

## State of Emergency



**THE TRULY ASTONISHING** thing about the state of emergency is that it now applies to us all. For some time now, many years in fact, draconian regulations and conditions have applied to asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, demonstrators of one sort or another, the homeless, beggars on the streets, the mentally ill, and all those lingering in the margins.

However, intrinsic to the current state of emergency is the abrogation of everyone's civil liberties and democratic rights.

In bourgeois societies these rights are rhetorically universal. That is, everyone in theory has them, but the ability to actually exercise these rights is not evenly distributed. It is easy to see that the destitute on my street in Manchester do not, even in normal times, have democratic rights or civil liberties which they can exercise.

Now, under the threat of COVID-19, the feckless and disorganised, the idle and well-heeled, the hard

working and the hard pressed, the compliant and the disorderly, all of us, are by law locked-down – our movements, travel arrangements, and our employment, may be regulated and directed by the police. People who deliberately cough or spit in the face of police and other front-line workers face prosecution and imprisonment.

There is no longer any free public space.

To the consternation of the far left, this suspension of our civil liberties has wide public support, not simply amongst the Labour Party and its enthusiastic supporters, but throughout society at large. The deployment of the police against recalcitrant or chaotic elements is widely supported. This is because the authorities have made a series of rational arguments in favour of 'social distancing', and 'self-isolation'. What is more, the government has made substantial moves to ensure that most people, employed and self-employed alike, are protected from the very worst effects of the resulting shut down of much of the economy.

The state is having to rely on the co-operation of both banks and employers to help out, and it is no surprise that some bosses and some institutions are not playing the game. Some banks are charging excessive interest and making unrealistic demands for collateral, some employers are sacking workers or making their staff come to work at the risk to their health, and that of everybody else. Government departments have been slow to respond and official systems are creaking at the seams. Vast numbers of people are going to have to eke out loans from family and friends for months on end before receiving assistance of any kind – the situation is truly appalling.

So, there is no doubt that large numbers of people will suffer, and suffer badly, but paradoxically it is widely recognised that the Tories are doing the best that they can in an unprecedented crisis.

Nevertheless, it is argued by some left-wingers that compliance with the government's advice is so popular and widespread, that emergency powers are

unnecessary. The authorities and the general public seem to disagree, believing that a minority large enough to undermine the self-isolating measures of the rest of us must be suppressed by the police – hopefully using persuasion rather than brute force and fines – but suppressed all the same.

What are we to make of this abandonment of most of our civil liberties?

Well, in the first instance it indicates that millions upon millions of people trust the government. Not only was Boris Johnson recently given an eighty-seat majority in Parliament, but his handling of the situation has earned him widespread respect and support. The government's mistakes, shortages of equipment, slow payment regimes, bureaucratic tangles, logistical difficulties of one sort or another, have not undermined backing or compliance.

Johnson appears, to all intents and purposes, to have chosen his cabinet well and surrounded himself with effective assistants and experts of all sorts. In the context of mass anxiety and alarm, most people have, despite what they might think in normal times, accepted that somebody has to be in charge, and we all have to, in these exceptional circumstances, support the powers-that-be.

Having said this, I think everybody should write to their MPs to ask them to ensure that Parliamentary committees continue to question ministers, and publicly scrutinise government on television and in the press. Although the House of Commons chamber may be 'furloughed' there can be no good reason, technical or otherwise, for allowing the business of the government to be conducted without public oversight.

Free speech has not been suspended, and all those who question the government's strategy must be given a fair hearing, including those, who like climate deniers, wish to argue that the measures taken to stem infection are likely to be worse than the infection itself.

Conspiracy 'theorists' and other eccentrics notwithstanding, it is certainly the case that the

measures taken to slow the spread of disease, improve the chances of the NHS, advance testing, and develop vaccines, will result in a deep recession and possibly even a slump. Mass unemployment is already a fact here in the UK, in the US, and elsewhere. The International Monetary Fund has already declared that we are all heading into a global recession. The G20 has said it will attempt to ameliorate the situation by pumping five trillion dollars into the world economy.

We know that tens of thousands of businesses in the UK will not reopen, and masses of workers will be unemployed at the end of this emergency. Boris Johnson will have to do rather more than exercise his rhetorical optimism and boosterism. Indeed, planning for the recovery needs to start now, and we need to know what the government has in mind.

The structural damage that the state of emergency is doing, and will do, to the economy needs to be closely analysed. The massive state intervention supervised by the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, cannot be simply turned off, once we have turned the corner. Massive state investments will have to continue in order to restore the operation of the market, and to deal with those sectors where the market fails, like housing, health, education, and social care.

This does not in any sense prefigure some kind of socialist planning or the restoration of the 'post-war consensus' of the fifties and sixties – organised labour and the trade union movement is far too weak for that. In any event capitalism has always needed an effective state. Indeed, since the inception of commercial society at the end of the seventeenth century the state has got larger and larger. As capitalism has developed, the state's relationship with business, with social and physical infrastructure, and the maintenance of public order, has, step-by-step, become increasingly articulate and intrusive.

Jeremy Corbyn, clutching at straws as usual, is using the virus to claim that the crisis vindicates Labour's *Manifesto* spending plans. Making it clear

that only social democrats, left-wing fantasists, including the cheer-leaders to the left of Momentum, and the contemptable 'luxury communists' over at Novara Media, could think that massive state involvement in economic life in any sense prefigures a socialist or communist future. The Tory government's use of the massive resources of the state to mitigate the effects of the pandemic has got nothing to do with Labour policy, nothing at all.

It is patently absurd to imagine that socialism is being implemented by the Tories, as a crisis measure. Socialism or communism, call it what you will, cannot be delivered by the state; not by this state, nor indeed, by any state. The historical experience of the twentieth century leaves no room for doubt on this matter.

If we are ever to gain socialism it will not be bequeathed to us by the managerialists and state-socialists of the left, but only by the growth of a preparedness amongst the mass of working people to control and run the enterprises and services where they work. Only if we can devise means for the popular planning of the economy as a whole can we move progressively beyond the demands of commerce and commercial society.

This utopian scheme, for that is what communism is, cannot be delivered by the Labour Party or any of the managers and advocates of state-socialism.

In the here and now, the suspension of many of our civil liberties is the result of popular compliance and support for the government regardless of confusion, logistical muddle, and slipshod planning. What is vitally important is to keep the government, and the authorities more generally, under the close eye of public scrutiny. Our freedom of speech and publication has not been restricted, and we need to use it in order to make clear that our compliance with emergency regulations is voluntary – this needs to be kept uppermost in the minds of the government and police alike. It is not only voluntary in essence, it is also temporary, and we will dispense with it as soon as it's safe to do so.