

State of the Unions

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

"Nobody else here baby

"No-one else here to blame

"No-one to point the finger

"It's just you and me and the rain...

['If God Will Send His Angels'](#), U2

By the time that Joe Biden is inaugurated as US President on January 20th the United States will have long passed the grim milestone of 400,000 Covid-19 (attributed) deaths, whilst here in the UK we will likely have reached 90,000 deaths. Not that the rest of Europe has fared much better, with Germany, France, Spain and Italy all amidst the top 20 countries for deaths attributable to the pandemic. Worldwide, the SARS-Cov2 virus responsible for the pandemic has infected over 95 million people and claimed more than 2 million lives, as shown in the table below.

Deaths attributable to Covid-19 as at January 18th 2021 by Country (top 20)

Country	Number of deaths
USA	407,202
Brazil	209,868
India	152,456
Mexico	140,704
UK	89,261
Italy	82,177
France	70,283
Russia	65,566
Iran	56,803
Spain	53,314
Colombia	48,631
Germany	47,440
Argentina	45,407
Peru	38,871
South Africa	37,105
Poland	33,355
Indonesia	25,987
Turkey	23,997
Ukraine	20,802
Belgium	20,435
World total	2,039,706

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

When one turns to deaths per capita, the poor performance of the United Kingdom in combatting Covid-19 is particularly borne into light, with the UK being sixth in the world for death rate per million of population, at some 1,333 deaths per million (higher than that of the US at 1,205; the problematic nature of compiling such statistics notwithstanding).^[1]

For religious fundamentalists of course, the pandemic is a key sign that the “End of Days” or “Rapture” or “Armageddon” is near, with the *Book of Revelations* ascribing plague (Pestilence) as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (alongside War, Famine and Death). In this vein, according to the Pew Research Centre, some 23% of Americans believe that Jesus would return to the Earth by 2050, whilst another 18% think that He probably will.^[2]

In general, the continuing religiosity of the US stands in stark contrast to other developed countries, with some 53% of US citizens stating that religion was “very important” to their lives during 2018. Whereas comparable figures for Europe and Australasia range in the order of 10-20% (with the UK for example at 10%).[\[3\]](#)

And white Evangelicals certainly made up a significant proportion of supporters of disgraced US (ex-) President Donald Trump, with a 2016 exit poll suggesting they comprised 46% of those who voted for him as opposed to only 9% for Hilary Clinton.[\[4\]](#) Trump, despite his own lack of any manifest religious belief was only too happy to exploit the beliefs of these individuals, with their innate conservatism and suspicion of ‘Big Government’. Suffice to say, these individuals were likely to be less educated, on lower incomes and older than their non-evangelical counterparts.

Appeals to ‘unity’ by Joe Biden in the face of such views will be difficult at best, as the recent violence at the US Capitol demonstrates, and the ever present threat of more acts of violence by the more extremist elements amongst Trump’s supporters as Biden’s inauguration takes place only heightens the polarisation of US society.

Not that he has any choice but to engage with the more moderate of his opponents, with most legislative bills requiring a 60-40 majority to pass. The Democrats’ grip on the US Senate is wafer-thin, relying as it does on the casting vote of Vice-President Kamala Harris, and therefore susceptible to undue influence by conservative-leaning democrats such as Joe Manchin from West Virginia, whose well-attested views on climate change, energy and the soon to be put forward fiscal stimulus package could put him at odds with the Biden administration.[\[5\]](#)

With Biden’s \$1.9 trillion fiscal stimulus package designed to combat Covid-19 providing \$1 billion for US households and direct payments of \$1,400 for all US citizens (and some \$415 billion directly against the pandemic and a further \$440 billion for SMEs)[\[6\]](#), it will be interesting to say the least to see how this fares over the coming weeks and months.

Meanwhile, back on this side of the Pond, as Brexit disruption starts to bite, the UK continues to stumble on in the grip of the Government’s

third national lockdown (as applicable to England). It has displayed continued manifest failings in the area of test-and-trace, procurement on PPE (with an additional £15 billion allocated to this in the 2020 Spending Review alone, one could severely question value-for-money here)[7] and failure to implement lockdowns in a timely manner.

In addition, the unwillingness to augment statutory sick pay or provide adequate financial support for non-employees has forced many to keep working when ill. This in turn has exacerbated the impact of the pandemic and coming on top of ten years of Conservative-led austerity, which as our own research has demonstrated, has impacted unduly on the poor and vulnerable.[8]

The one bright spot now is in terms of the rollout of vaccines against the virus, with roll-outs now proceeding at a prodigious pace (983,519 in terms of weekly first-dose vaccinations as at 10th January) which has to date seen some 6.1% of the UK population receiving a first dose.[9] Of course, the scale of vaccinations will have to significantly increase if a majority of the UK population (total: 66,830,000) is to be covered over the next couple of months. This suggests that the current lockdown is unlikely to be significantly eased before Easter at the earliest.

A similar scenario faces the rest of the world. As such, to close on a faint note of optimism, from the same U2 song:

“It’s the stuff, it’s the stuff of country songs

“But I guess it was something to go on.....

[1] <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/>

[2] <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/donald-trump-christians-fundamentalists-end-times-rapture-1083131/>

[3] <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/>

[4] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/06/why-trump-is-reliant-on-white-evangelicals/>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/17/joe-manchin-democrat-split-senate-leverage>

[6] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-55670801>

[7] <https://theconversation.com/drafts/150875/edit>

[8] <https://bcuassets.blob.core.windows.net/docs/coronavirus-and-a-universal-basic-incomev7-132345468703159905.pdf>

[9] On the 17th January alone, 225,407 people received a first dose. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/18/coronavirus-uk-covid-cases-and-deaths-today>