

A lesson from this pandemic. State action fails even when the case for it is strongest.

Ryan Bourne

September 16, 2020

A week may be a long time in politics, but a fortnight seems an eternity. A two-week period that started with Ministers urging everyone back to work, ended with “the rule of six,” Covid Marshalls, and discussion of curfews and a phone line for people to dob in neighbours for breaching pandemic laws.

If the sharp pivot in public health policy was a shock, the tone about enforcement was more jarring. It’s one thing to set clear guidance, buttressed with legally-enforceable regulations that, in reality, depend on an honour system. It’s another to brief papers of threatening enforcement of unpoliceable laws.

Gone is Boris Johnson the instinctive libertarian, imposing restrictions with a heavy heart. Conservatives now push authoritarian messaging. If nothing else, this doesn’t seem a sustainable way to get buy-in for infectious disease control. Especially since the government’s own mixed messages are a large part of the problem.

The implicit Coronavirus strategy has changed (again), but the Government has not publicly spelt it out. They aren’t trying to suppress the virus, it seems, but now want to protect much formal market activity to boost GDP (hence, school openings and “get back to work”), while sacrificing much socializing in recompense.

Without articulating that trade-off, the public is bemused: Rishi Sunak’s been subsidising indoor dining, but you now can’t have dinner with your own extended family. More than six kids can congregate at school. but not outside for a birthday party. Wedding rehearsal meals are banned, but wedding reception dinners for up to 30 are fine. You can mix with people at work, but can’t gather for a pint.

These rules strike people not so much as “confusing” (as journalists claim), but stupid. They know the virus isn’t choosy between work and leisure, and that the value of each is subjective. The British people complied with measures when they had public health coherence. Now, our Government is imposing its values of what’s important, but without saying so, and while brandishing a bigger stick.

So it’s unsurprising to see a more liberty-conscious pushback now. But I suspect this reflects more than just “Covid fatigue”, or lesser willingness to comply following the Dominic

Cummings episode. At least some of it appears to be waning confidence in government's abilities too.

For years, certain Conservatives have pushed the party to discuss "the good government can do" to distance themselves from us pesky libertarians, with our supposed vice-like grip on keeping the party freedom-oriented. It was always a delusional read on reality, but, as it happens, most British free-marketeers recognised early on that Covid-19 was a genuine collective action problem requiring government involvement and guidance.

Steve Baker's emotional speech to Parliament exhibited the sentiments of most of us. We acknowledged the uncertainties, and so tolerated the crude initial lockdown, but demanded it be limited in time and used for something—preferably to build a competent, rapid test-and-trace system that could help normalise economic life and provide feedback about where risks occurred.

The failures in delivering even this, however, have been a textbook case study in why governments fail. The early centralised approach to testing and provision of PPE showed the limits of government planning. Lockdowns caused a raft of unintended consequences. Some vested interests have been given favourable treatment in policy or guidance. Officials downplayed the potential efficacy of masks, because they wrongly thought of markets as zero-sum, rather than dynamic. Recent attempts to fine-tune human behaviour week-to-week in the North West has proven about as successful as Keynesian fine-tuning of the economy in the 1970s. A libertarian making the case against government intervention couldn't have scripted it better.

The consequence of all this is a growing hopelessness about government. Johnson is right that a daily rapid testing regime, for example, could be a gamechanger, as economists agree. But judging from the reaction I got last week in explaining why, the public thinks the state is incapable of delivering. I was regaled with horror story after horror story on access to even existing testing, now confirmed by news reports. Confidence in the "moonshot" is non-existent.

If state planning worked in winning War World Two, it was asked, why not have government build a New Jerusalem in peacetime? I wonder: will government failures in this pandemic lead to an attitudinal change away from faith in government action. just after the Conservatives have embraced it? Why would you trust people promising to use government power to "rebalance of the economy" by "doubling down on leveling up" when it has made such a pig's ear of a core competence?

To be clear: I disagree with other libertarian friends who think the pandemic is by-and-large over, and that we can "get back to normal." I'm not making a point about epidemiology. What I'm saying is that the pandemic has provided a crash course in how government fails even in instances where the case for suspending freedoms is strongest. It's possible the public may just blame this particular government for "incompetence," of course. But if they do generalise, then we may find inadvertent new converts to the cause of freedom through cruel experience.

The editor of this site has expressed eloquently the "freedom gap" in Conservative politics for some time, especially under May's premiership. The party has trended to highlighting the disruption of markets, business "rip-offs," the dangers of junk food and pollution, and the need for lifestyle adjustments to deal with climate change, with more controls and regulations of our activities. Government, it is thought, can swoop in and fix things to better social outcomes.

Yet after the 1918/19 pandemic came the Roaring Twenties. Following huge sacrifices today, there will be a pent-up demand for socialiability on top of disillusion in state performance—a desire to travel, party, eat well, engage in entrepreneurial activity, and live the life missed due to COVID-19. The author Clarissa Wild once said, “People say you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. Truth is, you knew what you had, you just never thought you’d lose it.” The political market for more government nannying, restrictions on travel and businesses, and new lifestyles taxes will, I suspect, be much smaller post-pandemic.

A Johnson of yesteryear would have been the perfect Prime Minister for a post-covid “freedom pivot”—explaining that temporarily suspending liberties to stop a collective threat was the limiting case for welfare-enhancing freedoms ordinarily. Alas, the Prime Minister’s political fortunes today are tied up with state action, with too much of his government seemingly enjoying their newfound bully pulpit. If there is an electoral dividend for economic and social freedom post-covid, Johnson’s government would have to change profoundly to benefit.

Ryan Bourne is Chair in Public Understanding of Economics at the Cato Institute.