

# Advisers advise, Ministers decide

I have had enough of news conferences of the PM or some senior Minister flanked by a scientific and a medical government adviser setting out policy. It is a distortion of our constitution, blurring the roles of both Minister and senior official. The format chosen also gives a very lopsided view of what should be happening in government when making difficult decisions over how to respond to a pandemic.

At the peak of the first wave of the virus I wrote about the questionable use of some figures and charts and the unreliability of some of the data. The media mainly played the game of accepting everything the "experts" said as true and acting as interpreters of their wisdom to the rest of us. Ministers seemed to add little to the narrative.

It was wrong that the only experts in the room were of one mind with one purpose, beating the virus. Their advice is rightly bound to be ultra cautious over the virus as that is their sole preoccupation. Where were the other health experts worried about what might happen to people with other conditions who might lose out on hospital and GP capacity? Would we get more deaths from other causes? Where were the experts worrying about mental health and the impact on people that lockdown could bring. Where were the economic experts asking about ways of limiting the damage to jobs, investment and incomes whilst wishing to assist with controlling the disease?

Responding to the virus is a cross government large task. It needs the inputs of many departments and many different areas of expertise. It is the job of Ministers within their departments and acting collectively across government to reconcile conflicting needs and pressures and come up with a balanced package of measures for the circumstances. The best way of then reporting would be to Parliament with MPs challenging government and putting forward issues and problems they wished to highlight. We should not see the individuals providing advice on the scientific, medical, NHS, economic, business and social policy issues, but Ministers should draw on it to support their final decisions. Government would publish relevant data to help us monitor progress. Outside experts would be free to query what the government was doing to inform a better debate.

Tomorrow I will look at some of the important questions that got little air time thanks to this style of presentation.