

Where's the accountability?

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Reflecting on life in a time of Covid, one of the key things many of us have learnt is humility. The challenges presented by a viral pandemic illustrate how delicately balanced are both our lives and the key foundations and principles on which they rely. In spite of the uphill struggle we face, and the anxiety caused by a crisis without any clear end date, I do have genuine optimism that come the other side we will be a more compassionate and considerate nation.

It is of course too much to hope that this humility should be a universal phenomenon. This was illustrated quite neatly by the weeks top 'Covidiot', Pret founder Julian Metcalf, who in an interview with the Daily Mail claimed we risk not recovering from a second lockdown "for the sake of a few thousand old and vulnerable people"[\[i\]](#). This of course resulted in an outpouring of disgust as Twitter was set alight by people pledging to never again shop at Pret.

Pret was quick to respond, distancing itself from the comments and informing the outraged that Mr Metcalf had not run the business for 10 years. The possibility of a picket on their trade understandably caused some concern considering the hit already taken from Lockdown Pt 1[\[ii\]](#).

This presents an interesting phenomenon we see regularly in Brexit Britain. The dynamic is simple; a privileged individual with little credibility or expertise in the field on which they are commentating makes a statement or proposes an action for which the outcome has little direct repercussions. Instead, the chaos caused by their ill-timed and ill-conceived intervention is left to those ill-resourced to weather any storm; in this case a set of beleaguered Pret employees facing an already fraught 2020.

In the week it was announced that the rise in Covid cases was outpacing the Government's predicted worst-case scenario, the economist Thiemo Fetzer (@fetzert) published an analysis of the impact of Rishi Sunak's eat-out-to-help-out scheme[\[iii\]](#). This analysis surmised that encouraging people to eat out was responsible for 8-

17% of new local infection clusters. So not only has the Treasury here picked up bill for an estimated £522 bn, but directly contributed toward the necessity for Lockdown Pt 2.

This sits on top of a wider series of mistakes made by the Government in the handling of both Covid and the ongoing Brexit saga. Flip-flopping over Covid interventions, often at the cost of humiliation placed on Johnson by either the badgering of Keir Starmer or tweeting of Marcus Rashford, has run alongside a growing dossier alleging cronyism and corruption within the government^[iv]. At the same time, preparations for the stark realities of an increasingly likely hard Brexit are expected to be superseded by opportunities presented through an increasing number of lorry parks popping up nationwide and the imagined savings on Soy(a) Sauce (as @tradegov advised during this week's Great British Bake-Off).

Hanging over all this is an enduring problem of a lack of accountability. The seeming absence of responsible government at a time of such high stakes, and one which so callously forsakes commitments for 'levelling-up' around the now 'Blue Wall' areas, illustrates the most venal form on entitlement which has festered Westminster and the corridors of power since the days of Robert Walpole (himself a Cambridge man). As the disaffected voices ever increase against the catalogue of failures Johnson has overseen, a constant here is the failures of the British electoral system and need for electoral reform to ensure more representative, and therefore effective government.

Donald Trump, who may himself be inciting civil war by the time this is published, is once quoted as having said he could commit murder and still have large numbers vote for him. In many senses, this is absolutely right. At a conference in Italy last year, an American academic told me how deeply embedded are the Republican and Democrat camps. He mentioned regular fallings out with close colleagues on this basis; despite relatively close agreements on most issues, neither could ever cross that particular Rubicon.

What we get for this unquestioning patronage is a set of principles which are in many events duly progressed by fundamentally inadequate individuals. Those of a certain age will remember full well the 'tub-of-lard' episode of Have I Got News For You, the comestible

duly standing in for an absent Roy Hattersley. In many cases this strategy could be applied to the electoral process, the right rosette on any inanimate object winning in a safe seat. How else can one explain Nadine Dorries or Mark Francois?

The absence of such legitimate scrutiny therefore requires governments to undertake this as a part of the governing process. But this seems to be a step too far for Johnson's cabinet in their delusions of adequacy. Instead, calls for reviews and to learn lessons fast during a time of crisis are disregarded under a vestige the time for questions will come after the pandemic.

It is therefore worth taking a moment to reflect on the EHRC's report on anti-semitism in the Labour Party. This has come at something of an inopportune moment for Labour, just as they had taken a lead in the polls. The findings, and resultant fallout with Jeremy Corbyn's suspension from the Party, will of course be politicised and use to discredit Labour and question their electoral credentials.

To frame the report in this way would be a mistake. It is instead indicative of the level of scrutiny to which a competent and confident (aspiring) government should expose themselves, and one the Conservative's should be willing to undertake in the wake of accusations of institutional islamophobia^[v], alongside growing calls for reviews on their Covid response and subsequent use of public contracting.

It's only at this point, where governments are open to scrutiny based on performance over rhetoric, that we will start seeing the reintroduction of legitimate accountability in British politics.

[i] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/pret-a-manger-itsu-founder-lockdown-shut-save-lives-julian-metcalf-b1421643.html?utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=Social&utm_content=Echobox&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1604006680

[ii] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/pret-a-manger-job-cuts-coronavirus-lockdown-b1074825.html>

[iii] Fetzer, T. (2020) Subsidizing the spread of COVID19: Evidence from the UK's eat-out-to-help-out scheme bit.ly/3ed5Slo

[iv] <https://goodlawproject.org/news/special-procurement-channels/>

[v] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/27/sayeeda-warsitory-islamophobia-muslim-prejudice-investigation>