This is a repository copy of *Gotcha! Coronavirus, crises and the politics of blame games*.

Article:

Gotcha! Coronavirus, Crises and the Politics of Blame Games

Matthew Flinders, Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre and Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield.

Amongst the contemporary chaos there are three predictions that can be made with relative certainty. The first is that around a year from now there is going to be a baby boom which will reflect what those couples that have enjoyed spending time together have been up to. The second is that the baby boom is likely to be matched by a similarly spectacular increase in divorces (reflecting those couples that did not enjoy spending so much time together). The final confident prediction is that in just a matter of weeks or months the 'Covid crisis' will lead to an outbreak of divisive and disruptive political blame games as politicians, policy-makers, advisers and experts all seek to avoid carrying the can for those decisions or opinions that inevitably turned-out to be wrong. It is in the context of this core prediction that this sub-section makes three arguments: (i) the analysis of previous pandemics exposes the existence of a powerful socio-political 'negativity bias'; (ii) politicians will try and manage this situation through a mixture of blame-games and self-preservation strategies; and (iii) it is already possible to identify a dominant strategy in the UK context that for the sake of brevity can be labelled 'hugging the experts'.

When it comes to considering the link between public trust and blame even the most cursory review of the existing scholarship on how governments have attempted to cope with pandemics in the past reveals a body of work that is primarily framed around the notion of 'policy failure'. This is a critical point. No matter what steps a government might take or how quickly measures are put in place the fact that by its very existence a pandemic brings with it crisis and chaos intermixed with death and suffering ensures that any governmental response will be seen in generally critical terms. The title of Greg Behrman's 2009 book *The Invisible People: How the U.S. has Slept Through the Global AIDS Pandemic, the Greatest Humanitarian Catastrophe of Our Time* reflects this point. Although it could actually be seen as fairly successful in terms of protecting life, the political reaction to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic at the beginning of the millennium is generally critiqued in terms of either *over-reaction* or *under-reaction* (see, for example, Hooker and Harr Aliis, 2009; Freedman, 2005). Add to this the manner in which 'What went wrong?' seems to be the dominant lens through which responses to both Swine Flu and Ebola are judged and the link between pandemic control and blame attribution becomes clear (see Kamradt-Scott, 2018). But what's also interesting about this seam of scholarship on pandemic crisis management is the manner in which it is infused with discourses not only of political blame and counter-blame, but also with discussions of self-blame, notions of shame and an awareness of the cultural apportionment of blame to specific countries or communities that is generally not discussed within the fields of public administration, executive studies or mainstream public policy (see, for example, Nerlich and Koteyko, 2012; Abeysinghe and White, 2011). A link is, however, provided in the work of Cáceres and Otte in their work on blame apportioning and the emergence of zoonoses (i.e. diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans) during the last twenty-five years when they note:

> [B]lame games take place between infected and non-infected regions, as well as between developed and developing nations. Apportioning of blame, more commonly known as finger pointing, is an inherent feature of human beings. This blaming process can be either active or passive depending on the issue(s) and given context(s). Evidently, blaming is used to shift responsibilities onto others, it singles out a culprit, finds a scapegoat and pinpoints a target, regrettably however, apportioning blame comes at a cost to those that are blamed. Expanding our epidemiological understandings into the realms of blamers and blamed permits a more realistic, emphatic and conscientious look into the unintended consequences of individual and institutional actions, and the extent to which other countries or regions are detrimentally affected by misguided pre-conceptions (2009, pp.377-8).

This focus on the 'cost' of blame and 'unintended consequences' brings us to a second argument and the suggestion that politics of the coronavirus pandemic (in the UK and beyond) is already beginning to revolve around the issue of blame (blame-shifters, blame-shiftees, blame-boomerangs, etc.). In this regard, political science offers a rich seam of scholarship on blame avoidance behaviour that arguably dates back to at least Machiavelli but has more recently been developed in the work of scholars including R. Kent Weaver (1986) and Christopher Hood (2013). Synthesised and simplified down to its core elements, this body of work reveals how politicians are primarily motivated by avoiding blame for failure rather than trying to claim credit for success for the simple reason that the public possess a strong 'negativity bias'. Praise will be as fickle as it is short-lived; whereas vitriol will be as strong as it will long-lived. The implication being that politicians will use all sorts of tricks and tactics – agenda-shaping, scapegoating, buck-passing, defection and secrecy as part of a deeper 'Teflon immorality' (see Smilansky, 2012) in order to keep themselves blame free. The relevance of this literature to the link between the coronavirus crisis and the broader crisis of democracy is the manner in which it connects the focus on public trust (discussed above) with the performative and substantive content of governmental policy responses.

Table 2. 'Blame Game' with 'Malign' Outcomes and Sympathetic or Vindictive Public Attitudes

		Public Attitudes	
		'Sympathetic'	'Vindictive'
	Direct	(1)	(2)
Choice of policy control by incumbent elected politicians		*Blame*: limited	*Blame*: high and direct
		Result: 'Teflon effect' (limited blame)	*Result*: 'blame attraction' ('buck stops here')
	Delegate	(3)	(4)
		Blame: low (default to delegatee)	*Blame*: high and redirected (default to delegator)
		Result: blame shift or blame avoidance	*Result*: blame reversion or blame displacement

Source. Hood. C. 2002. 'The Risk Game and the Blame Game', *Government and Opposition,* 37(1),15-37, at. p.22.

In this regard the work of Christopher Hood on 'the risk game and the blame game' (see Table 2, above) is particularly valuable for at least three reasons: first, it highlights the range of blame-avoidance strategies that politicians can utilise (notably presentational strategies, policy positions and the delegation of responsibility arm's-length agencies); second, it contextualises the use of these strategies through an emphasis on public attitudes; and thirdly it highlights that blame-shifting can backfire if those to whom responsibility is directed push back (hence the emphasis on blame-reversion, boomerangs and lightning-rods). The key question then becomes how this framework contributes to our understanding of the unfolding politics of coronavirus?

Working across a very wide and fluid empirical landscape and using a fairly broad analytical brush, the main answer to this question can be summarised as follows. First and foremost, (and as the previous section emphasised) public attitudes to politicians, political processes and political institutions were in fairly poor health in most advanced liberal democracies as the pandemic emerged. High levels of political frustration, apathy and anger were identified within large sections of the public and this had led to the emergence of potentially democratically dangerous level of anti-political sentiment. In contextual terms and with Table 2 in mind, public attitudes were arguably leaning more towards the 'vindictive' than the 'sympathetic' *vis-à-vis* Hood's schema and this matters because the literature on

pandemics and disease control clearly shows that whether the public is willing to follow public advice is highly dependent on pre-existing levels of political trust, hence its common focus on 'crying wolf', meta-communication patterns, 'epidemic intelligence' and 'vaccine hesitation' (see Nerlich and Koteyko, 2012; Mesch and Schwirian, 2015). The lack of pre-existing public trust may well have significant implications in terms of preventing what has been variously labelled 'crisis fatigue' or 'lockdown fatigue' (Flinders, 2020) amongst the public and a reluctance to abide by social isolation advice. The fact that in the UK these risks exist in the context of well-documented 'Brexit fatigue' underlines the manner in which the coronavirus crisis cannot be studied in isolation and should more accurately be conceived as being layered-upon or inter-woven with a complex patchwork of challenges.

A second way in which Hood's framework helps focus attention on the pandemic-democracy link, in general, and blame, in particular, is through the identification of specific blame-avoidance strategies. In the UK there has arguably been a very clear strategy at play which has revolved around the adoption of a technocratic, science-based and evidence-led approach that has ensured that no government statement has been made without the explicit caveat about 'following the advice of the experts'. This 'hugging the experts' is possibly even a future blame-avoidance tactic in preparation that represents an amalgam of presentational, policy and delegatory elements. The sight of Boris Johnson or other senior ministers flanked at the daily press conferences by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor is without doubt a strategic performative act of blame-sharing and blame-displacement. This is by no means unique to the UK. 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. Take, for example, 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, Jérôme Salomon, head of the National Health Authority in France and Prof. Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance in the UK (the Chief Medical Adviser and Government Chief Scientific Adviser, respectively). As Jon Henley (2020) has illustrated, it's 'the experts' that are now the household names. Not only does this raise issues about the political selection of expert advice (discussed below) but it also raises questions about the political protections afforded to scientists who become drawn into major debates and may become blame-shiftees or sacrificial lambs when the scrutiny industry kicks-in.

And 'kick-in' it will. A third way in which the literature on blame games is relevant to the current coronavirus crisis is due to the manner in which it underlines the aggressive and adversarial nature of public accountability. This is encapsulated in the notion of the 'negativity bias' and simply reflects that manner in which political decisions are generally taken in a low-trust, high-blame environment. Put slightly differently, public accountability is generally of the 'gotcha!' variety (which is a particularly problematic paradigm when placed within the contours of Hilliard, Kovras and Loizides (2020) scholarship on 'the perils of accountability after crisis'). The aim is very rarely to undertake a reasoned, balanced or proportionate review of what happened in order to learn lessons but primarily to apportion blame and demand some form of sacrificial responsibility. This is particularly true in power-hoarding majoritarian democracies like the UK and especially due to the focusing impact of the convention individual ministerial responsibility to parliament. Any attempt by ministers to deflect blame therefore risks bouncing-back on them in the form of a 'blame boomerang' if the expert, scientist or publicly trusted professor refuses to be scapegoated. The fact that the dark clouds of intense public and parliamentary scrutiny are already visible and hanging over the coronavirus is symptomatic of the potentially pathological politics of accountability that this section is attempting to underline. The World Health Organisation declared the outbreak to be a pandemic on the 11 March 2020 and by the end of the second week of April 2020 fifteen parliamentary committees had already announced inquiries (some multiple inquiries) into various elements of the government's response (see Table 3, below).

Table 3. 'In Crisis' House of Commons Committees of Inquiry

TOPIC	COMMITTEE	CLOSING DATE FOR EVIDENCE
Coronavirus: Foreign and Commonwealth Office Response	Foreign Affairs Committee	[Report published 6 April 2020]
Management of the Coronavirus outbreak	Health and Social Care Committee	n/a
Quality of the Coronavirus Act and associated legislation and its effectiveness	Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs*	n/a
Economic Impact of Coronavirus	Treasury Committee	31/3/2020
Impact of Covid-19 on the Charity sector	Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee	16/4/2020
The Dept. for Work and Pensions response to the Coronavirus outbreak	Work and Pensions Committee	16/4/2020
Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus)	Home Affairs Committee	21/4/2020
The COVID-19 pandemic and international trade	International Trade Committee	24/4/2020
The impact of coronavirus on businesses and workers	Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee	30/4/2020
Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics -	Women & Equalities Committee	30/4/2020
Covid-19 and food supply	Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee	1/5/2020
Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors	Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee	1/5/2020
Humanitarian Crises Monitoring: Impact of Coronavirus	International Development	8/5/2020
The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services	Education Committee	31/5/2020
The Government's response to COVID-19: human rights implications	Joint Human Rights Committee	22/7/2020
UK Science, Research and Technology Capability and Influence in Global Disease Outbreaks	Science and Technology Committee	31/7/2020

Notes: 1. List correct as of 15 April 2020.
2. * PACAC has announced its intention to call ministers to account on the topic but it has not launched a formal inquiry (yet).

The number or range of select committee inquiries – or, for that matter, any forms of public accountability process – is not the issue. The point being made relates to the *nature and ambitions* of those scrutiny processes and whether they themselves become part of the problem with democracy, due to a focus on scalp-hunting and shallow adversarialism that is devoid from any appreciation of the realities of crisis management, or part of the solution, in terms of promoting a balanced assessment of what went wrong, why and how similar patterns might be avoided in the future. In essence this is the argument relating to understanding that forms the focus of the next and final section but before engaging with this argument it is necessary to conclude this section with a very discussion of three final blame-related insights.

The first is that it is likely that the coronavirus crisis will serve to redefine the scholarship on blame-shifting just as it is likely to alter the contours of the debate concerning democracy. The complexity and intricacies of crisis-responses will somehow have to be accommodated within models that have generally been constructed around and within the notion of national systems. And yet we can already see the emergence of global blame games wherein specific and primarily American politicians and organisations are attempting to blame China for the crisis (see Henderson *et al.*, 2020); while China seeks to pass the buck back to the United States in what has become a 'war of words' amidst Covid-19 (see *The Straits Times,* 13 March 2020). Donald Trump is widely interpreted as trying to scapegoat the World Health Organisation by withdrawing American funding. European blame games are also beginning as, for example, Italy blames the European Union for being too slow to help member states (see Boffey, 2020). Within the UK cracks and pressure-points are already beginning to appear as tensions grow between departments, ministers, officials, agencies and advisers as the prospect of public scrutiny become ever more immediate. This brings us to a second issue and the 'blame attraction' or 'buck stops here' qualities (see Table 2, above) that come with being a minister. Despite the cross-governmental nature of the challenge, in strict constitutional terms it is the Secretary of State for Health and the Prime Minister who are likely to emerge as the 'lightning rods' when it comes to the allocation of blame and as key targets when it comes to demands for a 'sacrificial lamb' to carry-the-can. And yet even here the curiosities of coronavirus may well defeat conventional understandings.

On the one hand, the emergence of the Health Secretary from virus enforced self-isolation on the 2nd April to announce that mistakes had been made and that a U-turn on testing policy was needed that would see capacity increased to 100,000 tests a day by the end of April was a clear attempt to bolster public confidence by taking very clear personal responsibility for the target; on the other hand, the announcement that the Prime Minister had been taken to hospital and then moved into intensive care potentially insulates him from some element of blame, and may well fuel a second 'rallying around the flag' effect for the government as the media and opposition parties soften their stance. Although there is evidence to support this claim it might be more accurate to identify the existence of a post-hospitalisation surge in support for the Prime Minister rather than the government. Boris Johnson was discharged from hospital on the 12 April 2020 and a YouGov approval rating poll conducted at the time found a staggering leap in the proportion of the public who thought he was doing 'very well' as Prime Minister (30%, up from 14% in mid-March), with 36% suggesting he was doing 'fairly well' (up from 32%). Boris's Teflon-coated qualities and blame-avoidance behaviour have been discussed throughout his political career and he has been known to adopt cunning exit strategies in the past when faced with tricky situations. Nevertheless, the notion of 'medical distancing' as a blame avoidance strategy would be extreme even for this most unconventional politician and Boris appears to be more popular than ever, possibly to the despair of his opponents.

That said, the core argument of this section remains true: the coronavirus crisis is likely to spark a veritable tsunami of complex and aggressive blame games. This creates a strong risk that the structures of democratic governance will themselves fall victim to the painful politico-administrative malady that is generally labelled going 'MAD' (i.e. Koppell's (2005) 'multiple accountabilities disorder'). This occurs when politicians and their officials are expected to account through so many different accountability channels and to so many scrutiny bodies – which themselves often demand very different forms of information and are blame-orientated rather than understanding-focused – that they are distracted from focusing on their core tasks. Put slightly differently, MAD occurs when senior staff are expected to spend too much time 'accounting-up' instead of focusing on 'delivering-down' which, in turn, increases the chances that mistakes and errors will be made which would, in turn, simply increase the scrutiny placed upon them. The potential pathologies of highly politicized accountability, as Matthew Flinders (2011) has demonstrated, means that too much accountability can be as problematic as too little.