

When Incompetence Becomes a Matter of Life and Death

Dr. Steven McCabe

It's strange that, until Tuesday evening, how quiet the last week or so has been. In fact, beyond the normal flim-flam of government, the major story in the last week has been the intention to deprive 'middle-class' users of class A drugs of privileges including their driving licence and passport (Grierson, 2021).

As is explained in Grierson's article by a quote from the Sun on Sunday which interviewed the Prime Minister, such sanctions already exist against, for instances, parents failing to pay child maintenance as well as banning orders for football hooligans.

What's especially intriguing is that with a backdrop of rapidly rising inflation and the threat of the latest phase of Covid-19, the government should explicitly target middle class users of drugs? After all, it's not as if some of those sitting around the Cabinet table have not consumed, for example, cocaine, in the past?

There's no doubt that drugs are a dreadful curse upon society and that those who use them are indirectly responsible for the misery and lawlessness accompanying their production and supply. The fact that deaths due to drug poisoning deaths having risen by almost 80% since 2012 to a record high is a bald statistic which hides the pain and suffering of the families of those who've died.

Nonetheless, dealing with drugs is hardly a new problem and, as with all illicit substances, there's a network of supply and distribution which, for some, is highly lucrative. However, as anyone who's seen how cocaine, in Columbia, and poppies, in Afghanistan, are grown, this is usually carried out by those on subsistence (Woody, 2017; Felbab-Brown, 2021).

Depriving those engaging in particular activities, considered to be nefarious and anti-social, of certain liberties is not novel either. What's notable about this policy is the explicit targeting of those who are middle-class.

Cynics might claim that following stories of sleaze and apparent contempt of those who put their trust in this government, especially former Labour voters in areas in which there's a sense of deprivation and a feeling of having been 'left behind', this is an attempt to reset the narrative so as to give the impression of taking on the rich.

That a story coincidentally emerged over the weekend of an investigation being carried out of drug use in Westminster, after 11 out of 12 lavatories at Westminster were found to contain traces of cocaine, including those close to offices of the PM and his Home Secretary might, in normal circumstances, add to the government's embarrassment.

An anonymous writer in The Sunday Times (2021), in an article titled 'It's common to see messed-up people wandering the halls', indicates that amongst those in power and in whom we put our trust find it difficult to get through the day without prodigious use of drugs.

Though I have absolutely zero experience of working, knowingly, with those addicted to drugs, and whilst I am deeply sympathetic to the plight of such individuals, it's hard to believe the sort of behaviour suggested by this anonymous source is typical of the vast majority of organisations outside of Westminster.

The question that may be asked, who is middle class?

Helpfully, OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), define middle class as a person earning between 75% to 200% of whatever the median income for a particular country is. Currently, median income for the UK is £31,285 which means that if the OECD definition is used, the salary range would be between £23,463.75 to £62,570.

As many will point out, being at the lower end of this income range would hardly suggest someone wealthy. Moreover, anyone earning over the upper limit, though accepting they may be comfortable, will probably argue they're not rich.

There's something more insidious going on which is an apparent desire to pretend that alteration to policing and the justice system will transform society. Some critics go further.

Victoria Richards, writing in *The Independent*, believes that it is not just those who actively use drugs who need to be afraid with the measures that were proposed by the PM over the weekend:

"We should all be afraid because they're draconian to the point of being Orwellian; we should be afraid because they herald a sinister squeeze on our collective freedoms. We should be very afraid because – in threatening power over our passports, these measures are not actually about drugs at all, but an assault on the very nature of what it means to belong."

As Richards also points out, Home Secretary Priti "quietly" included a clause in Nationality and Borders Bill allowing for the government to strip individuals of British citizenship without warning. Notably, this can be done retrospectively which means that even those who have managed to claim asylum will constantly be in fear of having their right to remain taken away from them.

Undoubtedly this sort of 'red meat' plays well among those who, it's alleged, resent the ability of those not 'from here' to be allowed to enter the UK and enjoy resources that should rightfully be theirs. As such it seems the Brexit continues to be used as a way to garner support, just to a different tune.

That those who come to this country may be fleeing persecution, torture and, in many cases, death, matters not a jot. This is desperately sad for a country with such a long tradition of being somewhere those who were oppressed believed would offer sanctuary and safety.

Arguably, the most tragic story to emerge this week is the way in which the evacuation of Afghani people fleeing the country prior to the takeover by the Taliban was handled (Hughes, 2021). Raphael Marshall, who was a desk officer in London, working for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, states that former foreign secretary Dominic Raab "did not fully understand the situation".

Moreover, according to Marshall in evidence to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) permanent secretary, Sir Phillip Barton, at the end of August, Raab, who did not end his holiday for another 11 days when the crisis developed (Tapsfield and Wilcock, 2021), was in control of a department in which there was "bureaucratic chaos", lack of planning and a coherent strategy.

What is most dreadful, according to Marshall is that of the 75,000 and 150,000 evacuation applications by Afghans, many whom were interpreters and assisted the British during their time following the invasion in the aftermath of 9/11, it is believed that fewer than 5% were able to get out of the country before the Taliban assumed power. In evidence to the foreign affairs committee, Marshall contends that, "It is clear that some of those left behind have since been murdered by the Taliban."

Sadly, in the midst of a crisis which developed with immense speed following the overnight withdrawal of American troops by President Joe Biden, there may be an argument of an individual, Raab, put into an impossible situation. However, his apparent nonchalance and lack of sense of duty to those who, knowingly, put their lives on the line to provide support whilst this country was attempting to bring reform and improvement to the lives of millions of Afghani people should be something he is ashamed of.

Unfortunately, shame – not to mention resignations – seems not to be within the vocabulary of the current government. It's worth remembering that in April 2018, less than four years ago, Amber Rudd, who was Home Secretary, resigned because, as she admitted, she'd "inadvertently misled" MPs over targets for removing illegal immigrants.

Though there is no doubt this was extremely serious, it should be stressed that the information came from data compiled by staff the Home Office. More crucially, and though adding to suffering of those affected, Rudd's misinformation, when judged against the consequences of Rabb's incompetence would appear far less serious.

As the second anniversary of the general election win of the current government occurs next week, we bear in mind that this was an administration which came to power to 'Get Brexit done'. Many assert that beyond simple sloganeering this government has shown itself incapable of dealing with the normal functioning of a democratic country, let alone coping with the impact of a once in a century pandemic that's led to the premature deaths of over 146,000 as well as the awarding of contracts to cope with the crisis which is decidedly questionable though some simply state corrupt (Brookes, 2021).

There are some who suggest that what we are seeing is the current government, and opposition, following the tumult of recent tears, engaging in restoration of the old ways (Guardian, 2021). Others argue that the distrust and anger demonstrated by the PM and French President Emmanuel Macron in recent months has served no one well, least of all those who had hoped for improvement in their prospects after the UK's departure from the EU and urgent reproachment is required (McRae, 2021).

However, it seems, past sins are coming to haunt Boris Johnson's government. The latest example of this is the video which emerged on Tuesday evening showing No 10 aides laughing about a Christmas party during Covid restrictions last year, suggests contempt for the rules that were intended to keep us safe and save lives. This development has touched a very raw nerve and, coming so soon after the sleaze allegations, may do more harm to this government's reputation and sense of incompetence than previous scandals, such as Dominic Cummings' trip to Barnard Castle, did.

There's a sense, not for the first time, of an administration totally out of touch with the day-to-day pressures of citizens. It was Roman philosopher, Augustine of Hippo (354 430) who stated, *Noli foras ire, in teipsum reddi; in interiore homine habitat veritas*, "Don't lose yourself, return to you, inside of you lives the truth"

It's tempting to state that the Johnson administration seem unwilling to confront the reality that its incompetence has costs many thousands of lives in this country and beyond.

In the meantime, it must sincerely be hoped, there is a conscious effort to restore the values that made all those who enjoy the privilege of being British to feel proud of their nationality. A good start would be not engaging in politics which places so little importance on the lives of anyone, regardless of where they come from.

Unfortunately, like the addicts this government seem determined to use as their latest electoral tactic to win votes, it will find it difficult to wean themselves off the short-term hits it so clearly enjoys by petty posturing intended to appeal to those whose votes were instrumental in winning the general election two years ago.

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