

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 19th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Leadership & Followership In Turbulent Times

Most citizens of the United Kingdom must know that we are living in difficult times? It is conceivable one or two have deployed the skill or luck to avoid any contact with the (unfinished) Brexit bloodletting, but as COVID-19 bundled us into house arrest and a 2m personal moat, that surely has registered? These are just the most visible signs 'du jour' of how the 21st century is proving so much more awkward than we expected.

Although we like to take our national troubles one at a time, the truth is we must get better at managing a 'concurrency of woe', each one bringing great disadvantage, together perhaps amounting to calamity, and none safe to be ignored. Our lives will be shaped by the rise of China, disagreeable Russia, a planet unsustainably battered by global population growth and climate change, US stumble and isolationism, and the 4th Industrial Revolution - all of these marching at us together and at once. The withering of globalisation is one of the

symptoms of a world ranked across the galaxy as 'a swimmer in difficulty', struggling against the currents of mass migration, the questions around why there are 2095 billionaires and 3 billion people living on less than \$2.50 a day, and various flavours of violent extremism. Plus Brexit and COVID-19.

This is a world that will certainly demand some bravery and feel 'new', and it will require high quality political leadership and equally high-quality followership to navigate. Our recent performance indicates we need an epiphany on both counts. The way we have chosen to manage our affairs as a country for decades has been by historical standards comparatively gentle and broadly effective, but only a super-optimist could conclude a recipe built around the politics of marginal change and irresolute short-termism is good for what lies ahead.

It is very easy to take cheap, hindsight-infused shots around the handling of the pandemic, so here goes: we told ourselves such a thing was our number one risk but we elected not to prepare for it; we delayed taking decisive action and so made the whole thing much worse; we



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despatched the elderly from hospitals to care homes without testing them and were genuinely surprised this didn't turn out well; we kept our children out of school for 5 months, stuffing their education and keeping their parents from working despite the proven very modest risk; we spent £14bn a month on furlough and then clung on to the 2m rule to strangle transport and hospitality businesses anyway; we did so well at frightening ourselves to stay at home that many people need a crowbar to get back to work and the shops; and Google has 2.8m apps, with over 6,000 released every day...just not yet one for tracing in UK. If there is some truth in all of this low-punching, it includes recognising that in conditions of novel and major peril, amplified by great uncertainty, we have to find new levels of competency and leadership as politicians and resilient followership as citizens.

It really is difficult for political leaders to *lead* the way through things that are just hard and unpleasant in conditions of considerable pressure and uncertainty. But it is the job they argued for. It is also really hard for citizens as they must be prepared to play their part in following when things that are hard and unpleasant in conditions of considerable pressure and uncertainty. But it is their responsibility, the obligation side of the equation that confers great freedoms and benefits on us all. So if, as seems overwhelmingly likely, the road ahead for UK will be strewn with multiple potentially existential risks then we must raise our collective game as leaders and followers.

Even were today's adult population of the UK happy to slide into becoming helpless victims of a cruel world (which seems doubtful), we should accept the imperative to set the conditions for our future generations not to be cut off at the knees by predictable harm. This is an important

point not just because it feels commendably woke, but also because the inter-generational contract of the successive waves of betterment we have long assumed would apply forever has clearly been annulled. The children of today's 50-somethings do not see owning a home, going to university without a large debt, buying a car and going on holidays involving canvas-only as a matter of choice as all in range. This may be because interests change, but paying for all of this at once is hugely ambitious for many today in a way that was not for the wider middle classes of today's 70-somethings.

There are already really fundamental questions for UK around balancing supply and demand in an affordable NHS; raising 4 million children from poverty; paying for the care of 8.8m over 70s; the immense risks of a severely depleted and obsolescent provision for defence and security; how to educate our children in the intellectual and social skills that will foster equal opportunity and prosperity in the Digital Age; a looming crisis in electricity supply; getting rid of gas heating now we have almost finished laying the mains; a creaking railway system; whether to extend the busiest airport in the country over its busiest stretch of motorway; filling 500,000 potholes; and so forth – we all have our own list. If today already has many challenges (and life for many in UK really is still pretty good), where we are headed could be overwhelmingly adverse unless we plough the best furrow we can. This is not somebody else's fatigues, this is our job.

On leadership, we know what won't work because we have tried quite a lot of it. Leadership that is driven by focus-group and poll appeasement, where the horizon is never more than a week away and strategy is consciously eschewed in favour of event-juggling may work of course, or



it can feel like government by idiot-grade crisis-management of self-inflicted surprise. Based on how the landscape looks just ahead, there could be fewer moments when political leaders are gifted a choice of brilliant, new benefits to confer on a happily smiling citizenry and more when the demand is to decide between a broader, deeper selection of poor outcomes in order to alight on the least-worst. And there will likely be more of these political one-legged ass-kicking contests the more we fail to drive ourselves to better.

We should expect to live in an age where the UK has to be well positioned and resilient for the future. This entails doing hard things now at the expense of our pockets, preferences and current consumption. How else can we ride the displacement of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the imperative to head-off global warming before it heads us off, or maintain the consent to be governed amongst several million presently quite alienated citizens? These kinds of dilemmas pose choices that require clear-sighted political leadership and citizens who accept the limits of our national ability to heap benefits upon ourselves. A place in society will always impose substantial obligations on those who are able to discharge them.

We must be grateful that there are men and women who are prepared to submit themselves to the judgement of the ballot box and the ceaseless carping and abuse that comes with being an elected representative at any level. Our gratitude should be founded on the eternal truth that all political lives will end in failure because the scale and range of problems to be solved is beyond the power of one country or one person to triumph over, yet getting elected requires claiming it's all doable, now and for free. Even the greatest will to succeed is vulnerable to the

dark lottery of a complex world: completely unwarranted catastrophe is omnipresent.

Are there aspects of political leadership that would seem to improve the chances of some success in this most trying of times? Having a sense of the Big Picture, grasping the width of the horizon the UK is facing is not a bad start. Without the Vision Thing, without a good sense of what the overall challenge is, working out what doing well against it would look like that and expressing this in the big, inspirational ideas of a core platform, then all the small actions and soundbites of the daily political rumpus have no context or compass.

This is just not the same thing as political leadership by beating the citizen with announceables, these pellets of initiative that take their turn on a grid to convey concern and promise, yet without – when probed more in whining than in anger by the Today programme – coherent plans, the human and technical capability to deliver, or enough money. If the core challenge facing the UK is in the combination of China, a faltering planet, and the 4th Industrial Revolution, no amount of tinkering with VAT, Universal Credit, and quarantine will provide the answer, even if all these things matter in their own way in the present. This suggests that we will need not just a better sense of vision, but also a better hand on the art and science of strategy to chart a forward course – and highly competent delivery led by our Civil Service.

This infers that holding political office will demand more education and training than simply a good eye for public sentiment and a strong Twitter wrist. We expect our politicians to represent all the shades of interest and opinion expressed at the ballot box, and we need them to match that intuition with some of the leadership



skills normally only found after the lengthy preparatory schooling to helm a large public or private sector institution. Perhaps because of the financial and personal pains of electioneering, the relatively modest remuneration, the poor provision of research assistance, the terrible office conditions, and the unlimited scope for public vilification we should not be surprised that our political leadership today attracts mainly only real enthusiasts. Enthusiasts who for the most part have been schooled only in being an enthusiast as they ascend from Intern to Special Adviser to Candidate to cannon-fodder backbencher etc.,. Would it not be more in the national interest to provide better support to our elected representatives, perhaps a mix of (not really optional) education and training in the business of government, and much better support in things like research and office management?

Thesesupportandmodestincentivearrangements may be less important to the quality of political leadership we shall need than the expectations we set around character and behaviour. This is not so much about standard 'hygiene' measures around corruption, bullying, and respectful personal conduct, these really should not have to be spelt out. The greater issue is about the incentives that make people want to serve as politicians and how they should expect to be valued. What we need are leaders who accept the impossibility of succeeding in all things at all times, omniscience and omnipotence only really seem to work well in religions and North Korea.

Of course, we will need leaders with the moral courage to decide, to decide on time, and to be prepared to act in ways that increase the prospects of a better outcome for the country in inverse proportion to their own electoral prospects, and when they do this they must be prepared to explain why. This means the

degree of ruthlessness which we see mostly in the jostling for position being repeated in how policies and actions are articulated: there is no reasonable way to claim that battling the challenges we have to face will be pain free for everyone.

So we should expect to be given the facts, set a value on honesty and resilient good humour and have no truck with being messaged and massaged with what is plainly sugar-coated bobbins. A recession, for example, means less wealth for everybody and fewer jobs. Uncertainty and complexity also mean that mistakes are to be expected and since this is so, pretending all is well, clinging to a bus that is plainly hurtling over a cliff and calling it a diversion, should be called out. There is more respect to be had, now and in the history books, by being truthful and honest with an adult electorate than in hoping to make it to the next election without being found out.

This adult electorate has its part to play too. We are emerging from a time when our life was so relatively secure and prosperous that it became easy to think that each of us could lead most of our lives free of harm, and that when misfortune struck the NHS, Social Security, the Bank of England or the Justice system would ride to the rescue. This is of course a gross oversimplification, but we seem to have acquired a sense that we are free to live our lives as we want without let or hinderance until bad things occur, in which case it is the Government's job to fix it. In much more challenging times, the balance of an adult life between contributor and benefiter is bound to change: those genuinely unable to support themselves will still require the support and dignity that a compassionate society confers, and those genuinely able and yet resolutely unwilling to play their part will find a cooler welcome.



Perhaps the first element of ‘followership’ in harder times will be education and training: education in what the deal as a citizen is, what common risks we all have to face up to, and how to respond in a crisis. There is nothing wrong with our spirit, look at how the vast majority have abided by lockdown restrictions, how many people come forward on the spot when tragedy, disaster or terror strikes, and how many hilarious short videos one medium-sized country can upload to social media in the middle of it all. What is missing is a clearer set of expectations and some modest conditioning to lay the foundations for greater resilience. This is not an argument for a stiff upper lip when being abused, beaten or robbed, our tolerance for that should be set at zero, but it is an argument for not calling the police when the WiFi signal in the restaurant is down. Nor is it an argument for national military service, just perhaps for some formal education for school-leavers about what ‘society’ expects of us all. We might all agree that poverty is offensive in an affluent society, in a way that being caught in a thunderstorm without a hat is not.

Just as we all know disappointment and loss are not illegal and we are capable of bearing a share of it without the world falling apart, we also know that risk is not something that can be excised from human existence. To find our path in troubling times we need to do better at managing the risk that matters and not imagining that all risk can be inhibited, certainly not by legislation or regulation. Perfectly sensible risk assessment rules in the wrong hands (that is, anybody with a clipboard minus a normal helping of common sense) can be a menace anyway, but what the future will require is a collective thought that whilst we should limit risk (don’t make the floor wet) and manage it well if it occurs (mop it up and put a sign on it), sooner or later we all take

a tumble and wherever possible we must just get up and get on.

There are enough people in truly great need to focus our efforts on. Perhaps accepting a greater degree of resilience and self-reliance could extend to moderating the demand we make on our NHS so it can remain free at the point of delivery, from small things like not piling into A&E without taking advice on the phone first, to big things like diet and exercise to stay trimmer and healthier for longer? As we have seen during the pandemic, genuine major national emergencies will reduce the scope for society remedying those ills we wilfully even if only gradually inflict on ourselves as free-thinking citizens.

Is there is a big prize in prospect here? If we ramped up the quality of political leadership that we demand and resource, at the same time as we adjusted what is expected of each of us as a citizen as we all traverse difficult times, surely that would enhance the odds of getting through in reasonable shape? Even more than that, if we lit a fire under how we are led and how we follow, would we do a much better job at creating and seizing opportunities to be secure, prosperous and content on terms of our own making in a global competition. We should want to be runners in the race to the top of human existence, not the bottom.

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