

Off The cuff DON MILLIGAN'SApril 10, 2020

**Oh dear . . . I'm just upset
to be honest . . .**

“It's just tragic in the extreme to see the worst social response to a pandemic - one totally exacerbated by the state, the press and capital - but with the blame laid on your neighbours, workers forced to come in to work and kids playing in the fucking park. I'm just upset to be honest.”

THE QUOTE ABOVE comes from my Twitter feed. It echoes many comments from my left-wing friends and acquaintances. It expresses the dismay of people confronted by a situation over which they have little or no control. I share this predicament. Deemed by the NHS as “extremely vulnerable” on April 2, I'm advised to remain wholly isolated at home for at least twelve weeks. The reasoning behind this is, that if I become infected I'm more likely than others to need hospital treatment, so in order to preserve NHS resources, and

myself, I should stay home. I'm sticking with this advice and doing what I'm told by the authorities. What else can I do . . . nothing but obey!

This evidently sticks in the craw of many on the left, as well as many people who are simply averse to the authorities, come what may. In many circumstances this is a healthy instinct, a degree of rebelliousness and sheer bloody-mindedness has stood us all in good stead when fighting oppression and the arrogance of power, which not only 'appears' impervious to reason, but actually is – relying on brute force and arrogance.

Isolated examples of this are widely reported at the moment, from police officers attempting to stop people dawdling on park benches, watching the world go by, reading, or sunning themselves, to a senior police officer threatening to inspect the content of supermarket trolleys for inessential items!

Priti Patel, the right-wing home secretary recently had to rap Nick Addersley, chief constable of Northamptonshire, over the knuckles for such nonsense. So, the state has ordered extreme measures while simultaneously striving to ensure that police forces and individual constables use their judgement in applying what are certainly draconian laws and regulations.

This is akin to the young policeman in normal times who arrested a disabled man for being drunk in charge of his mobility scooter. The magistrate dismissed the case with the suggestion that the policeman's time would have been better spent seeing the drunk safely home to his door. In all circumstances good judgement is required in the application and enforcement of laws, and the state always has difficulty making this intrinsically ambiguous position clear. Police officers always have need of a judicious 'blind eye' in assessing when and when not to stick to the letter of the law.

This modality is the key to 'policing by consent', and is crucial for our 'citizen police force' which does not have the para-military or militia-like powers common in

many other democratic states. Consequently, good judgement and a light-touch is essential in the present situation, if the authorities are to retain the support of the general public in the enforcement of pandemic regulations.

Now, we all know that there are circumstances where 'policing by consent' breaks down entirely and the state deploys the police as a repressive militia against the general public – this happened most notably in the great miners' strike of the eighties – where arbitrary police actions in and around the coal fields were the order of the day. We have also seen something similar in the management and suppression of some, but not all, demonstrations and protests over the last decade. So, there are a number of examples of arbitrary power being exercised by the police, but the present pandemic situation is not one of them. On the whole the police and the general public seem to be on the same page.

Now, let's return to the opening quote from my Twitter feed. The outraged author describes the British government's actions as "the worst social response to a pandemic - one totally exacerbated by the state, the press and capital." The final phrase, "and capital" gives the game away, and explains how we should read the sentiments being expressed. The capitalist class, and their government and state, while not wholly to blame for the outbreak of disease, are responsible for "the worst social response to a pandemic."

Now, I'm scratching my head. Does he (it is a 'he', by the way) mean that others, like the South Korean, the German, or Swedish, capitalist states, or the Chinese party-state, are better than our capitalist state, or does he mean simply that the police enforcement of 'social distancing' regulations are the worst social response. Perhaps he means the failure of the government to accept the advice of the World Health Organisation. irrespective of local conditions and resources?

From other left-wing posts, and conversations with friends on the left, I suspect that he means a bit of both. He probably thinks that the Johnson government have not always responded well or in a timely fashion to the progress of the pandemic, and he decries absolutely the use of special powers to keep us stuck at home in our flats and houses.

He, like Extinction Rebellion activist, Rupert Read, thinks that the government is laying the “blame” on “your neighbours, workers forced to come to work, and kids playing in the fucking park.” Indeed, Read thinks that the government is directly responsible for a “tsunami of deaths”, and is evading its responsibilities by trying to pin the blame for this catastrophe on the general public.

Now, I am not aware of any of this being true. The government is not “blaming” our neighbours, or workers who have to continue going to work, or kids playing in the park, for the pandemic. They are not even “blaming” people who disobey social distancing for the pandemic, but they are saying that those who consciously flout the pandemic regulations might be adding to pressure on the NHS by contributing to the spread of the virus.

This is, I think, indisputable. Social distancing helps to slow the spread of infection. Most of the people on the left railing against the legislation also believe this, which is why they are simultaneously obeying the emergency regulations while cavilling at them at every opportunity from the relative safety of their front rooms. They conjure up the spectacle of the heartless policeman harassing ordinary people, and preventing kids from playing in the park, while they themselves stick religiously to the government’s instructions.

It is, of course, true that the police here in Manchester have broken up dozens of crowded house parties, barbeques, impromptu sports events, and the like, but the couple of kids skate boarding opposite my building yesterday – both two meters apart – were ignored by the passing police car. We really can’t have it both ways, either social distancing

is effective at slowing the rate of infection and giving time for the NHS to adjust, or it is not. If it is effective then there can be no argument against obeying the regulations, or against the police using their good judgement to enforce them.

If, on the other hand, one has a good argument against the social distancing policies of the Tory government then it is incumbent upon those on the left to make their position clear.

It is evident that the government has faced many logistical and practical difficulties with testing, the supply of personal protection equipment, and much else. Indeed, the overall strategy of our government and state might have been grievously flawed. I don't know. I'm not an epidemiologist, nor am I capable of assessing the technical capacity of our biological laboratories, or the quality of logistical planning and implementation in the UK. But I do assume that once this is all over, a thorough and well-informed public debate will take the authorities to task for their failings, and I hope that we'll be able to celebrate the successes, and learn from the mistakes.

In the mean time we should, stick to obeying the instructions of Tory ministers, and keep an eagle eye on the police to make sure that they do not overstep the mark. But, let's have an end to ritual rhetoric about police repression, and the generalised sins of the Tories in power. We'd be better employed thinking about how we're going to respond to the mounting wave of bankruptcies, the unfolding economic slump, and the circumstances of millions of newly unemployed workers.

