

A Bitter Spring

Felicity Dowling

Felicity Dowling, one of the principal speakers for Left Unity, delineates the impact of Covid-19 upon communities already suffering from the effects of years of austerity, and apprehends more hardship to follow a, possibly hard, Brexit.

The weather has been beautiful in spring 2020 here in England. For those children with happy homes it has been a grand extended holiday from school. For those with gardens or access to beautiful outdoor spaces it has been a rare chance to enjoy the spring. Road traffic was low, few planes were flying, air quality improved, and the birds were singing loudly. Very many parents and children have enjoyed the lockdown time together, enjoyed the lack of rush and pressure. Other families have struggled for food, for access to the internet, for the money to pay the rent. School students have had time to follow their own interests in music, art, and keeping fit, in computer games or boxset series. Most people young and old have carefully observed the lockdown.

Little else has been good. Deaths from Coronavirus are dreadful. 43,726 people are dead (Worldometer 2020) and many more seriously ill. New cases are reported every day. Though the numbers have come down from the peak of the crisis, new infections have only very

recently dipped below the numbers at the onset of the lockdown.

The emotional weight of these deaths is too raw to process. It will weigh with us for a century.

Many who live alone and have been in lockdown have been intensely lonely, especially if they have not had access to the internet.

It has been the elders who have been hardest hit by this virus, with pensioners 34 times more likely to die of the illness. The virus is more dangerous to older people but the UK government failed to protect residents in Old People's Care Homes even allowing hospitals to discharge patients with the disease to Old People's Homes where there was no protective equipment, no effective isolation (Booth 2020).

Men have died far more than women. Those who have been working in occupations that directly deal with other people are far more

likely to die than those from professional classes:

The major group with the highest rate of death involving COVID-19 was Elementary workers with 21.4 deaths per 100,000 males (225 deaths). The occupations in this group include those performing mostly routine tasks, such as construction workers and cleaners. The major group with the next highest rate was Caring, leisure and other service occupations (17.9 deaths per 100,000 males, or 72 deaths), which include occupations such as nursing assistants, care workers and ambulance drivers. (ONS 2020: 3)

Operation Cygnus in 2016 made plans for such a pandemic but these plans were not implemented. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was not available, and this lack of PPE has caused deaths amongst doctors and nurses. Nor were there enough ventilators. For each shortage, the Government made grand announcements, and gave huge contracts to private companies but failed grotesquely to deliver lifesaving equipment for many weeks. Still in May, there were problems with sufficient high-quality masks in hospitals.

Our NHS staff and staff in the care homes have worked magnificently and far too many have died and become ill. Many of those who have died are Black or Asian or ethnic minority (BAME). The Country came out each Thursday at 8pm to clap the NHS staff. The debt we owe our health and social care workers cannot be repaid. We must avoid a second surge if only to protect the health care workers. I could have written a whole article just on what the health workers did but somehow it is still too sensitive a subject. We honour them.

Coronavirus Testing in the UK is still not functioning well. Many care staff were not able to get tests and if they got them, the results took too long. “Test, Trace, Isolate, and Support”, the model used by the WHO and by other countries, is still not working. Contract after contract has been given in an uncoordinated fashion to companies to be involved in testing but it does not add up to an effective system. Far poorer countries have done much better in dealing with this virus.

Rather than learn from China’s experience of the virus, or learn from Spain or Italy, Johnson downplayed the virus, boasting of shaking hands with Coronavirus patients, and fatally delayed lockdown. Johnson himself became very ill from the virus, and his chief adviser Dominic Cummings claims to also have had it. His “experts” talked of developing herd immunity, letting the majority of the people get the virus. It is widely reported that Cummings (Boris Johnson’s Rasputin) said in March “...herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.” It was only when modellers showed that half a million people would die that the government changed tactics. Then a senior scientist said, “at the end of the crisis we will have done well if 20,000 die”. The real death toll is twice that now or even three times that if the *Financial Times* statistics are proven correct.

China, the USA, Brazil, Spain and Italy also have had appalling deaths rates, and we mourn them too. Many of the UK deaths were avoidable, and deep anger burns from this.

Before the virus hit the UK was already in the midst of multiple crises. Poverty, and

especially child poverty, misogyny, homelessness, poor housing, restricted rights at work, a new rigid school curriculum, high numbers of exclusions from school, “county lines” drug gangs and child sexual exploitation.

The Coronavirus closed UK Schools to most pupils on 18th March. Millions of parents are working from home; many more are still working out in the community – some doing essential work and some forced by their employers and by Government to work in non-essential industries, most notably in Construction.

Since the outbreak, two children have died of the virus in the UK. This pattern of children resisting the virus is international, with children being remarkably resistant to the virus.

Children’s experience of this lockdown has depended on family circumstances. Some will have enjoyed it, some been bored. Children of key workers have still been able to go to school though school in the lockdown is not like normal school at all. Some teachers have sent online work for their pupils at home. However, if you do not have your own laptop and Wi-Fi connection, you cannot access the lessons sent by the teachers. If mother and three children are all trying to work online, the Wi-Fi often will not cope. Good schools sent home printed materials for those who cannot access the online work but returning printed materials risk passing on the virus. The government promised laptops for all who needed them but many of these laptops have not arrived (cf. Ferguson/Savage 2020). These laptops matter. Some children have been

back to school since Monday, June 1st, but most children will not return until September and then it might be part time schooling. School buildings are not easily redesigned for social distancing, nor for high standards of hygiene.

Britain is a profoundly unequal society (Equality Trust 2019). There are many very rich people in the UK. In London, rich and poor live cheek by jowl, but lead very different lives. Poverty though is rife in the UK. Phillip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights reported:

Although the United Kingdom is the world’s fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021. Food banks have proliferated; homelessness and rough sleeping have increased greatly; tens of thousands of poor families must live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated.

The social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities’ budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with

a harsh and uncaring ethos. A booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda. (ctd. in Bristol Poverty Institute 2019)

Since the banking crisis of 2008 working people's wages have slumped, showing the worst loss amongst leading economies. Other factors have made the loss of income starker still. Welfare benefits such as unemployment pay have also been cut. Universal Credit, the system to support those who lose their jobs, who cannot work because of health reasons or whose wage is too low to exist, is fearfully hard to apply for and takes many weeks to arrive. Many people believe that Universal Credit is designed to frighten people into taking any job at any wage. UK employment statistics include people who have worked one hour per week as being employed rather than unemployed (cf. Edgington 2018).

Women have suffered most under austerity, bearing 86 percent of the cuts. (Stewart 2017) Mothers have suffered most amongst the women. It is appalling but parents cannot claim any benefits for a third child, unless the mother can prove she was raped (see DWP 2019). Benefits are poor enough anyhow.

Of 12 million children in the UK, 4.2 million live in poverty (CPAG 2020). 1.3 million children get one free meal a day at school. During lockdown, the parents of children who were entitled to free school meals were supposed to get a voucher for each child to make sure they got food. Even this has not worked properly. Some schools have been

making lunches and sending them out to the pupils' homes. Hunger is real in the UK. 1.5 million people have gone without food for a day. Many, many more are dependent on food banks to eat. Many of those using food banks are in work. The most generous contributors to food banks are people who have had to use them themselves. Liverpool FC fans organise "Fans supporting food banks" and football fans have made it a tradition to go to the match with food to give to the food bank. Other football clubs support the idea too using the hashtag #hungerdoesnotwearclubcolours. Their Facebook page [6] is worth a read.¹ Community groups have set up kitchens to cook food to send out into the community and in some areas, impromptu mutual aid organisations set up WhatsApp groups for each street so residents could support each other. Solidarity and mutual aid have helped millions through the lockdown.

Housing, too, is in crisis. Buying houses is often too expensive for many families and they live in rented accommodation where they have far fewer rights than in Germany. Before the virus large numbers of people slept on the streets, and as the Government is reducing the lockdown many will be sent back onto the streets.

The National Health Service in the UK is much prized. Year after year, it won awards as the most cost-effective healthcare system in the world. The NHS was a single national system, offering healthcare to all, free at the point of need and funded by the government. It was also an excellent research organisation. It is 70 years old and has a huge tranche of data that Big Pharma wants and which the people running health

insurance want. Sadly for more than a decade it has been starved of funds and used as point of profit for big business. Cuts in funding and shortage of staff caused huge problems. One little boy was treated in hospital on the floor (Stubley 2019). This picture reflected many other people's experience in Accident and Emergency departments but Boris Johnson hid in an industrial fridge rather than speak to the press about the state of the NHS (Stewart and Mohdin 2019). So, when the virus struck, the NHS was already in poor shape, although Johnson did promise more money for the NHS.

Difficult and immensely sad, though the situation is, for tens of thousands of families, the UK faces yet more problems with the Brexit deadlines approaching.

Ideologically the current UK government is right-wing populist similar to Trump in the USA and Bolsonaro in Brazil, both of whom also have catastrophic and avoidable death rates from the virus. It is my opinion that Johnson, Bolsonaro, Trump, and Orbán make up a group of reactionary and dangerous politicians. They represent the capitalism of hedge funds and speculation rather than investment. Austerity created poverty, stripped out public investment and infrastructure, like transport, health, social care and education. The governments of Teresa May and David Cameron represented different sections of capitalism. Johnson got rid of many experienced politicians, so his government is inexperienced, inept and malicious. Back in December, Johnson won the election on the slogan "Get Brexit Done". Johnson did not win a majority in the popular vote. He won 47.2 %, which is a high vote, but please do not think everyone in the

UK supports him, far from it. Amongst young people, he is not popular and was not popular in the election (Curtis 2019). Most young people opposed Brexit, want to keep the right to travel and live in Europe, and are happy to have EU citizens living and working here. They are rightly critical of many of the policies and structures of the European Union but they are not reactionary nationalists.

Migrants play a hugely important role in the UK economy working at every level of employment. Britain's link with its former colonies has been used over many decades to recruit workers to come from Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the West Indies to work in the UK. These people are referred to as migrants. Then we have refugees and asylum seekers. Seventy million people across the globe have been forcibly displaced, so naturally some end up in the UK (which used to have a civilised approach to such matters). Since 2010, and with increasing venom, Conservative Governments have used anti-migrant rhetoric. The government were deliberately hostile to migrants and introduced a policy called a 'hostile environment'. Many West Indian people came to work in the UK. They are known as the Windrush generation, called after the ship that brought one of the earliest groups of workers. When they first came, the West Indies were still part of the British Empire so people came with British passports. These were not rich people and often did not apply for new passports. Suddenly, in the hostile environment, they were expected to prove their citizenship and were denied health care and the right to rent homes. Albert Thompson was just one man affected by the Windrush Scandal.² The 'hostile environment' was

extended to many other groups of migrants and this has resulted in a brutal detention system for those applying to live in the UK. Brexit supporters want the hostile environment applied to applied to EU citizens too.

Cummings of course was the architect and chief strategist of the Brexit project. Cummings advertised for “weirdos and misfits” to join his team in supporting Johnson. This is the team negotiating Brexit.

However, the election was clear. Many people bitterly resent the way the press relentlessly attacked Jeremy Corbyn, but he was defeated. “Get Brexit Done” was the slogan that got Johnson into power. So, we can hope these politicians will do better with trade talks than in the Virus crisis but I fear for the worst.

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Endnotes

- 1 See www.facebook.com/FansSupportingFoodbanks/.
- 2 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoDcRCd9gd0 and www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained for more on this.