



Some classical liberal thoughts on the coronavirus pandemic

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Apart from concerns for our neighbours, friends, families and mankind, it goes without saying that the current pandemic and the responses of individuals, families, communities and governments pose challenges for thinkers of different political and economic traditions, especially classical liberals.

Among classical liberals there is a natural scepticism of government intervention, but to different degrees. As IEA author Eamonn Butler writes: “Classical liberals disagree about the exact role of the state, but generally wish to limit the use of force, whether by individuals or governments. They call for states that are small and kept in bounds by known rules”.

However, with so much uncertainty and contradictory advice around, it is during times of crisis that most people unite in placing their trust in government. So far, most people in most countries have followed advice and instructions from governments.

When announcing the £350 billion package of loans and grants to help businesses cope with the reduced demand, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, announced that now is “not a time for ideology”. There are two main issues of concern: the economic consequences and the societal consequences.

There will be companies that will go bust and there will be pleas for taxpayer bailouts. One view is that billionaire business owners such as Virgin boss Richard Branson asking for government money should have prepared their companies for unforeseen circumstances or taken out some form of insurance and can't expect taxpayers to bail them out. Besides, if airlines do go bust, once flights resume a willing buyer will come along, buy the planes and equipment, take on staff and new airlines will emerge. However, there are in fact no or few classical liberals arguing for no government intervention. Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute argues that “there's much more rationale for targeted measures that help otherwise viable businesses from going under or

provide a degree of security for workers or contractors who would otherwise have perverse incentives to continue working even if sick”.

Does this mean classical liberals have abandoned classical liberalism? Not quite. As Richard Epstein of the Hoover Institution writes, “In ordinary times, the classical liberal approach favours strong property rights and limited government. But it is less widely known that this same theory, like virtually every other general political approach, advocates strong government controls in any emergency situation that poses an immediate peril to life and health”.

The other concern that classical liberals have is over threats to our civil liberties. As Len Shackleton writes about the proposal to isolate those aged 70-plus, “we should be wary of arbitrary restrictions and turning the country into a police state on Chinese lines”. He concedes that “we will no doubt try to do what the government advises”. While the government will announce any restrictions as temporary, we should also be aware of Milton Friedman’s warning that “nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program”.

Does this mean that that big government is here to stay? Not necessarily. Fortunately, there are other measures the government has announced that offer a glimmer of hope. For example, the UK government has announced it will change planning permissions to allow restaurants and pubs to offer takeaways and deliveries. This and similar emergency measures have prompted the #neverneeded campaign on social media asking why these regulations were ever needed.

The pandemic is also bringing people together to ask not necessarily what government can do, but what we can all do for our communities. For example, community activist and founder of Crowdpatch, Simon Krystman, is hosting the Covid-19 club to crowdsource help for people vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus in local communities.

As with any unusual situation or emergency, there will be questions for classical liberals and others, but the outbreak also reminds us that while we may or may not view the world through ideological frameworks, in times of crises we can expect to see the very best and unfortunately, the worst of humanity. The challenge is to be supportive of the very best of government action, while being aware of the worst.