

## Stuart's Political Diary, July 2020

By Stuart Morgan-Ayrs

It has taken me almost a week to try to puzzle out why I have had a form of writer's block in regard to my diary for this issue. Usually I am brimming with ideas, and have to pare them down into something coherent. This time I sat down several times to either begin writing, or to choose reference material, and then wandered off again. Lock-down Syndrome, perhaps? That was, after all, my initial conclusion.

After about a week, however, on a rainy Sunday morning in Scotland, I realised the truth. Politics has actually become so utterly insane, that it is a parody of itself. The sheer volume of 'stupid' is overwhelming, and makes even a die-hard politico like myself want to wince and either retreat under the duvet, or disappear to a beach abroad. Indeed, it was probably the achievement of finally managing to book a week away in the sun yesterday that possibly shook something loose in my skull! (NB: since then, the Scottish First Minister has excluded travel to Spain and has thus scuppered my plans.) Remarkably, it would appear that this trait is not just in the realm of the usual suspects, but is beginning to spread like some irritating shadow pandemic, following in the footsteps of the dreadful COVID-19 virus. Before I begin, please believe me that I find all politics at the moment equally disheartening, and therefore if I have found fault within your 'tribe' then, honestly, yours is in good company.

In my last column I outlined the known blunders of the UK government in dealing with COVID-19 so far. Since then, Spanish scientists in Barcelona have found traces of the virus in sewage dating back to March 2019 (Badcock, 2020), and further sewage traces have been found in Italy from December 2019 (BBC, 2020) and from Brazil in November 2019 (Thomas, 2020), making the official line about

its spread from a December outbreak seemingly impossible. This was followed by another apparent outbreak in China in June (2020), again in a food market, this time near the capital.

In all the confusion of how it happened, why and when, various governments around the world began to plan the process of ending lock-down. Both the US and UK governments, whose countries were nowhere near as far along in the infection spread as other countries like Germany and Italy, were not to be left behind. Even though the infection rates and number of deaths were still worryingly high, both governments began the unlock process. Thankfully so far in the UK, there have been few negative consequences in terms of infection rates, with some local spikes in rates, one in Merthyr (South Wales) due to infection at a meat plant, and a more complex one in Leicester linked to slave labour textile 'sweat shops' (de Ferrer, 2020) leading to a local lock-down. Indeed, other areas worldwide are introducing limited local lock-downs, notably in Germany near another meat plant, and as of yesterday as I write (mid-July), in Catalonia. One theory is that the temperature in meat plants is particularly encouraging to COVID-19 spread (PA Science, 2020).

The USA, however, appears to be headed for a major disaster with the first state to 'unlock', Texas (a place close to my heart because of friends there), now seeing very high infection rates, and similar trends forecast elsewhere (*New York Times*, 2020). I am sure all our thoughts are with our cousins over the pond in this terrible crisis, as well as with all those other countries around the world and here at home. A British scientist has now proposed the idea that COVID-19 is not a new virus at all, but rather a

worldwide virus in animals, that has just switched from dormant to active as a possible result of environmental conditions (PA Science, 2020). This might therefore explain the odd spread patterns, and reported different strains.

Meanwhile, the UK unlock seems to be uncoordinated at best, bizarre at worst. Inter-devolved nation politics have begun to rear up and cause distinct differences in the unlock process, with Scotland and Wales in particular lagging behind England in easing restrictions. The positive side for Scotland is now a far lower rate of infection than England; the downside is the friction that this causes between nations, and in the local population. Opinion polls in Scotland show a high approval rate, while local parks are characterised with drunken youths defecating and fighting outdoors (Hay, 2020) because the public toilets are closed 'for health reasons'.

Here lies one of the first bizarre political decisions, readily visible in Scotland, of take-away pub service and off licences doing a brisk trade in alcohol, parks being open, but no toilet facilities being made available. As the article by Hay reports, things continued to worsen when pub gardens opened. Apparently everyone is shocked at urine, faeces and litter covering the parks as a result, when surely a tiny bit of joined-up thinking might have predicted the need for toilet facilities! In other parts of the UK, similar scenes have been noted, including illegal raves around London.

Trades and areas of industry have been encouraged to return to work, while we 'stay alert' to the presence of a minuscule virus invisible to the naked eye. However, who is allowed to return, and when, appears to be rather random. Wonderful for people who (unlike the author) still have hair that the hairdressers are reopening. Great for those with back pain or injuries (including the author) that physiotherapists can practise again. But though physiotherapists who do body work, and hair dressers who obviously touch their clients, could return to work, complementary and

psychological therapies had been forgotten. These 'close contact' services had to remain closed until further notice, despite their close relatives being allowed to reopen.

To be clear, podiatrists and physiotherapists, who are statutorily registered under the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), were back, but massage and other physical therapists, not to mention psychological therapists under the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) Accredited Register schemes, were not. Only on Friday the 10<sup>th</sup>, after furious industry lobbying, did reopening dates emerge for these professions, still omitting contact therapies in Scotland. At a time of terrible strain mentally and physically, one might have thought that getting the complementary and psychological health professions back up and running might actually have been a priority.

Another priority for many, including myself, for the interests of sanity includes the ability to get away for a few days' holiday. Initially, of course, there was the real objection of containing the virus and ensuring safety; but then it became clear that the infection rate was actually lower in most destinations for UK tourists than back home. Just consider this for a moment: it is probably safer sitting on a beach, in UV-rich sun, in the open air, in, say, Spain, than it is remaining in rainy old Blighty. As several scientists have said on TV, UV light kills the virus, and spread outdoors is negligible, and the actual infection rate is less in many other countries.

After due consideration, the Westminster government realised the obvious, and responded with the 'air bridges' scheme, where it drew up a list of countries it would like us all to be able to visit, and proposed dropping the quarantine restrictions on return from them. So far so good – only they neither consulted the other countries, nor the devolved home national governments. The result was that Greece initially declined to be a part of it, and Scotland

and Wales were sitting on their hands in protest at not being consulted.

Meanwhile, no column mentioning political stupidity would be complete without referencing everyone's favourite, 'The Donald' (aka the president of the United States). Not content with initial ineptitude in handling the fallout from the George Floyd killing and subsequent other deaths, the president had security forces clear a path from the Whitehouse to a local church, using what most people have considered unreasonable force to move peaceful protesters (Gittleston & Phelps, 2020). Trump then stood outside the church, holding a bible upside down as a photo opportunity, before returning to the Whitehouse. This is allegedly to offset the bad optics of having been cowering in the bunker previously because of the protesters outside. At a time when the USA doubtless needs strong leadership to unite the nation and resolve inter-racial issues, it would appear our friends across the ocean are getting yet more rhetoric and division from their leader.

Around the world, two countries heavily affected by the COVID-19 virus, India and China, are edging uncomfortably close to conflict along their long border (Topgyal, 2020). The border is not settled, instead having a 'Line of Actual Control' after previous fighting between their military forces. An optimistic assessment is that this is an opportunity for China to showcase its brand new tanks, mobile artillery and fighter jets for potential export sales, and they do not actually intend to use them; but with both sides expanding their forces on the border, and both having advanced weaponry and nuclear capability, the situation is dangerous. Making matters even more complex is the investment by China in a Pakistani port so that Chinese warships can dock there, and the potential involvement of the USA, who have now sent three carrier groups to the wider area.

In the interests of balance, and having criticised the Conservative Government, the devolved administrations, and several foreign

governments, it is only fair I mention someone from the political left in this article, Rebecca Long-Bailey. Freshly re-minted as a loyal shadow cabinet minister under Keir Starmer, the new Labour leader, it might have been reasonable to expect that she would throw herself into the new role and rebuild her reputation, which some have argued had been dented by her closeness to the previous leader Jeremy Corbyn, and the incessant issues around anti-Semitism under his leadership.

Now I honestly have no idea whether Long-Bailey has any anti-Semitic leanings or not, and I am inclined to want to believe her when she says she does not. But why, oh why, would someone who has that question mark around them be so foolhardy as to re-tweet a message containing a conspiracy theory alleging Israeli security force techniques were used in the death of George Floyd (Walker, Stewart & Carrell, 2020). Surely anyone's internal radar would be screaming 'hot potato, back away'?

Unfortunately for Ms Long-Bailey, the theory appears to be total nonsense, was later retracted by the original author Maxine Peake, and anyone who knows anything about close combat methods will tell you that there is no 'Israeli' style of restraint or combat. Their primary style, Krav Maga, is a hybrid of styles from other sources around the world, and security forces, martial art instructors and police the world over train and cross-train in a rich mixture of styles, and techniques are often common to multiple sources.

As a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan who has cross-trained in multiple styles in over 30 years (including Krav Maga), and specialised in military-style close combat, the author can attest that kneeling on someone's neck is common to all sorts of styles, probably most obviously Brazilian and Japanese jitsu styles. Should we perhaps accuse Japan or Brazil of being involved? Unfortunately Ms Long Bailey merits inclusion in this article not just for the sake of political balance, but because in my view this was a monumental failure of judgement, even if it was not conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism. Meanwhile she was

under attack for not having a coherent 'back to school' policy in response to COVID-19, which after all was her day job. If you can't resist re-tweeting a silly conspiracy theory while your work remains undone, maybe you should go!

Perhaps the saddest side-effect of this unnecessary distraction is that it takes the attention away from current Israeli government expansions into Palestinian territory (al Jazerra, 2020), and may result in it being harder for people to speak up about it for fear of being linked to irrational conspiracy theories or other bias. On the positive side, perhaps this signifies the Labour Party moving back into electable territory and finally taking a firm hand with the behaviour of their elected members.

I honestly thought that Ms Long-Bailey had run away with it, and been the most idiotic example of political behaviour; but then just before sending in my draft, not just one but two late contenders ripped the prize away from her. First, our fearless leader Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, Prime Minister extraordinaire, managed to blame care workers in part for the COVID-19 crisis in care homes. Not content to have been leader of a government to set inappropriate standards for care homes and NHS referral / discharge to them in the time of crisis, and managing to restrict the PPE they were able to receive, the Prime Minister now blamed the workers themselves and later refused to apologise (Forrest, 2020).

And finally, the winner, for those of us living in Scotland at least, was First Minister Nicola Surgeon's decision to firstly delay opening up air routes, and then, belatedly, to open up pretty much all of those England opened, but not Spain (Fetherstone & Elliot, 2020). Spain, the destination most Scottish voters wish to visit, which although two regions have locked down, otherwise has recovered well, and which has resorts like the Canary Islands, which have had very few cases at all. Never mind that we can go to Germany, whose inhabitants have been enthusiastically visiting Spain for about two weeks, France, with a common border, and of

course our English neighbours will be travelling back and fore. It makes little sense, and does not – to this author at least – appear to be anywhere near 'following the science'. Despite this, there have been calls for a national 'Clap for Nicola' on her birthday (Pagan, 2020), something this author happily abstained from!

So wherever you are, whether back to work face to face, or still working remotely, surviving 'blended learning' or happily retired, please stay safe, and rather than 'Don't let the Bed Bugs Bite', please don't let the politicians drive you to distraction!

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### SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“The learned man is stupid when he relies on books, on knowledge and on authority to give him understanding... To understand *ourselves* is both the beginning and the end of education.”

**J. Krishnamurti** (1895–1986)