PRESS RELEASE

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Tim's Viewpoint – Does truth matter? Yes, it is the essential foundation for any good outcome.

In a world dominated by political spin doctors and social media, you sometimes wonder whether the truth exists. Years ago, a famous historian was asked this question. He replied that truth does exist, but it's hidden in a fog by a lack of both information and perspective. But does the truth matter? Obviously, yes. As ultra-successful investor Ray Dalio explains: "Truth is the essential foundation for any good outcome." If you act on the basis of something untrue in the world of investment, for example, you can lose your shirt. Hence, the legendary writer Mark Twain lost all of his money by investing in dud mines – and famously defined a mine as "a hole in the ground owned by a liar". One problem with covid-19 is that the issue has, in the words of one US politician, been "weaponised and politicised". Once politicised, logic and truth become secondary to the need to prove that your dogma is correct – or to gain favour with your tribe. A good basis for any discussion on coronavirus was the comment to the BBC last summer by a German professor: "There's a lot we don't understand about the virus." The professor was perplexed that there appeared to be few cases of virus transmission in hair salons in Germany – this didn't make sense, he said, although it was true, according to the data which he had at the time. The professor's humility was encouraging – beware a claim of absolute knowledge or someone who can't acknowledge truths which belie their narrative.

Anders Tegnell, state epidemiologist of the Public Health Agency of Sweden, reflected similar humility when he told the New Statesman magazine: "Maybe in a year or two, we can sit down together … and try to figure out what worked well and what did not work well." It's definitely true that the truth and, therefore, superior outcomes are helped by debate – and by democracy. That's where the press and programmes like Today and Question Time, for all of their faults, play a vital role. Unfortunately, in the modern world, at least, there's a strong movement to stifle debate by no-platforming, ad hominem attacks and media vilification. If you can kick a top opponent out of the game, as happened to the great Pelé in the 1966 World Cup, you gain short-term advantage. But guess who won the World Cup in 1970? If you kick an opponent out of a game in which there are many unknowns – a lot of fog – as in the covid-19 debate, it will reinforce your own side's prejudices and reduce the opportunity to find the truth, worsening outcomes.

Neil O'Brien, Conservative MP for Harborough, is a good example of a politician who has tried to silence critics of the government's covid-19 policy by kicking them off the field. In a Guardian article, O'Brien uses the inaccurate description 'covid sceptics' to describe critics of government covid-19 policy. Most government critics question hard lockdowns, capricious restrictions and harsh authoritarian measures, yet agree with social distancing, hygiene guidelines, trusting the people and common sense. They are better described as 'government policy sceptics', rather than 'covid sceptics'. O'Brien's language encourages sectarianism. He says: "Covid sceptics … crawl out of the woodwork … make stuff up … and double down on false claims." Belfast and Glasgow natives, of a certain age, will recognise the rhetoric. O'Brien argues that non-lockdown Sweden has pursued a "failed strategy" and that "Stockholm's hospitals overflowed". In fact, Sweden's all-cause mortality rate, probably the best measure, is eight per cent higher in 2020 than its average of the last five years. For England and Wales, the all-cause mortality rate is worse – 14 per cent higher than its average for the same period. Unsurprisingly perhaps, O'Brien turned down an offer to debate covid-19 with Professor Carl Heneghan, one of those he vilifies, who is a practising doctor and a director of the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine at Oxford University.

According to The Times, the UK, now in its third lockdown, has the greatest number of fatalities per million of population of any large country. In contrast, Florida, which, like Sweden, avoided a harsh lockdown, has had a better outcome than that of California, which, like the UK, locked down hard. Australia and New Zealand locked down early and hard, closing borders and implementing a quarantine. They have had great success in almost eradicating the virus, albeit at considerable economic and social cost, and they probably have lower immunity than the Swedes. So, will the Aussie/Kiwi approach or the Sweden/Florida approach turn out to be superior? No one knows yet. To some extent, covid-19 has all countries in its thrall – imprisoning the Aussies within their own border and threatening the Swedes with a third wave. However, these opposing approaches, so far, have had better outcomes than the UK, in terms of both health and the economy. Indeed, the main question is why the UK has fared so badly, compared with many countries. It may be because the government is putting politics and presentation above the truth – an emphasis on spinning to the press, reliance on narrow groups like the 'quad', use of emergency powers to limit debate, excessive reverence for academia-dominated SAGE and so on.

The evidence on which the government relied for the latest closure of pubs is paper thin and contained in an 'EMG/NERVTAG' paper of 22 October 2020. The New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group, reporting to Public Health England, (NERVTAG) is a group of academics, including Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College, formerly of SAGE. The NERVTAG report completely ignored the evidence of extremely low transmission rates in UK pubs since they reopened after the first lockdown last summer – as demonstrated by the test-and-trace system and by trade organisations such as UK Hospitality. Wetherspoon, for example, has had over 50 million customer visits recorded through the test-and-trace system, with not a single reported example of an 'outbreak' among customers, as defined by the health authorities. Yet NERVTAG, bizarrely, did not consider evidence from the UK after July 2020, when pubs started to reopen, relying, instead, on earlier evidence from abroad: "Japan, China, South Korea and Indonesia noted that large super-spreading events originated from pubs, clubs, restaurants, gyms and wedding events." Clearly, the overseas examples, from early 2020, relied on by NERVTAG, related to different rules and protocols from those successfully utilised by the UK hospitality industry after July. NERVTAG and the government concluded that "hospitality venues are a significant risk for transmission" since "the disinhibitory effects of alcohol are likely to exacerbate difficulties with social distancing". Yet alcohol is regularly consumed in households, especially when pubs are closed. NERVTAG and the government have therefore swapped supervised and regulated consumption of alcohol in pubs, with screens, hand-sanitisers and trained staff, for unsupervised consumption in households. Whereas a plethora of evidence demonstrates low transmission in UK pubs, a similar plethora indicates a vast transmission level in households. The irrational NERVTAG report is another example of the erratic government dodgem car, lurching from lockdown to lockdown and from Eat Out to Help Out to tiers and curfews. In the end, the government, lacking perspective, has ignored the real evidence and has taken the momentous decision to close the hospitality industry repeatedly, based on the tribal beliefs of academics – who, contrary to received opinion, are often steeped in dogma. As Boris Johnson recently said: "There is obviously an extra risk from hospitality." Except that it's not true, Boris – if we proceed on the basis of information which is untrue, outcomes are worse, and we will, end up, like Mark Twain, running out of money.

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