

British roulette

by GWYNNE DYER

?I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose their loved ones before their time.?

? Prime Minister Boris Johnson, 11 March 2020

?Just stay calm. It will go away.?

??resident Donald Trump, 10 March 2020

The contrast between the two major populist leaders of the English-speaking world could not have been greater.

Trump, who spent two months dismissing the Covid-19 virus as a 'hoax' cooked up by his opponents to crash the market and scupper his re-election chances, finally did an about-face on March 13 and declared a 'National Emergency'. But on Sunday he was still fantasising that 'we have tremendous control' over the virus.

Johnson, on the other hand, assumed a grave manner as he delivered the bad news. It's serious, many people will die, but we do have a plan. The problem is that the plan would kill a great many Britons for nothing if he is wrong - which most experts think he is.

'When I heard about Britain's 'herd immunity' coronavirus plan, I thought it was satire,' epidemiologist William Hanage of Harvard University told the Guardian on Sunday. But it is deadly serious. Boris Johnson, unlike Donald Trump, listens to scientists, but the ones he listens to most, chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance and chief medical adviser Chris Whitty, have a plan that most other experts think is crazy.

'Herd immunity' occurs when a large majority of the community has acquired immunity to a disease. That breaks the chain of transmission for the virus in question, and even those without immunity are fairly safe so long as their numbers stay low. So this is Boris's cunning plan.

Let the coronavirus spread until around 60 percent of the population has acquired and survived it. Then the dreaded 'second wave' of the epidemic will not happen, because herd immunity will protect everybody. Alas, there are a few flaws in this plan.

Sixty percent of the British population is about 40 million people. Only 0.2% of adults under 40 who contract Covid-19 die from it (and those under 10 don't get sick at all). The death rate goes up steeply for older age groups, but even for those in their 60s it's only 3.6%. So for all the under-70s it's only 'hang on a minute, that's 445,000 deaths. More than British military deaths in World War Two.

That's assuming that Britain's National Health Service (NHS) can give intensive care to all the severe cases of Covid-19. If the UK follows the pattern in China, around one in five coronavirus patients will need intensive care to recover. One in five of 40 million people is eight million.

The number of beds in intensive care units (ICUs) in British hospitals is 4,300. Maybe the NHS can improvise 10,000 more, but it still wouldn't go far if up to 8 million severely ill patients need ICU beds this year, each for weeks at a time. Many more than 445,000 would die. The whole scheme is lunacy - and we still haven't got to the plan for the over-70s.

The death rate from Covid-19 for people in their 70s is 8%. For 80 and over, it's at least 15%. So while everybody under 70 takes their chances with the virus, all those over 70 must self-isolate for four months.

Now, it's possible that Boris Johnson's advisers are right and everybody else is wrong. Maybe there is a devastating 'second wave' coming next winter, and this bizarre plan is the only way to stop it. But we don't even know if Covid-19 will have a second wave. There wasn't with SARS, a similar coronavirus. As William Hanage said, 'vulnerable people should not be exposed to a virus right now in the service of a hypothetical future.'

Testing, contact tracing and social distancing may turn out to be ineffective: infections may pick up again in other countries when the rules are finally relaxed. (280 million Chinese went back to work on Monday after two months of lockdown). But that strategy is certainly worth a try, whereas Johnson, in the words of Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of leading British medical journal 'The Lancet', is 'playing roulette with the public.'

So not all that much difference between the mini-Trump and the real thing after all. And the 'herd immunity' nonsense won't last much longer. The British public is starting to realise what Johnson's government was actually planning, and he has begun his retreat back to sanity.