INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Coronavirus: no going back to normal

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Summary

It did not take the new travel ban on people coming from Brazil and a host of other countries to make the point, although it did. There will be new variants of coronavirus cropping up steadily. Some will be contained by existing vaccines, some by straightforward amendments to those; others, eventually, may not be. Mutation and rapid evolution to get around obstacles are in the nature of a virus.

What, then, should we expect for life after this emergency? Governments are holding out the vision of a return to 'normal life' as the incentive for 'one last heave' of compliance with constraints, while they race to inoculate their people with the vaccines.

That seems a mistake. The precautions that may have to be taken for a long time – perhaps for our lifetimes – against coronavirus and its variants will change the way people conduct their lives. They are likely to restrain the globalisation that has been the engine of growth for many countries for many decades. There will be choices along the way for governments and their people to make about what level of risk – and contagion and loss of life – they are prepared to live with and what kind of intrusion or constraint they accept. The dilemmas may diminish but are not going to vanish.

Meanwhile, in the UK, as it struggles to find a way out of the emergency, it is clear that health and education are not just suffering a backlog from the interruptions of this year; there is a task of making good what has been lost that some compare to the scale of recovery after the Second World War. And on the big economic questions there is nothing approaching consensus – how to pay down the debt or whether even to try, and how to distinguish economic activity that the government should try to preserve from that which has no future (and may not have done before coronavirus either).

On the other hand, the emergency has accelerated a wave of innovation that was already underway. In digital technology, artificial intelligence, biological sciences and medicine, it has reshaped government, ways of working, education and new research. Countries will want to preserve that when the worst of the crisis has passed. Whether those innovations flourish will depend to a great extent on private companies and creative activity that has nothing to do with ministers, but government still has an important role to play in support for research and in regulation, as Britain's leading position in genome sequencing has shown.

Life after coronavirus will not feel like life before. It is best that governments acknowledge that and start planning now in order to capture the best that can come out of a very tough period while not raising expectations that life will suddenly snap back to an almost forgotten normal.

Countering the virus – a perpetual task

The virus is not going to disappear, and the government should not raise expectations that it can 'defeat' it. It is clear, on current policy, that a repository of infection is likely to remain in the population. Those under 16, for example, are unlikely to be vaccinated. Some adults will turn down the chance of a vaccination (in France, where suspicion of government and support for homeopathy have long shaped people's approach to inoculation, the number hovers around half the population). And that is just in affluent, developed countries. Many poorer countries will not be able to afford the vaccine or compete with richer ones to secure supplies, or lack the organisation to distribute it and persuade suspicious populations.

What is more, the virus will mutate, and, almost certainly, strains resistant to current vaccines will emerge. Perhaps existing vaccines can be modified, as the Pfizer-BioNtech team has suggested. But that takes time, money and a further campaign of vaccination. One vision of the future – a plausible one – is that countries have to 'learn to live' with the virus in its changing forms, even if they can beat back the prevalence to more manageable levels. That has implications for public health (perhaps, a steady flow of coronavirus patients and need for repeated vaccination) as well as for constraints on public behaviour. Social distancing and masks may have to remain in some contexts. Pressure for vaccination passports may well grow. Governments will have to find ways of explaining to people how to live with a degree of risk.

Travel

One of the most difficult questions for government to address will be about permitted travel. In the UK's case, as ministers point out, an island cannot afford to cut itself off from the world. But the ban on travellers from Brazil following the discovery of a new variant there, together with those from the rest of South America, caused great protest. Less at the start from Brazil itself – given that it had already banned travellers from the UK because of the 'UK variant' – but Portugal was outraged to have been "nonsensically" included because of its close links with Brazil. That has been followed by the scrapping of all 'travel corridors', set up to facilitate travel with lower-risk countries.

Some of this – the panoply of outright bans, quarantine rules, demands for tests before and after flying – may stay. It is hard to see how it will not, given the perpetual chance of new variants with the potential to spread and the cost if that did happen. A web of rules on quarantine, vaccination, negative test certificates – different between countries and localities, and often being tweaked – is likely to remain. That is grit in the wheels of the kind of easy movement to which the world has been accustomed. At the very least, for governments, it represents a cost in enforcement and communication of the latest regulations.

Health and education

The backlog in the NHS is not just a stack of postponed operations that can be tackled as the pandemic wanes. It may turn out to represent a neglect of illnesses including cancer and diabetes that – being treated at a later stage than would otherwise have happened – will sharply increase the demands on health services in the coming years. At the same time, much innovation in diagnosis, consultation and treatment has taken place during the crisis, and leaders of health services will want to capture these.

The same is not true of care homes in England. The neglect of these by successive governments, despite many promises, has been exposed in the crisis. There are some innovations that care homes may want to retain, such as video visits and help with funding for those discharged from hospitals. There may well be pressure for more consistent management practices; while the variety of provision and approach can be a strength, many relatives were acutely distressed by the sometimes draconian restrictions on contact with residents by their families, drawn up by individual care home chiefs with little recourse or consultation. The biggest problem, though, is the lack of political attention that contributed to the oversight of the risk in discharging patients from hospital to care homes early in the crisis.

The impact on people's mental health overall is one of the great unknowns about the pandemic. That applies to doctors, nurses and carers too, as many searing accounts show. Isolation, confinement at close quarters in acrimonious or violent relationships, poverty and fear of loss of income, trying to work at home with children, strained community relationships – all these have been a hidden cost on people.

Ministers and officials say privately that they know there is considerable work there to be done but it is almost inaccessible to public services until the crisis has abated.

That goes for children and teenagers too, where the effects of loss of schooling have yet to be fully assessed. Some children will essentially have missed a year of school and those who have drifted out of contact with any formal part of the education system in that time may never go back. The gap in educational standards and achievements between affluent and poorer areas has grown. Two years of suspension of public exams (not handled well) have distorted the grading system while university students are resentful of being locked in dorms – while still charged full fees and accommodation costs.

Repairing the loss in education is a mammoth task in itself, officials acknowledge – and they still hope to hold onto pre-virus innovations as in technical qualifications. On the positive side, the widespread (even if not complete) distribution of laptops has helped schools and pupils get better at long distance learning. The government will need to press through with these changes, making them more extensive, including through pressure on phone and data operators to improve digital access.

Devolution

Tensions in the UK have shown up during the crisis, with the devolved administrations complaining of lack of consultation, while using the opportunity to display their freedom to diverge from Westminster in the way they have set their rules. At times, the Welsh and Scottish governments have effectively closed the border to those travelling from other parts of the UK – described, in the Welsh case, as the hardest border for several centuries. Other countries – the US most dramatically – have also shown how complicated managing a crisis can be when parts of the country are allowed to set their own rules. But there are counterexamples, too – such as Australia's federal system, which have worked well. The lesson is one of co-ordination, although that is made harder in the UK's case by the intensity of the politics of the SNP's independence ambitions.

The question will remain of what freedom and what resources parts of a country should have to run their own affairs. The Westminster government will come under more pressure to grant more powers to the devolved administrations – or independence outright. They should consider quickly what their response is on the former, probably their only alternative to being confronted with even stronger pressure for the latter.

Economy

Questions of how to handle the economic fallout will dominate life after coronavirus. But that moment has not yet been reached, and these central questions have been pushed repeatedly back as lockdowns continue, to the obvious frustration of the UK's chancellor Rishi Sunak. Although there is a strong constituency arguing that the country can live with high debt for a long time and will ultimately rely on inflation to get rid of it, the question of tax rises to make some inroads into it will not go away. Nor, too, will

politically difficult questions about spending cuts – for example, in the triple lock on state pensions, or public sector pensions themselves.

In looking at the future of business and worker support, the Treasury will need to consider at some point whether to use the benefit system more (as, for instance, the US has done) to support people's income while avoiding propping up jobs that cannot be sustained. However, the repeated lockdowns – always with the hope that 'normal life' can soon be resumed have delayed that debate. The government will also need to consider generational fairness in deciding how any tax increases should be levied. The housing market and stock market have found unexpected strength during the pandemic, widening the gap between those with such assets and those without.

Some of the hardest questions will be about how to help the economy reshape itself, with retail shops probably diminished forever. The government says it wants to support digital technologies and scientific innovation but will need to be careful with what it does with public money if the expression of its enthusiasm is not to be wasted.

The new normal

The pandemic has been sweeping in its effects on society, the economy and the government; a lot will have changed by the time it is beaten back or contained. The government's task now is to help mitigate the worst effects and preserve the best, to discuss with people and businesses the level of risk and constraint they are prepared to live with, and to help them live in a world that has changed.

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