

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The fifth in our series of expert comment and analysis, by GSF Advisory Board member, Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield, Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary University of London and an independent crossbench peer. He is currently writing 'A Duty of Care: Britain Before And After Corona'. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Duty Of Care: Reflections On A Pathogen

In one of the last papers he wrote before his untimely death in 2009, Sir Michael Quinlan, the finest combination of mind and pen to be deployed on defence policy in post-war Whitehall, advanced what he called 'a theorem' and 'a rationale' for those charged with framing defence programmes:

*'A theorem: In matters of military contingency, the expected, precisely because it is expected, is not to be expected. Rationale what we expect, we plan and provide for; we thereby deter; what we deter does not happen. What does happen is what we did not deter, because we did not plan and provide for it, because we did not expect it'*

One of the many singularities of COVID-19 is that it is beyond the scope of Quinlan's Law which otherwise covers pretty well all aspects of the threats to the Queen's Realm, as it does to all the other countries upon whose territory it has befallen. And it was expected, too.

In Whitehall, the Cabinet Office's Risk Register has had pandemic at the top of its list for years. There is no way of scaring off a pandemic; the wretched bugs are strangers to deterrence theory. Once a new strain has emerged somewhere in the world every traveller can be a carrier; every 747 an incubator; every advanced economy but weeks away from the deepest and swiftest of recessions. Now pulses of insecurity, of a kind we have never had to deal with before, are in motion at home and abroad.

It is the human cost that hits the imagination so hard. The capriciousness of the virus; the prospect of dying alone; the possibility of a second wave and then another; the race for a vaccine. Living with Corona stretches a government's duty of care to its people close to the points where the bonds snap.

In the UK, the most intense shared collective experience since the war years 1939-45 has reopened questions right across that duty-of-care spectrum. This strange mixture of atomised living amidst shared communal anxiety – and with a swiftly, hugely expanded state lent a great parcel of liberty by the British people through that Parliament with the passing of the Coronavirus Act 2020 – may be taking us through one of those moments when old nostrums give way. Each Thursday evening at eight, when we come out of lockdown to clap, cheer, sing and rattle our pots and pans in cacophonous salute to our NHS and key workers, I hear a people rediscovering themselves and the old decencies and social solidarities that marked the British people in the fighting Forties and after which set in place the welfare and full employment policies that formed the basis of a consensus that lasted until the 1970s.

It is very striking how Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the new Leader of the Opposition Sir Keir Starmer, both talk the language of 'national consensus' as they think through the handling of the pathogen that changed the world. Can it – will it – endure once the worst is over is now the primary question of British politics which has suddenly grown up after prolonged period of adolescent behaviour with 3½ years of Brexit torment. If this



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consensual spirit does endure, it will, in its own way, be as strategically important as anything that might emerge from the 'integrated' defence, foreign policy and security review that now looks like being postponed till 2021.

Sir William Beveridge, the leading social arithmetician of his day, produced a report in 1942 at the height of the global conflict for post-war reconstruction in the UK. There were, he wrote 'five giants' on the road to recovery and he put them in capital letters.

WANT, IGNORANCE, IDLENESS, SQUALOR, DISEASE.

Give or take differences of emphasis, all British governments were Beveridge-ite for more than 30 years.

Beveridge's insight was that all five giants had to be clobbered simultaneously if the outer crust of deprivation was to crack.

There is a new, Beveridge-style consensus awaiting beyond Corona. Its ingredients in my judgement are: social care, social housing, technical education, combatting and mitigating climate change; preparing for the full input of artificial intelligence in ecology and society. If the politicians pick this consensus up, run with it and find the tone and pitch of language in which to convey it – the 2020s will not be a decade squandered in recriminatory politics. If they don't, those we have lost – and those whom we have still to lose to COVID will not have the memorial they deserve. It has taken a pathogen for us to rediscover, refresh and renew our shared duty of care. But rediscover it we have.

***Peter Hennessy***  
***May 2020***

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Contemporary British  
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*House of Lords Official Portrait*

