

COVID-19 death rates & arrogance

by GWYNNE DYER

Something has gone wrong in the 'Anglosphere', as the English-speaking countries are known in some other parts of the world.

Smaller English-speaking countries are coping with the Covid-19 emergency quite well. New Zealand's coronavirus death toll so far is eighteen, and Australia's is 83. Even Canada, despite being next-door to the United States, has only 2,500 fatalities.

But the two big English-speaking countries are taking worse losses to the coronavirus than anywhere else. The United Kingdom has 20,000 dead already, and the United States will hit 60,000 by Wednesday at the latest. At the current daily death rate, the US will reach 100,000 in about two weeks.

Last month Sir Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said that keeping deaths below 20,000 would be a 'good outcome', but the final British death toll in this wave of the pandemic will probably be between 30,000 and 40,000 people - the highest loss in Europe.

The United States is almost as bad. Early this month President Trump congratulated himself for his belated conversion to lockdowns, boasting that 'The minimum [predicted] number was 100,000 lives and I think we'll be substantially under that number.'

American infection rates are still going up, so that is highly unlikely. But even if the US stops at the 'minimum' level of 100,000 deaths, that would mean Americans are dying from Covid-19 at eighty times the death rate that Chinese citizens suffered before Beijing got the virus under control. Or, if you doubt China's statistics, at 1,515 times New Zealand's death rate.

Other English-speaking countries, including those that use English as a common second language, like Kenya, India and South Africa, are not showing anomalous death rates. It's just the US and the UK - so what might they have in common that none of the other English-speaking countries share?

Oh, wait a minute. Weren't these two countries the superpowers that dominated the world one after the other for most of the past two centuries?

Might that have made them a bit arrogant? Unable to see the experience of other countries as relevant to their own situation? Reluctant to follow the advice of international bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO)? Am I getting warm here?

Britain ticks all the boxes. It has a nationalistic government obsessed with the 'greatness' of the country's past and unable to grasp the reality of its modest current stature. Hence the Brexit project, for example, but exactly the same attitude is manifest in its coronavirus policies.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was saying 'Test. Test. Test.' as early as January. In early March, however, Britain defied the conventional wisdom and all but abandoned both community testing and contact tracing (which is the other essential part of the 'Test' strategy).

It finally declared a lockdown after all its neighbours, and it is paying the price for the delay with its death rate. This was sheer arrogance at work, with only a slight tincture of ignorance. And even now, with pressure growing for an early release from the lockdown, the UK government is still playing catch-up.

Wrong at every step, Prime Minister Boris Johnson must be very grateful to have Donald 'Lysol' Trump to make him look good by comparison. The American president's sins of omission on coronavirus are why the US has one-third of the Covid-19 infections in the world, with only one-twentieth of the world's population.

Trump downplayed the threat as long as he could, then became a last-minute advocate of lockdown. He has now moved on to being the liberator of the American people from lockdown (without any contact tracing, of course). The problem with him as a leader is that he is not only arrogant but flighty and astoundingly ignorant.

But his flightiness and ignorance are merely personal attributes, and Boris Johnson is not ignorant at all (just lazy). What the two men and their respective countries both have in abundance is an arrogant exceptionalism that is leading them into increasingly grave errors.

As Joseph de Maistre remarked, "Every nation gets the government it deserves."