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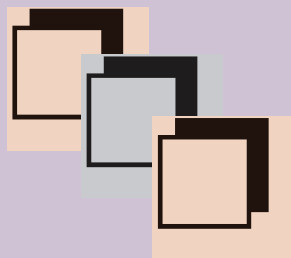
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Comment

With Covid-19 the government has managed to scare the population more than the Luftwaffe ever did. I feel entitled to say that. I was, apparently born during one of its nightly visits to the east end of London and, for two years afterwards, we lived next to a factory to which it seemed to have taken a particular dislike. Fortunately to no avail. My mother's attitude was that, if it had our name on it, there was not a lot she could do so I was put to bed each night with a teaspoonful of whisky in my bottle of milk and slept soundly. (A habit I continue to this day though the milk was dropped many years ago and these days the whisky is a bit more than a teaspoonful.)

Writing in The Sunday Times Jonathan Sumption (Lord Sumption, a former supreme court judge), says that our biggest problem is that our society is totally risk averse. More than that we have a poor relationship with the second great phenomenon of life – death. People used to be born and die at home. It was accepted. Nowadays it is hidden away, medicalised, industrialised even.

So the government shuts down the economy and tells us to stay at home. Worse still manufacturing has stopped. That was not an instruction but most manufacturers – including the window industry – took it upon themselves to shut up shop. The mantra now is 'to protect staff and keep them safe'.

The government's constant message is to save the NHS. Everything it has done carries that message. It is an emotive subject and the fear here seems to be that if too many of us catch Covid-19 the system won't be able to cope. Do I hear the flap of chickens coming home to roost? The NHS doesn't have the resources to cope with a national emergency. It has been underfunded for years and politicised and is, these days, run independently of government. So it has ignored offers from industry to supply the tests that are needed and PPE that is also badly needed. Turf wars are breaking out all over Westminster and Whitehall as nobody wants to be blamed for what is happening and what is going to happen.

As I write this the prime minister has spent a second night in intensive care. He is being given oxygen to help him breathe and in all probability he feels as though someone hit him with a shovel. And yet, his ministers insist, he is still in charge, they are merely following his instructions, implementing his plan. It seems no one wants to take responsibility.

We are being led by cowards!

If things are not returned to near normality soon we will see an economic disaster the like of which I do not think anyone can imagine. The Chancellor's rescue plan has meant that it is better for many businesses to lay off staff than to continue trading. Although I believe that the treasury is still struggling with the knot in its purse strings and firms are still waiting for the promised cash. Self employed people will wait even longer, until June. Many, many people have been forced to apply for benefits. Ironically the Tories flagship reform to the welfare system, Universal Credit, which was supposed to make work more profitable than being on benefits, is having to do what welfare systems are supposed to do, support those who cannot support themselves.

So for the moment we are stuck with no clear way out. The consequences may be momentous. The economy aside, we are social animals and are being denied the ability to socialise. The police have extraordinary powers to stop people from leaving home. One thing that has puzzled me is the aversion to sunbathing. Now, being on the 'ginger' spectrum, I have never been a big fan but equally I have never seen it as a team sport, more a solo occupation. And yet – the other day I saw a picture on the BBC website of two police officers apparently berating a lone woman, sitting by herself in a park. But then one of their main jobs is locking people up so sending us all home must be second nature.

One final thing. We are being showered with forecasts at the moment and I came across a Rumsfeldian quote the other day: "There two kinds of forecasters, those that don't know and those that don't know they don't know." I think it may be worth bearing that in mind in the coming weeks.

John Roper

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