

We're all in this together

"We're all in this together". We have all heard Tories trot this one out, usually when government cutbacks, below inflation pay awards and benefit freezes are in the offing.

In many ways it is the 21st century soundbite equivalent of one nation conservatism first floated by Benjamin Disraeli in the late 1860's and which has periodically resurfaced in Conservative Party political rhetoric. Originally devised to attract working class voters it's based on three principles: conservation of traditional values and institutions; the importance of a paternalistic approach to the transfer of wealth and social benefit from rich to poor; and, the notion that we all have obligations towards each other.

The one nation tory was almost obliterated during the Thatcher era, but allegedly enjoyed a revival under David Cameron who saw himself as one and said Disraeli was his favourite politician. The results were disappointing.

Although we were told at the time that "we are all in this together", it didn't really feel like it as the twin policies of Austerity and the Big Society crashed through what little remained of social cohesion. The Big Society, far from preserving institutions, withdrew government support from libraries, day centres and sports facilities expecting the voluntary sector to pick up the tab.

As for a paternalistic transfer of wealth and social benefit from rich to poor, this was reversed, fiscal policy being predicated on a bizarre notion that the best way to incentivise wealthy people is to give them more and the best way to incentivise poor people is to give them less. As a result taxation on high incomes was reduced and benefits were frozen.

The callous lack of concern for the widespread long term mental and physical distress these policies caused in many parts of society seriously undermined the notion that we all have obligations towards each other.

Now we are in the phantasy world of Bozzie who, when Covid started to run out of control, also had the barefaced cheek to say "we are all in this together". Yet again actions have failed to match rhetoric.

To start with we weren't even all in lockdown together as Rasputin graphically demonstrated. Then while funerals and weddings were limited to 10 attendees it was proposed that hunting parties could be as large as 30 and we are now facing a public sector wage freeze which will hit the key workers Boris was recently applauding from the doorstep of number 10. So much for those obligations towards each other.

The chancellor recently told us that there will be no tax increases, even for the wealthy despite the need for the wage freeze, and benefit freezes are now under discussion in complete disregard of the fact that 23% of the UK now lives below the poverty line¹. This is the same chancellor who apparently opted not to disclose that his wife is wealthier than the Queen.

At the other end of the wealth spectrum the government issued over £1 billion in government contracts to the private sector during the first two months of lockdown without any of the usual scrutiny. One, for Covid testing kits, worth £133 million was awarded to Randox Health who pay

Conservative MP Owen Paterson £100,000/yr for consultancy servicesⁱⁱ. Two months later the testing kits Randox supplied were withdrawn as potentially dangerous.

As the pandemic has unfolded the apparent disregard for the public service ethic seems to have worsened. Take Test and Trace as an example. Although Dido Harding has been placed in charge despite a complete lack of experience of public health this is actually less surprising than it first seems when you realise that she is: a Tory peer; a friend of David Cameron; and, sits on the board of the Jockey Club. You might wonder why her role in the Jockey Club is relevant. Well, the Minister for Health represents the home of racing, Newmarket, as MP and has received around £350,000 in donations from wealthy racing interests during his career. Just to close the loop, the Grand National is actually called the Randox Health Grand National!

All of this seems far removed from the upholding of traditional values and institutions, but perhaps I am being naïve in thinking this. Possibly this is how our governing elites have always behaved.

So if all this is just business as usual, why is it worth blogging about? Well, there are fundamental differences between historical insider dealing and what goes on today. Firstly I did not need to conduct a Washington Post type investigative journalism marathon to uncover the details outlined above. They are all very much in the public domain. Secondly, in the past such details entering the public domain would have resulted in apologies, resignations and possibly even court cases.

But today it seems to make no difference to the people at the centre of these outrages. To all intents and purposes it looks as if they both choose, and are allowed, to completely ignore the constraints on such behaviour as laid out in the Civil Service Code of Ethics which was drawn up to reflect and uphold our shared cultural values. As a result they are driving divisive wedges through the fabric of society, devaluing truth and honesty, cultivating suspicion and conflict and making much needed collective, effective responses to crises like Covid all the harder to achieve.

None of us know what future will bring, but sadly we can be sure of one thing: we are unlikely to be able to say that we are all in it together.

Res ipsa loquitur.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/30/almost-700000-driven-poverty-covid-crisis-uk-study>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/firms-given-1bn-of-state-contracts-without-tender-in-covid-19-crisis>