

## View from Westminster April 2020

In any war, and it is not an overestimation to suggest coronavirus is forcing us into an unwanted battle against an unseen enemy, it is important to have feelgood moments. The shots of optimism before the reality of contemplating whether to make the 5<sup>th</sup> Zoom call of the day from the living room or the bedroom sets in. This conflict's very own Vera Lynn is Capt. Moore. I for one salute his stamina and versatility. Whether it is scoring a chart topper with Michael Ball, opening a Nightingale Hospital or strolling around his frankly impressively-sized garden, the war veteran is everywhere and he has proved that we might have 99 problems, but he certainly ain't one.

Alas, pandemics are not all charity records and fundraisers. There is hardship as well as happiness as 20,000 funeral services regrettably testify to. This is maybe not the time for political partisanship and finger pointing. However, when the time comes, it is important that all those individual stories are told and honoured, not least by investigating all decisions taken throughout the coronavirus era. Legitimate questions will be asked around national preparations in January and February, the eventual mortality rate, the provision and distribution of PPE, the impact of the virus on care homes, the continued decision to allow flights to land in the UK, as well as the precise timing and severity of the lockdown decision, and the wisdom of permitting the now infamous Cheltenham Festival, Liverpool vs Atletico Madrid football match and the Stereophonics concert to proceed just days before requiring us all to remain largely housebound. In addition, of course, serious reflections on how we are to fund the great giveaway temporarily pausing the economy has necessitated, will need to be made. Austerity is a mere drop in the ocean of current borrowing projections.

When the time comes, it will do the government and its loudest supporters no favours to dismiss important enquiry as old politics in action. The point, one hopes, of what will politically follow on the other side of all of this is to learn lessons about what worked and what did not, as the country faced an unknown threat. Perhaps the biggest test for our contemporary politicians will not be how they get through the immediate period...but how they respond to questions surrounding it. If we see government ministers openly admitting imperfections, then some good might have come out of all of this. The campaign for that can and must start now.

Politics of course is a long way from business as usual. Parliament has returned from recess in a blizzard of questionable internet connections and with cheap gaffer tape on the floors to ensure MPs understand the concept of social distancing. The cynic in me feels removing the most problematic element of the chamber, namely most of its unruly inhabitants, has ensured a much better and informative quality of debate is held and it will be fascinating to see how the format suits Boris "The Greatest Showman" Johnson once he is fighting fit and back at the despatch box. And up against Sir Keir Starmer.

A worldwide pandemic might have stopped almost everything in its tracks, from the economy to the provision of basic government services, but such trifling things are not going to stop the unstoppable. To that end, the UK and the European Union have recommenced Brexit negotiations, with all sides seemingly intent on pushing through a deal in accordance with the set timetable. Such a thing might be

described by Sir Humphrey as brave and courageous, particularly given the importance of managing trade flows. It's bad enough vital PPE cannot make it out of Turkey without the local Sweeney swarming all over it...the last thing we then want is officious customs agents stopping the boxes because an i wasn't dotted. I strongly suspect extension is coming...and I additionally believe most Brexiteers would accept a position that would have been unthinkable just weeks ago.