope rather than belief that the reduction in economic activity would be temporary and short term. Why sensible businesses would borrow and owners increase their liabilities in the face of such adverse prospects is not clear.

These measures have been effective in postponing the political consequences of rising unemployment; what will happen when the schemes end is unknown.

International comparison may or may not be valid; however it does seem that those cultures with a more *laissez-faire* tradition - USA, Australia, Brazil, UK - have been less effective so far in controlling Covid-19 than some countries with a more state-interventionist culture. Whether this relationship is causal or casual is not clear.

Was globalisation a cause and will the trend to increasing globalisation continue? Globalisation as an economic trend which will continue. The forces behind it are unchanged. However, increased virus transmission between countries is a consequence of globalisation. That the UK political system did not respond effectively to the challenges raised by the pandemic seems not to be in doubt. Whether the cause was the personalities of those in responsible positions, in both politics and the civil service, or in the science, statistics and external advice is unclear.

What consequences and changes for UK politics? No clear answer....
It is a subject which we will discuss at future meetings.

Some of the interesting comments in the discussion are noted below:

"The Germans had better prepared laboratories able to test quickly and efficiently"

"We were the best" Boris and his team exclaimed: "We are going to have a world beating app." !!!

"As 95% of all deaths are over 65, should they be separated from the rest of the population?"

"Should we ring fence NI contributions into a separate fund? If so the purposes of the fund will have to be well defined."

"Covid-19 will lead to an improvement in social care."

We noted that the The Office for Budget Responsibility in its June central forecast expects about 1.3 million of people on furlough to lose their jobs, and that the number of unemployed will reach 4 million.