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DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF CORONAVIRUS: TRUST, BLAME AND UNDERSTANDING

This article explores the relationship between crises and democracy through a focus on the unfolding coronavirus pandemic. Its central argument is that to interpret the current pandemic purely in terms of its epidemiology and public health implications risks overlooking its potentially more significant socio-political consequences. This is because the challenges posed by the coronavirus crisis have themselves become overlaid or layered-upon a pre-existing set of concerns regarding the performance, efficiency and capacity of democratic political structures. The aim of this article is to try and understand and warn against what might be termed a rather odd form of cross-contamination whereby the cynicism, negativity and frustration concerning politicians, political processes and political institutions that existed before the coronavirus outbreak is allowed to direct, define and automatically devalue how democratic structures are subsequently judged in terms of how they responded to the challenge. As such, this article focuses on the link between the Coronavirus crisis and the democratic crisis; or, more precisely, the risk that the Coronavirus crisis may mutate into and fuel a broader crisis of democracy.

KEYWORDS:

BLAME; CORONAVIRUS; CRISES; DEMOCRACY, FAILURE; TRUST

Keeping democracy healthy during a pandemic has already proved problematic in many countries where politicians have seized upon the crisis in order to claim emergency powers and strengthen their position (Hungary, Israel, etc.). At the same time, the victorious claims of countries such as China and Singapore have raised potentially far-reaching questions about whether authoritarian regimes handle pandemics more effectively than democratic ones (see, for example, Kleinfeld, 2020). The fact that this is happening in a global context that already contained an ‘autocratization alert’ (see V-DEM, 2020), concerns about ‘democratic backsliding’ (see IDEA, 2019) and an increase in populist pressures (see Institute for Global Change, 2020) simply underlines this article’s emphasis on the need to understand the link – or more specifically *the interplay* - between the ‘new’ Covid-focused crisis and the pre-existing democratic crisis (on the latter see Keane, 2020). Although this article is primarily focused upon the United Kingdom the themes, issues and challenges that it highlights have a far broader international and global relevance.

The link between the Coronavirus and the crisis of democracy is explored and developed through a focus on three inter-related themes: trust, blame and understanding. The first section focuses on public trust in politics before the pandemic emerged and how the outbreak appears to have affected public attitudes. The interesting element of this discussion is the contrast it offers with the public’s trust in scientists and experts and the implications this has in terms of culpability, credit and censure. This brings the discussion to a second focus on the issue of blame in the second section. The simple argument is that if previous pandemics offer insights into the post-crisis politics of Coronavirus it is likely that a series of intense and multi-dimensional blame-games will rapidly emerge. The main focus of this section is upon the early emergence of potential blame-limitation strategies within the British government’s approach. This focus on scapegoats, sacrificial lambs and self-preservation strategies flows into a third and final focus on tolerance and understanding. The aim being to acknowledge the realities of decision-making and governing under pressure in times of crisis and through this develop an argument concerning balance, empathy and proportionate scrutiny. The manner in which a large number of legislative select committees have already announced their intention to launch pandemic-

linked inquiries, not to mention demands for wider national and international in-depth reviews, underlines the contemporary relevance of this argument. Taken together, a focus on these three topics (*trust, blame and understanding*) provides a buckle or link through which the relationship(s) between the coronavirus crisis and crisis of democracy can be understood.

Trust

The aim of this section is to make three relatively straightforward arguments about levels of public trust in elected politicians. The first is that the Coronavirus crisis emerged at a time of fundamental concern about the global state of democracy; the second is that the limited data that is available suggests the existence of a common crisis-linked ‘rallying around the flag’ effect; and (third) that this uplift in public confidence and trust may well prove to be short-lived. As a first-step to substantiating these arguments Table 1 provides a precis of the core findings of a number of authoritative and evidence-based reviews on the state of democracy that have each been published within the last six months. Taken together, the core conclusions suggest that the anxieties that have surrounded democracy for at least half a century have in recent years grown in scale, complexity and intensity. This is linked to the emergence of a clear populist signal, the growth of anti-political sentiment and – critically – the emergence of a clear ‘trust gap’ between the governors and the governed.

Table 1. The Global State of Democracy, 2020:

| Source | Report | Core Conclusion | Distinctive Element |
|---|---|---|---|
| Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) | <i>The Global State of Democracy, 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise</i> | ‘Democracy is ill and its promise needs revival...While the idea of democracy continues to mobilise people around the world, the practice of existing democracies has disappointed and disillusioned many citizens and democracy advocates’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of the ‘reverse’ third-wave theory • Strong emphasis on ‘democratic backsliding’ • Focus on citizens’ expectations re. democratic, social and economic performance. |
| Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) | <i>Democracy Report 2020</i> | ‘Autocratization (i.e. the decline of democratic traits) accelerates in the world. For the first time since 2001, autocracies are in the majority (92 countries, home to 54% of the world’s population...[plus] the emergence of ‘toxic polarization’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issuing of an ‘autocratization alert’. • A new record in the ‘rate of democratic breakdowns’ • Decline in liberal democracy intensifies. |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Centre for the Future of Democracy | <i>Global Satisfaction with Democracy, 2020</i> | ‘In the West, growing political polarisation, economic frustration, and the rise of populist parties, have eroded the promise of democratic institutions.... In developing democracies the euphoria of the transition years has faded.’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy is ‘in a state of malaise’. • 2019 represents the highest level of discontent on record. • Deterioration particularly stark in high-income ‘consolidated’ democracies. |
| Pew Research Centre | <i>Democratic rights popular globally but commitment to them not always strong, February 2020.</i> | ‘[D]emocracy remains a popular idea among average citizens, but commitment to democratic ideals is not always strong. And many are unhappy with how democracy is working.’ One important driver of dissatisfaction with democracy is frustration with political elites. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust of elites is critical • Underwhelming percentages of the public describe democratic rights and institutions as <i>very important</i>. • Increase in dissatisfaction levels stark in the United Kingdom. |
| Freedom House | <i>Freedom in the World 2020</i> | ‘Democracy and pluralism are under assault. Dictators are toiling to stamp out domestic dissent [and]...many freely elected leaders are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas.’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom • Drift towards ‘division and dysfunction’ • Global phenomenon in which freely elected leaders distance themselves from political norms. |

Within this democratically dubious context the UK held a particularly prominent position due to a combination of generalised and long-standing concerns regarding the nature and limits of a majoritarian power-hoarding democracy plus more specific and related concerns regarding the country’s relationship with the European Union. The Hansard Society’s *16th Audit of Political Engagement* (2019) provides a powerful evidence base for these arguments and its headline findings can be summarised as:

- Opinions of the system of governing are at their lowest point in the 15-year Audit series – worse now than in the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal.
- People are pessimistic about the country’s problems and their possible solution, with sizable numbers willing to entertain radical political changes.
- Core indicators of political engagement remain stable but, beneath the surface, the strongest feelings of powerlessness and disengagement are intensifying.

It would at this point be possible to drill-down into each of these points through the provision of evidence-based insights such as: 72% of those surveyed said the system of governing needs ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ of improvement; asked whether the problem is with the political system or the people

running it the largest response group (38%) replied ‘both’; 50% of those surveyed believed the main parties and politicians didn’t care about people like them; 75% thought political parties were too internally divided to serve the best interests of the country; 63% thought Britain’s system of government is rigged to advantage the rich and the powerful; the number who ‘strongly disagree’ that political involvement can change the way the UK is run (18%) had hit a fifteen-year low; as had the 47% who felt they had no influence at all over national decision-making. If this was not bad enough the 2019 survey also detected hints of what might be interpreted as an *illiberal* swing away from the core tenets of liberal democracy. When it came to the public’s levels of confidence and trust in different professions, for example, the ‘military/armed forces’ (74%) and ‘judges/courts’ (62%) scored far higher than MPs (34%) or members of the government (33%). Added to this was the fact that only 25% of the public had confidence in MPs’ handling of Brexit (with the government faring only slightly better on 26%). Of particular concern was that over half (54%) of those surveyed agreed with the statement that ‘Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules’, and 42% thought that many of the country’s problems could be dealt with more effectively if the government didn’t have to worry so much about votes in Parliament.

The Ipsos MORI Veracity Index – published just days before the 2019 General Election – found that public trust in politicians had fallen to just 14%, a five per cent fall from 2018. Professors were, by contrast, highly ranked at 86% but government ministers lowly ranked at 17% which represented a level of distrust far greater than that even suggested by the Hansard Society’s audit of political engagement but which did resonate with the broader data and evidence on the global state of democracy (see Table 1, above). The gap, or more precisely chasm, between public trust in scientists/experts/professors, on the one hand, compared with politicians on the other, is striking and forms a central element of arguments offered later in this article. It is, however, worth noting at this early point that the Edelman Trust Barometer’s ‘Trust and the Coronavirus’ report of 1 April 2020 that surveyed 10,000 people across ten countries found that: 85% of respondents agreed that ‘we need to hear more from the scientists and less from politicians’; 58% were concerned about the politicization of the crisis (‘Certain people are making the situation seem worse than it is for political gain’); and that scientists were trusted

to tell the truth by 83% of those surveyed, compared to 51% who trusted their prime minister or president. The aim of emphasising these statistics on (dis)trust is simply to underline that the health of democracy was not in good shape when the pandemic emerged and that populists had for some time been fuelling and funnelling public frustration in an attempt to gain power and legitimate the construction of ‘strong leader’ *illiberal* democracies (i.e. what the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance refer to as ‘democratic backsliding’). The obvious risk, and one that has already come into fruition in some countries, is that the pandemic will be used by populists to further dilute or remove democratic safeguards (what Daniel Levitsky and Daniel Zilatt refer to in their hopefully not prophetic 2018 book *How Democracies Die* as the ‘soft handrails’ that checks-and-balances provide) as part of the ‘autocratization’ process that the Varieties of Democracy Project has warned against.

The issue of public trust therefore provides the first strand in the link between the coronavirus crisis and crisis of democracy. But what’s interesting in this regard is that the immediate impact of the pandemic appears to have been a sharp *increase* in the popularity of incumbent national leaders (see Jennings, 2020). Two elements stand out within this general trend: the first is that the ‘Boris bounce’ was exceptional, rising to 52% by mid-March 2020 (up 16% from his ratings just before the December 2019 General Election); the second is that the ‘Trump jump’ fell fairly flat when compared with the spike in public support enjoyed by most leaders. Although approval ratings are very different to precise trust-based assessments they do point to the existence of a social phenomenon that political science has identified for some time and that is certainly related to questions of trust – ‘the rallying around the flag effect’. This concept was first coined by John Mueller in 1970 and relates to the observation that groups tend to unify in times of crisis and at the national level this is commonly exhibited through support for national leaders. The March 2020 ‘Boris bounce’ is essentially the UK’s equivalent of a ‘rallying around the Union Jack effect’ but it is dissecting and understanding this change in social attitudes that more light can be spread on the emergent politics of Coronavirus and in this regard three issues deserve brief comment.

The first two issues concern the two main and inter-related variables that are generally offered by scholars to explain this effect. The first of these emphasises the social psychological dimensions of a crisis and particularly the power of patriotism (for a discussion see Baker and ONeal, 2001). In times of crisis national leaders are, the theory suggests, viewed as almost the embodiment of national unity fighting the crisis for the public good, which is especially significant when the leader is both head of state and head of government as in the United States. The second theory, that has been explored in the work of Hetherington and Nelson (2003) amongst others, believes that the rallying effect occurs due to more institutional reasons and particularly due to the opposition's general reluctance to openly attack the government during a clear crisis. A reduction in 'attack politics' by opposition parties leads to less conflict being reported in the media and so, this approach suggests, the public assumes the government must be performing better than normal. The public may not trust their political leaders but they might view them as competent in terms of governing capacity which leads to a third and final point about rallying around flags – it usually doesn't take long for 'fleeing the flag' to occur. This is a critical point. Although most analyses of 'rallying around the flag' effects are concerned with wars, invasions or terrorist effects with a clear enemy, rather than public health pandemics in which the enemy is a new strain of virus, the overall conclusion is that the 'rally effect' is usually short-lived. The public are fickle and it may be just one or two months before public opinion returns to pre-crisis levels. In the UK there are already suggestions that the public's support for the government's approach and levels of trust in key ministers was by early April 2020 already waning (see Opinium, 2020).

This fall in public support may well reflect the existence of major concerns about unpreparedness and indecision within the government which was underlined in the sudden shift from a focus on 'herd immunity' and basic precautions (notably handwashing) to a policy of legally enforced social distancing and 'lockdown'. From personal protective equipment to the repatriation of citizens, through to the availability of ventilators and questions concerning the police's use of 'lockdown' powers, not to mention mix-ups, muddles and misunderstandings concerning virus-testing and care home policy, have combined to produce accusations that the government's response has been little short of 'a disaster' (see Jenkins, 2020). This raises at least two issues that emerge out of this section's focus on trust and

serve to refocus attention back on the link between the specific 'Covid crisis' and broader 'crisis of democracy'. The first revolves around the issue of blame and warns against the political system going 'MAD' in the sense of falling victim of 'Multiple-Accountabilities Disorder' (Koppell, 2005) and the scapegoating, scalp-hunting and sacrificial practices that usually come with it. The second (flip-side) issue underlines the need for public understanding in the sense of not only appreciating the realities of crisis management situations but also about the manner in which coronavirus is itself being politicised by different actors. The first of these themes is the focus of the next section.

Blame

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

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

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. This leads the discussion to a possibly unexpected focus on *understanding* as the final strand that connects the coronavirus crisis to the crisis of democracy.

Understanding

Democratic politics, as Bernard Crick sought to explain in his *Defence of Politics* (1962), is a rather rough and ready affair. It grates and it grinds, it frequently cumbersome and generally clunky, it can be inefficient and its basis on the art of compromise can make it difficult to understand for those that are not intricately connected with those processes. It is messy. And yet those characteristics are from Crick’s perspective not failings but elements of the very beauty of politics; they reflect the simple manner in which politics is charged with somehow generating broadly acceptable decisions and choices in an environment that is increasingly defined by complexity and incompatibility. It would, of course, be possible to make politics smoother and more efficient, to impose clarity and clearer control mechanisms through a uniformity of style and structure. But the cost of such measures would in all likelihood be a decline in the sensitivity of that system to the rights and views of the individuals and communities within it. This matters because at the heart of any understanding of the link between the coronavirus and the crisis of democracy there has to be a fundamental understanding of the existence

of inevitable trade-offs and dilemmas. The existence of these dilemmas are generally far more apparent in times of crisis due to the emphasis that is generally placed on the responsive capacity of the state rather than on the democratic sensitivity of the system. Tough decisions will have to be taken quickly, on the basis of imperfect information and without the possibility of extensive consultation and compromise in what might be seen as a capacity/democracy trade-off. Understanding the rationale, logic and implications of this shift is critical not just in terms of how it flows through to influence public *trust*, or how it structures subsequent *blame*-games but also due to the manner in which it shapes the ideational space – the simple realm of ideas – about how assessments regarding the future of democracy should be made.

In order to understand this focus on *understanding* and demonstrate its centrality to this article's central focus on the nexus between the current Covid-19 crisis and broader debates concerning the crisis of democracy this section adopts a multi-levelled approach. This takes us from a micro-level understanding of politicians as individuals operating in a crisis context; through to a mid-range governmental focus on understanding and gauging 'policy success' as well as 'policy failure'; to a final macro-political focus on the grand narratives and regime battles that coronavirus appears to have unleashed. Taken together, what this three-level focus on understanding provides is a fresh and timely analysis of how two very different crises have come to be inter-woven with the risk that one (i.e. Covid) will be politicised and utilised in order to inflame the second (i.e. democracy). Defending democracy - or more specifically promoting an understanding of its inner beauty, inescapable inadequacies and the inevitable trade-offs that come with any choice of organising society – has therefore been the underlying ambition of this article. This is a point that brings us to begin by reflecting on the scale of the challenge; not in relation to defending democracy but more specifically in relation to the challenges posed by coronavirus. This is a new virus, it can be highly aggressive and it is easily transmitted. With this in mind it is possible to move across the three levels from the individual, to the system, to the basic notion of democracy.

Any defence of democratic politics must to some extent seek to defend politicians. Although frequently demonised, derided and dismissed as self-serving and self-interested characters the simple fact is that politicians are at the end of the day humans, as the manner in which several leading politicians have succumbed to coronavirus reflects. Notwithstanding clear concerns about patterns of political recruitment and the degree to which the political class reflect the diversity to be found within society this does not alter the basic point that promotes some understanding of the practical and day-to-day pressures under which politicians generally operate. Put slightly differently, ‘governing under pressure’ is incredibly demanding and an evidence-based debate about the mental health and well-being of politicians was already emerging before the coronavirus crisis emerged (for a review see Flinders *et al.* 2020). These pressures increase as individuals assume the responsibilities of ministerial office and are particularly pronounced in times of crisis, especially when the source of the crisis is new and therefore no clear knowledge of ‘what works’ is available. Crisis situations by their very nature demand that someone ultimately has to assume control and make decisions under extreme pressure, on the basis of imperfect information and in the full knowledge that they are dealing with matters of ‘life and death’ for which they will at some point be held to account. In a democracy it is elected politicians to whom these decisions and situations fall. The public demands clarity (‘When will lock-down end?’, ‘When will a vaccine be found?’, ‘What is going to happen next?’) when politicians are themselves charged with grappling with uncertainty and cannot produce simple answers to complex questions. This may explain their strategy of ‘hugging the experts’ but as expert opinion itself divides and becomes more contested then so the ability of politicians to look to science for answers, at least in the short-term begins to wane.

The micro-level argument is therefore simply one that promotes some understanding of the professional challenges and personal pressures that those who have at least dared to step into the arena and assume the burdens of office are attempting to manage. It would at this point be possible to explore the contemporary relevance of Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘It’s not the critic who counts’ speech of April 1910 but such temptations must be resisted in order to move to a second mid-level focus on understanding institutional change. The simple argument here is that although, as the second section (above)

suggested, the response of democratic governments around the world is likely to be seen through interpretations of ‘policy failure’ – and some mistakes and failures will undoubtedly have occurred – it is also important to understand the scale of what has actually been achieved. In the UK the Whitehall machine and wider-state structures have demonstrated an ambition and agility that although not perfect cannot be denied. The scale of the achievements are worthy of reflection, irrespective of whether it relates to building new hospitals, launching new policies, negotiating new powers, liaising with other governments, co-ordinating a vast network of organisations and suppliers, calming and informing the public, reshaping the economy or building new financial safety nets. Interestingly, it is possible to identify a strong ‘negativity bias’ within academe as well as within society more broadly. To enter the fields of public administration and public policy is generally a fairly depressing due to the almost obsessional focus of these fields on failures, catastrophes and disasters. The publication in April 2019 manifesto ‘Towards Positive Public Administration’ by Scott Douglas, Paul t’Hart and a large group of leading scholars was an explicit attempt to rebalance the analytical scales and promote an understanding of structural successes, policy achievements and democratic innovations.

The mid-level argument is therefore one that seeks to promote some understanding of the structural and institutional accomplishments that have been achieved in the content of a truly exceptional and potentially transformative crisis. Democratic politics has not been able to ‘make all sad hearts glad’ as Crick admitted it never could in his *Defence* over half a century ago and to some extent the Covid-crisis has shown this, but at the same time its achievements in response to the public health pandemic should not be too easily dismissed.

This argument matters because it underpins a far broader macro-political dispute about the global state of democracy and how the coronavirus is already reshaping the debate about regime legitimacy and state capacity. The danger of the ‘credit-claiming’ behaviour of China in containing the crisis through technologically powered surveillance is that it may engender an ‘authoritarian appeal’ or ‘strong leader’ effect that was to some extent already evident in many countries through the drift towards populism (see Table 1, above). ‘The new coronavirus pandemic is not only wreaking destruction on public health

and the global economy but disrupting democracy and governance worldwide' Frances Brown (2020) and her colleagues have argued 'It has hit at a time when democracy was already under threat in many places, and it risks exacerbating democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation.' The geopolitical consequences of this can already be seen in the 'power grab' behaviour of some national leaders and also in the attempts by international actors to defend democracy. The existence of what Dan Keleman (2020) has labelled an 'authoritarian equilibrium' within the European Union has raised particular concerns. The decision of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to publish an open letter to the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, on the 24 March 2020 regarding the use of Covid-emergency measures, plus the decision to launch a new *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy* the very next day that is explicitly designed 'to defend human rights and democracy all over the world by using all our resources faster and more effectively', captures the sense that a new phase in the long-running tension between authoritarian and democratic regimes may well have started.

Understanding the dynamic and dialectical relationship between concerns regarding the crisis of democracy and the unfolding coronavirus pandemic is necessary in order to prevent a form of socio-political cross-cross-contamination whereby the cynicism, negativity and frustration concerning politicians, political processes and political institutions that existed *before* the coronavirus outbreak is allowed to direct, define and automatically devalue how democratic structures are subsequently judged in terms of how they responded to the challenge. Without appreciating (i) the fragility and significance of public *trust*, (ii) the potentially pathological impacts of *blame-games*, or (iii) *understanding* the achievements of individuals and institutions working together to address a collective threat there is a very real risk that the coronavirus crisis will fuel a broader crisis of democracy.

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