

At peace with our past?

I remember showing a visitor from the recently liberated USSR around Parliament. He remarked that it was a pleasure to see a country "at peace with its past". For he saw in the statues and paintings, the memorabilia and the stories, all the nation's past represented – good and bad, insiders and outcasts, establishment and rebels. They are on display for all to see. We cannot change the facts that they lived, held their own views and made their own impact. In his crumbling superstate the government told you what to think about the past, and threw out the statues and paintings of people and events they disliked.

Few of the figures from our past would have shared our preoccupations or held similar views to our present consensus where it exists. Some will look at the statue of Cromwell and see a tyrant and a butcher. Others will see him as the embodiment of a rebellion to tame the arbitrary power of the monarch and to give the generations to come a say in how they are governed. He is still part of our present as well as our past, as we still react today to both the good and the bad of his legacy.

Some will look at the great merchants and business people of the eighteenth century and see there generous donors of civic improvement at home. They will acknowledge their contribution to the betterment of many in the UK who gained employment and advancement from their enterprise. Others will dwell on those that made money out of the slave trade and rightly condemn that source of wealth.

It is true in a way that the past is a foreign country. Many attitudes and assumptions were different then. It is also true there is considerable continuity. Some of the past is an important part of our being a community. Tradition means enjoying what was best about the past and learning from what success our ancestors had in promoting a better life for many. Just as we celebrate our own landmarks of birthdays and anniversaries, so nationally we celebrate or remember important events in the life of our nation. Our nation above all made great breakthroughs for democracy and freedom at home and abroad.

Living in a great democracy means we all need to show some tolerance to each other and cut some slack to our past relatives who had different views from us. It is best to study them in their full range, and accept we will find things we do not like as well as things that showed they cared about us, the ones who came after. The thinkers of the Enlightenment thought they were "dwarves on the shoulders of giants", who could see further because they could add to the visions of the ancient philosophers and scientists before them. Today too we should accept that we can see further, enjoy greater prosperity and assert superior morality to the past partly thanks to what they achieved and passed on to us.

I have got used in politics to the gross discourtesy and aggressive personal abuse adopted by some on the left. I assume that is because they have such a

bad case. I do not like to see the same style adopted by people who I might otherwise wish to agree with.

Freedom now

The BBC's wish to avoid singing "Britons never never never shall be slaves" speaks volumes about how hostile to freedom many in the establishment have become.

There is nothing colonial nor racist in this iconic chorus. It is a paean to the liberty of the British, a reminder that we sided against continental tyrannies and opted for the course of freedom.

It records the success of the British against Spanish invasion and planned conquest, and against French expansions. Later we were to offer the same resistance to German attempts at the unification of Europe by military force.

Today our liberties are under pressure. Government in the name of tackling the pandemic has made unprecedented inroads into our personal freedoms for peace time. Now the threat is much reduced and medical understanding of the virus increased, it is time to relax the controls further and restore more dignity and judgement to us all.

Schools should make more of their own decisions about how to keep their staff and pupils safe, and not expect a detailed government blueprint about how and where they hold classes. Businesses need to set out their own approach to hygiene and safety, explaining it to customers who can decide whether to go there or not.

Local and national government places more and more restrictions on people getting about in cars in ways which sometimes make town and city centres more dangerous for all involved as well as more frustrating for pedestrians as well as drivers.

Government is in danger of taking too much to itself. Leaving more to a free people and their private and public sector institutions beyond central government is the right way forward. It will produce better answers, a more prosperous society and see off the threat of a new slavery.

Jaguar the brand

I would like Jaguar to succeed as a UK manufacturer and have been worried by

recent news reports of poor sales figures and issues over a possible partner. The value of the brand rests in part on the loyal following of past Jaguar owners which they need to consider as they plan their future products.

The company needs to ask itself why it is selling so few Jaguars. Did it lose past customers by the way it treated them in its search for a new generation and style of customer?

When they dropped the S type and went to the XF they allowed the press to write that they were looking for a new younger breed of Jaguar buyer. To find these new buyers they changed from a car which was clearly part of the Jaguar design heritage in modern idiom, to a vehicle that did not have much Jaguar about it. The shape of the XF was similar to the Vauxhall Insignia which did that design well at cheaper prices. They then decided to make the legendary XJ into a stretched version of the smaller car. Maybe that did not work as they hoped.

Did they do some selling down? Were they seeking to get established owners to buy smaller and cheaper variants to boost the sales of newer products?

In recent years the Land Rover and Range Rover brands have powered far more sales than Jaguar. There the company has managed to preserve the essence of the old whilst creating cars that are clearly new. They have kept more past customers whilst attracting new ones.

I read that Jaguar have decided to delay the entry of their electric XJ Jaguar. I presume they have carried out sales research and decided there are too few potential buyers. They should do a bit more research into what people who have liked the brand in the past might buy, as that could still be a useful reservoir of potential custom.

What some like about the brand is its past ability to harness great British design and to produce the cars in a UK factory. Some are not looking for a clone of the great Jaguars of the past, but a modern embodiment of the design inspirations that made past vehicles iconic and distinctive in their day . The theme was Grace, Pace, Space. It is important that when they launch a new car it has some of the flair and brilliance of the E type or the Mark II Sports saloon. They were radical new cars on launch, but they kept alive the tradition of beautiful lines, good performance and a more affordable price than many luxury car competitors. The ageing XF and XJ do need replacement. Bring on a proper Jaguar. We need that to restore the sales. There is no fundamental reason why Jaguar should be so far behind BMW or Mercedes in selling cars.

[Time for a quango review](#)

Now Public Health England and Ofqual have shown their capacity to make

headlines and to raise the issue of how independent they are of Ministers, it is a good time to ask how many of these so called independent bodies do we need?

I have long argued there is no such thing as an independent public sector body. It is possible for one to appear to be independent and to act on its own for a long time if there is political agreement about its role and if it performs well or avoids the searchlight of media criticism. As soon as what it does becomes contentious or is done badly, Ministers are expected to sort it out and often held to blame for the original lapses by the organisation.

The best model is for Ministers to accept they will be held responsible for the work of these bodies, and for them to hold regular reviews of the policy, conduct and success of these organisations to satisfy themselves they can defend them if necessary. It is a good job to give to experienced Ministers of State on behalf of busy Cabinet Ministers. When I used to do this, I typically held a budget meeting once a year to go over their financial bids for the year ahead, a meeting to review the previous year's work and achievements at the time of the Annual report, and strategic or issue meetings if necessary.

The Minister cannot assume an independent body is putting in an acceptable bid for resources. He or she also needs to provide some check on the wish of many of these bodies to put up fees and charges on people using their services, especially where the use is involuntary because the person has to buy a permit or licence from them. The Minister may need to explain the public sensitivities and reaction to the quango to its senior personnel. If things start to go wrong the Minister needs to request better performance. In bad cases management would have to be changed.

All this is a lot of work. It also comes with additional cost, as the quango will want its own headquarters and other facilities, its own computer systems, own accounting system, audit and the rest. Much of this could be supplied more cheaply by doing the work within the Department using the common facilities of government. Its top management may be offered higher salaries and there will be more of them than if the function is run within the department. There needs in each case to be some offsetting benefits for these additional costs.

In some cases the Agency is able to attract specialist talent and a good CEO to offer higher quality service and more efficiency than the sponsor Department could do. In other cases it is just an added overhead, with more difficulty for the Minister to control the body and get the quality and volume of work out of it the public and government needs. Now would be a good time to review these bodies in each department, and come up with a 5 year plan to manage them out or ensure their success under correctly skilled and motivated management. Far too much activity is hived off in this way, leading to crises for government, the Quango and the Minister concerned when something goes wrong as with Public Health England and Ofqual recently.

Slaves to R?

With stories circulating that some think we need a new national lock down because R may be over 1, we need to go over old ground on these inaccurate numbers. Sage updates us on R, a measure of how many people someone with CV 19 will infect, and on the growth rate in infections.

The latest SAGE Report says the R figure is now in the range 0.9 to 1.1, a 22% spread. The Report admits R “cannot be measured directly so there is always uncertainty”. They tell us different groups work R out in different ways. Some use hospital admissions and death rates data. This used to be the main way which I criticised in the past. They now concede this data may have a lag of 2-3 weeks in it. There are also the issues over how reliable the death rate figures are as some of the CV 19 ascribed deaths are people who had had the disease well before death and had other serious medical problems. Some use contact pattern surveys of people’s behaviour. This relies on people providing accurate returns, and leaves open big judgements about how it relates to the spread of the disease. The third identified system is the one that should produce more accurate results being based on the consistent and regular testing of a sample of the population. This should in particular give more accurate figures for growth or decline in the disease which would be a more useful figure than an estimated R.

SAGE blends the results from all these different methods , arguing they should draw on all of them as “there is uncertainty in all the data surveys so estimates can vary between different models”. You would have thought instead of this consensus blended approach they would identify the most accurate ways of calculating relevant figures and create consistent and accurate data to do so. They give us these ranges, and then add qualifications. They point out where the incidence is now small the data may be more unreliable.

Because they are combining results from a range of ways of computing R, all with their problems, they present it as a range. They assert that “The most likely true values are somewhere towards the middle of these ranges”. Why? What if the sample testing result was at one of the extremes? Shouldn’t this be taken more seriously as a better indicator of growth rates and therefore of R? They also stress local areas can have flare ups which are not representative of the surrounding region or local government area.

People deciding to lock down places and areas need clear and reliable data that there is a real problem with a surge in the virus and its spread. These generalised stories based on national R estimates are not the way to settle whether the economy can recover or whether we can have some of our lost freedoms back.