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## The evidence is in. Lockdowns kill people – and the more you lock down, the more you kill

The leaked WhatsApp messages show that we have been governed by petty, frightened men who valued appearance over substance

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18 March 2023 • 5:12pm



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It's their sheer smallness that is so striking. Their banality. Their triteness. I had hoped, reading *The Lockdown Files*, to find some explanation for the miseries that were inflicted on us in 2020. Perhaps decisions that looked imbecilic to the rest of us might make sense to those in the control room, able to survey information that we could not see. Perhaps there was a grand plan.

But not a bit of it. What we see in the [leaked WhatsApp messages](#) are petty, frightened men at the mercy of events. They obsess over tweets and news reports. They fret about how they are coming across.

Again and again, decisions are made for presentational rather than medical reasons. Quarantine could safely be cut from 14 to five days; but the problem, says Matt Hancock, is that this would "imply we've been getting it wrong". "Imply"?

Care home testing is initially rejected because the bigger issue is meeting the 100,000 tests a day target. What is so important about that target? In medical terms, nothing. In political terms, everything, since some self-important broadcasters have decided that this is the measure by which the Government's success will be gauged. Schoolchildren are forced wear masks, not because they do the slightest good, but because the Tories don't want to look weaker than Nicola Sturgeon, who has imposed this dystopian requirement in Scotland.

This being 2020, there is also inevitably some nonsense about whether a lockdown in areas with lower white populations [would look racist](#).

People often say that *Yes, Minister* is a documentary not a comedy. But what we really see here is a hideous, two-year, real-life episode of *The Thick of It*. "CALLED FOR THIS TWO MONTHS AGO," exclaims Hancock at one point, in a line that could have come straight from Armando Iannucci's ingenious script. "This is a Hancock triumph!"

The problem is not with one politician, but with a dysfunctional system. Hancock comes across as (no other phrase quite fits) a bit of a plonker. But he also seems energetic and diligent. Having insisted on lockdown because he believed that vaccination would be the way out, he did at least stick to his logic and argue for a removal of restrictions once the jabs came in – a surprisingly lonely position when BBC reporters, public sector unions, Labour MPs and assorted malingerers were clamouring to keep it going.

What we see is not a bad man, but a well-intentioned man caught up in a machine that might have been deliberately programmed to generate bad outcomes. Britain was driven into abandoning its proportionate, cool-headed epidemic plan, not just by shrieking TV presenters, but by perverse incentives. Put simply, decision-makers knew that they would not get into trouble for excessive caution. They could blow away billions, bankrupt businesses, ruin children's education, and none of it would be a resigning matter. But make the slightest mistake

the other way, and they would be done for.

Easy to say in hindsight? Maybe. But those of us who said it at the time were roundly denounced as granny murderers. In February 2020, I recalled the ridiculous forecasts that had accompanied bird flu and swine flu, and cautioned against panic: “Politicians, like most people, are bad at calculating risk, and almost every minister would rather be accused of over-reacting to a threat than of having done too little. There is a similar bias, albeit a less pronounced one, among the various medical advisory bodies”.

Every time I criticised the lockdown – and this column was one of only three or four doing so in March 2020 – I would steel myself before pressing send. I knew that demanding a reopening was hugely unpopular. What if it also turned out to be wrong?

Yet the facts remained stubbornly at odds with the policies. As the disease spread from China, [Chris Whitty pointed out](#) that it was not dangerous enough to merit an acceleration of the vaccine approval process (no one, at this stage, was contemplating a UK lockdown).

“For a disease with a low (for the sake of argument 1 per cent) mortality a vaccine has to be very safe so the safety studies can’t be shortcut,” he messaged on February 29 2020. Reader, the mortality rate for Covid in this country never rose as high as 1 per cent.

Why, then, were we panicked? What happened to the original epidemic plan, which was to allow infections to seep gradually through the population so that hospitals would not be overwhelmed at any one moment?

The answer can be glimpsed in a message on March 8 from James Slack, Boris Johnson’s calm and measured spokesman: “I think we’re heading towards general pressure over why our measures are relatively light touch compared to other countries.”

Too bloody right. And the pressure – cretinous rants from Piers Morgan, false rumours of hospitals being overrun, “Go Home Covidiot” signs – grew until, two weeks later, a prime minister who hated nannying with every bone in his body felt obliged to sentence the population to house arrest.

Could he have resisted that pressure? Other countries had already closed, 92 per cent of the electorate wanted to be confined and the scientific advisers, sniffing the wind, had switched to arguing for tougher measures.

But one country held out. Sweden, lacking its own pandemic plan, had adopted Britain’s – and, unlike Britain, it did not crack under criticism. Sweden is our counterfactual, a laboratory quality control showing what would have happened here had we held our nerve. And the evidence it presents looks damning. A study has found that, from 2020 to 2022, Sweden had the lowest excess mortality rate in Europe.

That finding blows the case for lockdowns out of the water. In the early days of the pandemic, when the Government was being criticised for what looked like a high death rate (largely because it had sent NHS patients into care homes), ministers and medical advisers urged us to wait until all the evidence was in.

They had a point. Covid was a new disease, and countries had wildly differing approaches to measuring it. There was a row about whether people had died “of Covid” or “with Covid”. Some nations did not have the capacity to test even this.

But one thing that no one can fake is the overall number of deaths. We know how many people die annually in each country, and we can predict, on the basis of population size and age, what the figure should be for any given year. The excess mortality figure is the percentage above that expected baseline. It can be calculated with the same methodology the world over. It is, in short, the one statistic that there is no getting away from.

Judged by this metric, Britain did not do badly. Our overall excess death rate was behind Scandinavia, in line with Germany and the Netherlands, and ahead of most of southern and eastern Europe. But the real outlier was Sweden, which had the lowest excess mortality in Europe, and one of the lowest in the world, throughout 2020 and 2021.

During the pandemic, I assumed that Sweden would emerge with a slightly higher death rate, but a much stronger economy. Since poverty correlates with lower longevity, I expected that, over time, Sweden would see fewer deaths from other causes, so ending up healthier as well as wealthier. But I underestimated the lethal impact of the lockdowns themselves. Sweden did not just do better over time; it actually killed fewer people during the pandemic.

How did Britain’s leaders respond to the evidence that they should have stuck to Plan A? They took it as a personal affront. Hancock referred in his messages to the “f\*\*\*ing Sweden argument”, and asked officials to “supply three or four bullet [points] of why Sweden is wrong”.

But Sweden was not wrong, and no amount of desperate deflection about Norway also having a low death rate can disguise it. The horrible truth is that lockdowns killed people. Sweden had lots of coronavirus cases but relatively few excess deaths. Australia had few coronavirus cases, but a strict lockdown. It ended up with higher excess mortality than Sweden.

Are people ready to believe it? Are we prepared to admit that the disasters we are still experiencing – undiagnosed diseases, absenteeism, debt, lost education, price rises, mental health problems – were self-inflicted?

It seems not. We will go into the next crisis with the same skewed incentives. And all because, like so many Hancocks, we don’t want to “imply we’ve been getting it wrong”.

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