

Failures of State - Observer piece

' When I became Health Secretary in 2007 the Chief Medical Officer, Liam Donaldson took me aside to explain why there was bound to be a pandemic soon.

Between 1918 and 1920 the H1N1 virus that became known as Spanish Flu was responsible for more deaths than the First World War. There had been a flu pandemic about thirty years before that and another, Asian Flu (H2N2), that killed up to four million forty years after.

"It's running a bit late, but one's sure to come along any minute," he told me in his reassuringly soft Teeside accent, as if we were standing in Whitehall waiting for a Number 11 bus.

Liam had been instrumental in shaking politicians out of their torpor not only here but through his role in the World Health Organisation (WHO), around the globe.

It had been his report on infectious diseases in 2002 that sparked Britain's efforts to prepare properly for what was to come.

That report led to a Ministerial Committee on Pandemic Planning and in turn to a national response framework approved by Parliament.

In February 2007 five thousand doctors, nurses, police officers, soldiers and civil servants took part in Operation Winter Willow, a rigorous rehearsal for the real thing.

The expected pandemic struck two years later when the dreaded H1N1 reappeared for the first time since 1918. This time it was called Swine Flu and whilst affecting up to 1.4 billion people it thankfully proved to have a milder impact than expected. It was in essence another rehearsal, albeit a full dress one in which 457 Brits lost their lives.

I have no experience of dealing with the kind of crisis that this administration has had to face over the past year. But I do know that a pandemic remained top of the government risk register as the greatest threat to our citizens - greater than terrorism, a biological attack, nuclear accident or a severe weather event and I do know that we had a detailed and proven plan to deal with it.

Swine Flu (as well as SARS five years earlier) should have added to our store of knowledge and, because it wasn't 'the big one' it should have led to us redoubling our efforts in advance of the next pandemic which in all probability would be.

In the first part of 'Failures of State' by Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnot they set out to answer the question of how a country whose level of preparedness had been amongst the best in the world should have been so unprepared when Covid-19 struck.

One entirely valid point made by Jeremy Hunt amongst others is that we'd prepared for a flu pandemic rather than a coronavirus. But there are more similarities than differences between the two. Both are respiratory diseases emerging from a novel virus. Both require detailed plans for containment through isolation, quarantine and contact tracing. And, crucially, both require substantial stocks of personal protective equipment.

In any case, given that it had been sixteen years since SARS and eleven since Swine Flu we should have been well prepared for both.

Calvert and Arbuthnot conclude that a combination of austerity and "the government's one eyed obsession with Brexit" had eroded our defences. There had been another scaled down rehearsal in 2016 codenamed Cygnus after which the official verdict was that Britain's preparations were by now inadequate for the 'extreme demands' of a pandemic. It was a danger signal that seems to have been ignored.

The result is chronicled here in meticulous detail: out-of-date stock that should have been replenished, respirators with an expiry date of 2012, no gowns, visors, swabs, body bags or eye protection. Nurses having to improvise PPE with black bin-liners.

As for containment, our borders remained open (despite warnings from the scientists) to the extent that large numbers of students returning to Britain from China early in 2020 at a time when we knew

all about Wuhan weren't even temperature tested let alone quarantined. Such measures, crucial to the pandemic plan, were described by our government as 'symbolic gestures'.

Not only did Boris Johnson lockdown three weeks too late, he spent those weeks lurching around hospitals shaking hands with staff too polite to spurn him, joining an 81,000 crowd at Twickenham for England v Wales and joining Phil and Holly on daytime TV where, having forced a handshake on a shocked Philip Schofield, he explained to the nation that "stopping big gatherings doesn't work in stopping the virus."

It is understandable for a leader to worry about the economic effects of lockdown. But as the authors of this book point out, the economy could only thrive if the virus was kept in check. We had the worst of all worlds.

Calvert and Arbuthnott painstakingly piece together the evidence. Some of their sources are whistle blowers inside Downing Street and the NHS; some are the amongst the few members of the public who managed to get onto hospital wards and into care homes to see their relatives. There is much that we already knew although most of this was revealed by the two journalists themselves in their Sunday Times pieces through the year. Bringing everything together presents a damning indictment. And the authors go further; delving into the Clinical Information Network to demonstrate that critically ill patients really were denied access to intensive care because resources were so inadequate; exposing how the government originally pursued a policy of herd immunity (which Johnson described as 'taking it on the chin') and most graphically and incriminating of all, setting out the awful truth about social care.

On 25th February last year Public Health England (PHE) had told staff in the care home sector that there was no need for face masks as it was "very unlikely that anyone receiving care in a care home or the community will become infected".

In fact the virus was spreading like wildfire at that moment with 1,600 new infections - of which PHE had only identified 23.

A few weeks later 15,000 mainly elderly patients were discharged into care homes and community placements in order to free-up hospital beds. All regulatory requirements were suspended to facilitate this mass discharge. Under a third of the 6,435 people discharged into care homes were tested. We now know that at least 623 of them were already carrying the virus. Those particularly susceptible to catching Covid had been placed in an environment where they were most likely to contract it.

The result of this maladroitness? Over the course of 2020 a Brit had more than twice the likelihood of dying from the disease as a German. Britain had almost twenty times the number of cases per head of population and forty times the number of deaths than China where the pandemic began. On New Year's Eve alone more deaths from the virus were recorded here than in Australia over the entire year. There were more deaths in England in an hour on that same day than the total death toll in New Zealand. Singapore got on with implementing what had been our pandemic plan whilst The New York Times described the place where it had been constructed as Plague Island.

Will these 'failures of State' damage Johnson electorally? Perhaps not. The vaccine has given him a metaphorical as well as an actual shot in the arm. After all, when the Second World War was over people understandably wanted to celebrate D-Day rather than dwell on Dunkirk. '