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Version: Published Version

Online resource:

Flinders, Matthew and Dimova, Gergana (2020) Bringing in the experts: blame deflection and the COVID-19 crisis. British Policy and Politics at LSE (03 Apr 2020). Blog Entry.

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Bringing in the experts: blame deflection and the COVID-19 crisis



The current political emphasis on ‘the experts’ is partly a depoliticisation and blame deflection strategy to render them, instead of the politicians, as the public face of the coronavirus crisis, write [Matthew Flinders](#) and [Gergana Dimova](#).

‘People in this country have had [enough of experts](#),’ Michael Gove (in)famously declared as part of the assault on ‘the establishment’ and ‘elites’ that formed such a central element of the Leave campaign and Brexit. And yet now many key members of that campaign seemed to have adopted a very different strategic position. Instead of deriding and distancing the experts, the government is now hugging them close.

The frailties of evidence-based policy, or what is now more often termed ‘evidence-led’ policy, have been [well-documented](#) within the social sciences. The rational, technocratic, data-driven recommendations of the scientists will at some point fall upon the procrustean realities of frequently irrational and commonly dysfunctional political life. And yet one of the defining performative elements of the coronavirus crisis is the daily reports of the Prime Minister or senior ministers at which they are flanked both figuratively and literally by ‘the experts’. No message, statement or utterance can be made by a representative of the government without being foreshadowed and subsequently enmeshed within the golden phrase that is ‘*following the expert advice we are receiving*’.

In some countries a [new public service bargain](#) seems to have emerged whereby the politicians depart the stage to an almost total extent and let the experts become the public face of the crisis. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the United States, Fernando Simón, the head of health emergency centre in Spain, Christian Drosten, the head of virology at Charité hospital in Germany and Jérôme Salomon, head of the national health authority in France have emerged as some of the most visible faces of the response to the pandemic. It’s ‘the experts’ that are now the [household names](#).

So how can we understand this sudden shift from loathing the experts to loving them?

Unlike dealing with the coronavirus crisis itself, the answer to this question is refreshingly simple. The pandemic is a toxic issue for all politicians: not just in the sense of the epidemiology of the crisis and its public health implications but also because the nature of politics means that at the end of the day someone will be scapegoated and blamed for the crisis. Scapegoating, finger-pointing, arse-covering and the emergence of blame games (and blame boomerangs) are one of the few predictions that anyone can make about the current crisis with any certainty.

From appearing as external annoyances offering unhelpful facts as they did to those promoting leaving the European Union, the experts now offer political cover. That is, potentially the most beautiful blame-shifting political bullet-catching safety net ever built around today’s politicians but like spiders building a web the beauty veils a deeper predatory aspect. Bringing in the experts and hugging them close is a politicized form of self-preservation strategy that *might* (and it is a rather dubious ‘might’) afford politicians some distance from direct culpability when things go wrong.

And they will go wrong. Coping with crises demands an agility, speed and ambition that public bureaucracies are generally not designed to deliver. Decisions will have to be taken on the basis of imperfect information, in an emotional context, by exhausted individuals who are well aware they are dealing with matters of life and death. Politics is a brutal game. It’s not for the faint-hearted and at some point every politician and official knows that they will have to provide an account of each and every decision they made. And yet post-crisis accountability and scrutiny frameworks are rarely concerned with lesson-learning and a balanced review of the facts, and are more accurately viewed as blame-allocation processes where ‘[gotcha!](#)’ is the favorite phrase and [scalp-hunting](#) the favourite game.

The contemporary visibility and political emphasis on ‘the experts’ is therefore a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is completely rational to heed the advice of those who have dedicated their professional lives to understanding and protecting public health; on the other hand, it is also a *depoliticisation* strategy in the sense that politicians who have dedicated their professional lives to not going MAD (i.e. falling foul of [‘multiple accountabilities disorder’](#)) will understand the benefit of allowing ‘the experts’ to become the public face of the crisis.

Letting others take the stage and assume the position of lightning-rods when blame-laden storm clouds are amassing on the horizon is a political strategy that dates back to [Machiavelli’s](#) advice on blame-avoidance behaviours, and probably much further. But the bigger question is really whether ‘the experts’ quite understand the politics of the role they have been cast?

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