

The state of the pandemic – show your papers?

It was tragic news from the USA that the country surpassed 500,000 deaths this week from CV 19. The President and Vice President commemorated the sad landmark in a moving ceremony and with appropriate words. The USA and the UK make daily announcements of the deaths attributed to the virus, with Ministers and Administration representatives making regular statements of sympathy for the relatives of those lost.

The EU passed through the 500,000 deaths before the USA. They have gone over to weekly reporting, and last announced 515,519 deaths. The incidence of the virus and the death rate has been very variable around the EU. Belgium's death rate has been more than three times that of Greece. Luxembourg has had more cases relative to the size of its population than most, whilst Finland has low figures for cases and deaths. The world figures released daily on the worldometer does not include EU figures so you have to add up all the relevant national figures. This is surprising given the leadership role the EU has adopted over responses to the pandemic in member states. It would be good to see more analysis of the reasons for the very different rates of cases and deaths amongst neighbouring states.

Asian countries led by Japan have had much lower case rates and lower death rates than the Americas and Europe. I have yet to see a good account of why the spread of the disease and the fatalities have been so much lower in much of Asia. It would be good to know if it was to do with the nature of the response, or to the treatments, or to greater natural immunity from past exposures to similar viruses or to diet or other issues.

The U.K. after Israel has achieved much more in offering vaccines to people vulnerable to the virus and vaccinating most at risk. In both France and Germany misleading negative briefings against the Astra Zeneca vaccine has held up acceptance of vaccination on top of the slower moves of the EU authorities to approve the jab and to buy enough for fast roll out.

We now learn that the U.K. is considering using vaccination certificates for other purposes. Ministers accept there are practical and moral problems with such an idea. I would be interested in your thoughts on this possible limitation on freedoms.

My question during the Prime

Minister's statement on Covid-19: Road Map, 22 February 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government do more to improve air flow, control and extraction in health settings, and to make more safe use of powerful ultraviolet cleaners to reduce cross-infection further?

The Prime Minister (Mr Boris Johnson): My right hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. Our scientific advisers are looking at everything we can do, including the means that he suggests, to reduce transmission of the disease.

The arguments over the Union.

I am in favour of the Union of the UK. I also believe Unions only work well when the main parts of them accept the Union's authority and feel at home in it. That is why I supported the idea of having a referendum in Scotland to see how strong the feelings for independence were. Had a majority wanted to leave I would have accepted that verdict and been in favour of as fast and smooth a divorce as possible. I was given assurances from the SNP at Westminster that such a vote would be a once in a generation event. As more than half the Scottish people wished to stay in the Union just a few years ago we owe it to them to offer stability around their victory. I understand how the SNP voters feel, as I voted to leave the EEC in 1975 and had to wait until 2016 to get another chance to vote. That was too long, but I never thought we should have a second ballot for the first 25 years after the 1975 referendum. It was the acceptance of the Maastricht Treaty followed by Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon along with the long period of time elapsed which confirmed the need for a new vote.

The Scottish Parliamentary elections will be dominated by arguments about a second referendum if many of the politicians fighting it have their way. This seems to be a pity. Now Scotland has a Parliament and government with considerable powers to go their own way on everything from pandemics to agriculture and from spending priorities to law and order the elections might mainly be about how well the current government has done and who of the competing parties offers the best prospect of governing well and meeting most of the aspirations of voters. There should be a lively debate on what is and is not working in education, health, economic development and the rest. Instead much of the media accepts the diversion to the arguments over independence in place of scrutiny of how all the new powers and money are being used. If that is what most Scottish people want to debate then so be it.

Many in the SNP do not seem to want proper independence anyway. Muddles over what they did want made the 2014 referendum campaign difficult for them. Many seemed to want to stay with sterling. The first thing I would want for my country is its own currency, to have the full range of options for economic policy. Most of them wanted to rejoin the EU, limiting their ability to legislate and administer Scotland in the way of their choice. The wish to join the EU implied a wish to join the Euro which was in conflict with the wish to keep the pound. They seemed to want to keep the monarchy, a symbol of the union of England and Scotland which started as a union of crowns before progressing to a union of Parliament and government some hundred years later.

Today we still await a definitive SNP view on what currency they want, how they might rejoin the EU, if they will accept the Euro as part of the price of EU membership, how much of the joint state debt of the UK they would assume on leaving, what if any they would like by way of defence assistance and what a Scottish budget would look like without the links into Union finances and taxes. If we are to have a debate again on independence instead of a decent election debate on the successes and failures of the SNP government, these are some of the questions the media should be asking them.

[The contrast between BBC Scotland and England](#)

The BBC has a clear website presentation for BBC Scotland. It tells us about its flagship nightly News programme, the Nine. That takes “a global view on the news whilst maintaining a distinctive Scottish voice”. There are plenty of advertised Scottish news specials and supporting cultural programmes and events. There is no such statement about an English news programme, no news presented with “a distinctive English voice”. English viewers and listeners seeking BBC England on the website are invited to share their post code to be sent down a regional and local rabbit hole on the site, palmed off with phoney regional loyalties to regions that do not want elected assemblies. We have no need of mock declarations of loyalty and cultural harmony to South easternness or to Rest of the south-eastness or to Thames Valleyyness or to South westernness or whatever. England gets the UK news product, complete with plenty of exposure to Nicola Sturgeon, a person we cannot vote for nor remove from office. I have never heard a satisfactory explanation from the BBC of why they treat England so differently from Scotland, and why they always seem to have shared the old EU wish to balkanise England into regions which fail to resonate with voters and have no place in our history to draw from.

The BBC is particularly weak about following France, Germany and the EU. It gives little airtime to considering the twists and turns of their politics.

It rarely reports the extensive legislative work of the EU Commission government, and views all things EU through its anti Brexit prism, using pro EU UK establishment figures to give their inaccurate minimalist and positive account of EU ambitions and actions. Where the BBC is rightly ever ready to criticise the UK government, and has just spent four years attacking every feature of the Trump administration the Democrats disapproved of, the BBC has been almost completely silent when it comes to criticisms of the government of the EU or of the leading countries on the continent that are our immediate neighbours. It rarely comments on the small shares of the vote most of the leading parties in continental democracies now command and ignores most of the struggles to lead Germany after Mrs Merkel or to control the Italian government. In the battles over the pandemic the BBC has nearly always sided with the pro lockdown arguments, giving plenty of airtime to SNP and Labour criticisms of the UK/England response when the Scottish and Welsh governments took a slightly tougher approach. Understandably it has proved to be a robust defender of the UK government's vaccine strategy because it commands cross party support. The BBC looks to some as if is helping Scottish independence, regularly making it a topic on its broadcasts. It ranks Nicola Sturgeon's news conferences alongside the Prime Ministers and airs them regularly in England though they are nothing to do with policy in England. The BBC scarcely recognises England and when asked about it usually turns to trying to break it up into artificial and unpopular regions or explores local government matters.

As we enter a new phase in the arguments about the Union the BBC needs to revisit what is fair, and see that the different ways it treats different parts of the UK is a live part of the debate itself.

[Paying for journalism](#)

Some MPs in the UK have rushed in to side with the Australian government and Parliament in their row with Facebook. The Australian government is proposing a law to make platforms like Facebook pay to use extracts from newspapers and media reports on their sites, so the journalism involved will not go unrewarded. Facebook has countered by saying they in effect give the papers and media free adverts by posting some of their material with full credits. The journalists get access to a much bigger audience which in turn boosts their commercial value. Facebook decided that the best way to comply with the prospective law is to ban all journalism extracts from established media outlets from its sites so it need not make any payments. This tiff provides a good opportunity to review the current state of journalism and how we pay for things here in the UK. I do not propose to weigh into the Australian debate, which their Parliament is best able to conduct for itself.

Let me declare my prejudices. I am a fan of good journalism. A well researched and informative article helps my education. Lively and informed

opinion pieces contribute to the national conversation, vital in a democracy. Well written and amusing pieces are entertaining, a welcome diversion for time off. Many pay for some of this by buying papers and electronic subscriptions, by paying the BBC Licence fee, by their employer taking out collective subscriptions for services needed for work, and by accepting adverts alongside journalism to enable them to enjoy some free services. Each of these paying models has its advantages and disadvantages.

My concern with the current UK media relates to editorial choices and use of journalistic talent. I am particularly critical of the BBC because I have to pay for it whether I want to use it or not. It regularly fails to live up to the ideals of its Charter. As one who used to listen to a lot of Radio 4 news and watch one of the main evening tv news programmes every night, I often find myself turning off, faced with the same diet of highly selective topics and systematic bias of worldview. For much of the last year the two story lines of pandemic and global warming have dominated most news broadcasts. It is often not a case of "news", but recycling "olds". It is often not hard news but regurgitated opinion or forecasts, not reported events and government statements but opinion surveys and lobby group reports inspired to prove a viewpoint. In order to be better informed I turn direct to the sources of the news and read the statements, draft laws, budgets and the rest for myself, as it is a rare day that you get much factual content or informed comment on the important decisions and events that unfold.

Armed with the facts and statements of those making the news I often find I am in a very different conversation from the trivia, ideological repetitions or exaggerations of the main broadcasts. The BBC makes use of highly selected experts, many of whom seem to share a clear one sided political viewpoint about the importance of powerful global government as the answer to their view of what the problems are. Some of them do not seem to have read the detailed documents that underpin the issue. On economic matters I find they usually misrepresent the position by drawing on some highly spun interpretations and not using the actual figures. They normally ignore important statistical releases, as with the state debt where they do not usually distinguish between net and gross allowing for Bank of England ownership of debts. They rarely report cash figures for public spending and spending increases. They are not interested in public sector productivity issues. They accepted the Labour "austerity" analysis of the previous decade without revealing that over that decade there was a very large rise in tax revenue, a rise in cash public spending and even a very small increase in real public spending, contrary to the generally stated cuts in spending and a failure to increase taxes enough. They regularly ignore the preoccupations of voters with issues like illegal migration, politically correct language, restrictions on freedoms, controls on our freedoms and high taxes on enterprise. They usually dislike or ignore England.