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COVID-19, politics, economics and how the future pans out are inseparable

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In a recent article by Professor of Politics Robert Garner entitled ‘Why global crises are political, not scientific, problems’, he asked ‘Is there a case for saying that coronavirus is not a political issue but merely one that requires the objective expertise and judgment of scientists and medical professionals?’¹

In fact, among the many lessons to be learned since December 2019 is that politics undoubtedly remains alive and kicking during the COVID-19 era. Indeed, politics, the economy and how crises are handled are inextricably intertwined.

For example, decision after decision regarding the reopening of the economy appear to have been more heavily influenced by concerns about returning to an economic status quo from the recent pre-coronavirus era, rather than taking stock and assessing if those very economic systems some people are so attached to might actually have been at least in part responsible for what happened in December 2019, when the hitherto unknown COVID-19 pathogen emerged.

In fact, there has up till now been little evidence of any attempts at the higher levels of government to learn from the past and rethink things. Indeed, persistent attempts by leaders in the UK and USA to reopen established models of trade as soon as possible, such as the international tourism industry and public bars serving alcoholic beverages,^{2,3} clearly reflect a focus on returning at all costs to traditional ways of conducting trade and making money rather than assisting the wider population with prioritising steps to avoid becoming infected with COVID-19 and possibly dying as a consequence.

But, collectively, we do as a species have choices.

In fact, should we see the point in history where we are at now as representing a political and economic crossroads?

Going forward, at its most basic there are two broad alternatives.

The first might be described as the ‘Adam Smith’ option. Do we accept and follow the credo of the likes of 18th-century economist Adam Smith and his adherents, relying entirely on the free market and the concept of the ‘invisible hand’ to save humanity?⁴ This approach, which is certainly closer to the way things currently operate in much of the world, extols the individual’s right to self-determine over concepts of collective good. Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher exemplified this particular zeitgeist when she said ‘There is no such thing as society...no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves...’⁵

The other broad alternative is what one might perhaps call the ‘Thomas Hobbes’ option. In the 16th century, Hobbes wrote in his book *Leviathan* ‘The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them’.⁶ In other words, governments have an obligation to govern in a way that is genuinely helpful to the people they rule over. Drilling down on this, it is certainly not just a question of monetary wealth but also about physical health, and an acceptance that a person’s actions are not just about helping themselves but also about the common good. With regards to health, people from political backgrounds as diverse as Winston Churchill, Nye Bevan and Robert Owen have in the past accepted that human beings should identify common purposes and common benefits and commit to working towards them. Robert Owen encapsulated the idea that governments and the people should see themselves as ‘all being in it together’, when he wrote ‘The end of government is to make the governed and the governors happy’. As for healthcare, in his BBC broadcast of 21st March 1943, Churchill said ‘We must establish on broad and solid foundations a national health service’ while in 1948

Bevan famously said ‘Illness is neither an indulgence for which people have to pay, nor an offence for which they should be penalised, but a misfortune the cost of which should be shared by the community’.

If the ‘Thomas Hobbes’ alternative or something similar were to be the favoured way forward, then we may have to accept that the political and economic systems that the bulk of humanity has favoured and embraced up till now might bear substantial responsibility for the problems we are currently experiencing. We would then have to ask ourselves some tough questions. If we accept that, for example, zoonoses can in just a matter of a few hours travel huge distances across the earth hidden away in the bodies of live animals,⁷ and that a human being carrying a transmissible infection such as Ebola can in the morning be standing in the tarmac of an airport in West Africa and in the afternoon step off a plane in Dallas, TX, USA,⁸ then maybe the time really has come for a rethink. For example, do all goods being traded really need to be transported from one side of the planet to the other, or should there be greater controls in place? Do human beings absolutely have to fly from Europe to East Asia simply to attend a face-to-face business meeting or to go on vacation? Just how in the future do we design buildings and airplanes that facilitate safer social distancing and maximise infection prevention and control?

If general acceptance were to emerge that making changes to that approach to the way we conduct trade and tourism would help improve the chances of the majority of mankind avoiding catching serious infectious diseases like COVID-19 now and in the future, then making changes to our existing global economic systems should perhaps not be considered crazy and unthinkable but instead pragmatic and essential. As Jack Middleton very recently wrote in the *BMJ*, ‘Efforts to revive the economy are vital, but no one contributes to the economy if they are dead’.⁹

Standing stage left or stage right (depending on one’s political orientation) is politics. The reality is that to have any genuine meaning these sorts of decisions can only be implemented at a higher political level. In democracies, for example, credible options have to be presented to voters, and the voters given accurate, evidence-based and appealing information on which they can base their decision as to how they will cast their vote.

Could such change ever happen? In fact, should it happen? Or shouldn’t it?

The 18th-century statesman Edmund Burke provides us with some useful advice – ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to

do nothing’. The next question this statement presents us with is... ‘do’ what?

Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein provides us with more help – ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results’. But, are we capable of changing?

To quote Abbasi, ‘...questioning and change must become the new normal’.¹⁰ So, to pose a question, would failing to recognise that we human beings can’t uncritically go back to exactly the same way we did things in the past be the greatest mistake of all?¹¹

If asked that question, what would a politician say and/or do?

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