

**Fevered Imaginings**

**I STAND ON MY TERRACE** looking down at the deserted street. There is not a soul stirring at the junction of High Street and Church Street in the middle of Manchester, next to the Arndale Shopping Centre. I suppose I'm waiting for something catastrophic to happen. Perhaps I'm waiting for a shambling mob of zombies to come stumbling around the corner. So far, they have yet to make their appearance.

This pandemic is the most peculiar event. The electricity is still on, the Wi-Fi and the phones are working just fine. Ditto the water, and our showers, and toilets. This is not like any disaster movie I've ever seen – the pharmacies, supermarkets, and small food shops are fully stocked. What's more, people for the most part, have not become feral marauders, guns and clubs in hand.

On a truly bizarre note, Charles Windsor, The Prince of Wales, probably one of the most idle men in

the country, has decided to add to the gaiety of the nation, by urging people to go out into the fields and work. His slogan is “Pick for Britain! To this piece of satirical comedy, we can add the news that Medical Detection Dogs have been set to work to wrinkle out the virus in the most unlikely of places. Sadly, it is true that larger numbers of people are dying than usual, but even the dismal daily statistics are not enough to throw one off balance.

I live alone, and have been entirely locked down since March 23<sup>rd</sup>. I don’t anticipate going out until July 1<sup>st</sup>. This is because I’m following the advice of my local NHS Foundation Trust. They wrote to me on April 2, and advised me to “stay home at all times” for twelve weeks. Consequently, I’m now feeling somewhat unmotivated, stranded, becalmed, lost in my imagination.

It seems that I’m not the only one.

People I know have been telling me that they could easily handle the pandemic better than Tory ministers – in fact it is such a simple task that it “could be set as a class project for a group of Year-10 kids.” Others have been arguing that the virus is caused by 5G masts, and still others have been suggesting that the disease has been manufactured by the “Americans” to wreck the Chinese economy, or alternatively, synthesized by the “Chinese” to stimulate an economic meltdown so that the dictators in the Forbidden City can pick up the pieces.

Those of a literal frame of mind, have been so impressed by the potential that this crisis has for revolutionary politics, it has led them to talk of stimulating the “class war”, cancelling rents, and keeping most schools permanently closed in order to prolong the shutdown, and use it to expose the true nature of capitalist relations.

Under capitalism the workers have always been compelled to live in unclean quarters of the towns, where epidemic disease is rife. It was only owing to the dread that they themselves would suffer from these epidemics, that the capitalists introduced certain measures to improve the

sanitation of the areas in which their wage-slaves dwelt ....  
Capitalism was only interested in the protection of public  
health in so far as this was necessary for its own safety.

[Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky,  
*The ABC of Communism*, 1919]

This old quote from Nikolai and Yevgeni is cited from the Spring, “Pandemic Politics”, Issue of *Jacobin*, a rather lavish lefty journal I subscribe to. Consequently, our modern revolutionists argue that the capitalist do not really care about the safety of teachers, schoolkids, and workers being hurried back into work ‘prematurely’. Those of a more anarchic bent, are lining up with Piers Corbyn, and libertarians of all stripes, in the struggle to defend our civil liberties against social distancing regulations, imposed by a government of corporate millionaires.

Others were delighted by Boris Johnson’s close call with the Grim Reaper, and although disappointed by his recovery, have recently had their hopes revived yet again by his failure to face down Keir ‘Forensic’ Starmer, tribune of the people and the aged, in PMQs. They have even been chuckling at the absurd comparisons between the shambling ‘loser’, Boris, and national hero, Winston Churchill.

They have clearly forgotten the Norwegian Campaign, the debacle at Dunkirk, and a string of other disasters, that happened on Churchill’s watch, including the greatest military defeat suffered by the British Empire – the fall of Singapore in February 1942. Catastrophes did not finish Churchill and they won’t finish Boris – in fact the only thing that bugged up Winston was winning the War in Europe, because it enabled the British electorate to throw him out on his ear in July 1945, a month before *VJ Day*.

So, we are beset by fevered imaginings of all sorts, spurred on by the belief that the Tory government is either wicked or incompetent, and probably both.

It is certainly entertaining to see the left – *far*, *near*, *revolutionary*, and *liberal* – giving a free pass to the

owners of care homes. Over the years, as a result of the drive for increasingly slender profits by care home proprietors, and skinflint funding by councils and central government, the entire sector has perpetually teetered on the brink of collapse. It is a clear case of market failure that has been allowed to dawdle on for years. It is a problem of the private sector that neither the Tories nor the Labour Party have done anything about for decades.

Throughout the pandemic the owners of care homes have sought to pile all the blame for the 'excess deaths' suffered by their residents upon the government rather than their own slipshod level of organisation, low wages, poor training, and lack of preparedness. They have refused to share responsibility for the mounting crisis of early mortality with the government and local authorities. They've sided with the media, the socialist left, the SNP and the Labour Party, by washing their hands of responsibility, and unreservedly placing all the blame on Health Secretary, Matt Hancock.

The fact that the Tories have ensured that the NHS has not been overwhelmed, can now be safely ignored. We can forget that large emergency hospitals, equipped with ventilators and intensive care beds, have been constructed at breakneck speed because, fortunately, we have not needed them. Finally, with the help of the Army, logistical arrangements for the effective supply of personal protective equipment to tens of thousands of different addresses have been put in place. This has enabled journalists to move on to berate ministers and scientific advisers about testing. Having discovered that the country did not have the diagnostic capacity to implement a large and robust testing regime early in March, we can now attack the Tories for failing to do the impossible by implementing large-scale testing in March.

And, so we have arrived at 'Gotcha Journalism'. I have no doubt that media folk will rattle on about "speaking truth to power", but it is evident that in a

global crisis of the sort we're experiencing, cheap shots at embattled politicians are not helpful. Particularly, the close monitoring of the mistakes and failings of Tory ministers and their advisors, whilst the opposition is given a free pass. Labour and the SNP, without once offering practical alternatives to the government's actions, in lockdown (or in easing lockdown), have loudly rebuked ministers for their lack of care and responsibility in guarding the nation from infection, disease, and premature death.

One is meant to conclude that Boris Johnson and his ministers are both wicked *and* incompetent.

Then come the desperate musings of the young, 18-24-year-olds, faced with a catastrophic slump, unemployment, insecurity, very low wages, and a serious lack of opportunities to get ahead in any job or career. Younger people are being encouraged by some to think of their present inconveniences as the surrender of their futures to the survival of the very old and frail. This is another version of our present predicament, canvased as *intergenerational conflict*, as if imagining such a thing could save one job, or one young person from a world of lost opportunities.

The problem confronted by the entire working class, the lower middle class, and most young people, is certainly going to be the disappearance of large parts of the economy as we come tip-toeing out of lockdown. High streets will be disheartening with even more shuttered pubs, shops, and restaurants. We will be weighed down with bankruptcies, tax hikes, and the government's attempts to wrestle with the truly enormous debts Rishi Sunak has contracted in his desperate attempt to keep the economy on a more or less even keel.

When we're through the worst, market failure in care homes, and in housing, will have to be tackled as a matter of urgency by the state and local authorities. So too, must the outrageous level of overcrowding on commuter services in and out of our great cities. Working people should no longer put up with being

treated like cattle during the daily commute by bus, tram, tube, or train.

However, until we're through the worst, until we have effective treatments *and/or* a vaccine, we should support the incumbent government in its efforts to get the country safely to the other side of the pandemic. The bitter truth is that the fevered imaginings of those who want to damn Tory ministers up hill and down dale, is that they do not have any practical solutions or better remedies for our predicament than Boris Johnson's government has to offer. Opponents have lots of complaints and criticisms, and lots of suggestions for what should and should not have been done, but no realistic alternative course of action to present.

The reality is that the post mortem on the government's record will have to wait until the dust settles, and knowledge of the virus, and its global impact becomes clearer.