

The Plague: saving the old

by GWYNNE DYER

The basic choice all along with Covid-19 has been: do we let the old die, or do we take a big hit economically? So far, the decision almost everywhere has been to take the hit and save the old (or most of them), but in some places it has been a very near-run thing.

Already, the number of deaths from coronavirus in the United States has far surpassed the total number who have died in China (3,304 people) from what Donald Trump generally calls the 'Chinese virus'.

China has four times the population of the United States, but in the end around 50 times as many Americans will die from the coronavirus. That is according to Trump's own prediction on Sunday, in the speech where he finally did a U-turn, that 'only' 100,000-200,000 Americans will die because of his wise decision to extend the national lockdown to April 30.

It was a decision he took long after the last minute, if 'last minute' is defined as the last moment when the right decision would have held American deaths down to the Chinese level. But Trump was not alone in this dereliction of duty: his Mini-Me equivalent across the Atlantic, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, also waited much too long, and the United Kingdom will be lucky to escape with 20,000 deaths.

Why did they wait so long before imposing the restrictions on movement that will break the chain of transmission of Covid-19? Because locking down the people also means locking down the economy: huge numbers of people will lose their jobs, at least temporarily, and the stock market will crash.

Whereas if you don't impose the restrictions, perhaps on the plausible pretext that you are pursuing an alternative solution called 'herd immunity', then the economy will keep ticking over nicely. However, achieving herd immunity requires 60%-70% of the population to have had the disease - and with this particular coronavirus, about one or two percent of those people will die.

But who cares? Almost all the victims will be over 70, two-thirds of them will be male, and at least half of them will also have 'underlying conditions' that are already forcing the health services to spend a lot just keeping them alive. They are entirely dispensable to the economy. We would be even richer if they did die.

What forced Johnson into a thinly disguised about-face two weeks ago was one or both of the following facts. One: almost everybody his policy was condemning to death was somebody's beloved father or mother. And two: it amounted to carrying out a cull of Conservative voters, since two-thirds of British people in the over-70s group vote for the Tories.

He was late, but not too late. Even the strictest measures now will not keep the British death toll under 20,000, according to the Imperial College London group that did the key calculations two weeks ago - but half a million would have died without them. And exactly the same equation applies to Donald Trump.

It's always tough to know what Trump really believes, because he will say whatever he thinks works best politically at this precise moment. If it flatly contradicts what he said yesterday, he doesn't care. And if some journalist calls him on the contradiction, he just denies what he said yesterday. It doesn't matter if the statement is on the record; it's 'fake news'.

We cannot know if Trump ever really understood the choice he was making when he condemned lockdowns and repeatedly promised the imminent 'reopening' of the economy. And then, two week after the Imperial College group published its prediction that without lockdowns 2.2 million Americans would die, he finally read it and reversed course. Or so we are supposed to believe.

He even claimed credit for saving two million American lives by abandoning his old strategy (if that's the right word for it). His real calculation, at some level of his conscious or unconscious mind, was that his re-election in November would be even more damaged

by two million needless American deaths on his watch than by a deep recession and huge unemployment.

But at least half of the Americans who will still die would have survived had he moved two weeks sooner, when he already had ample evidence that it was the only sane course. Exactly the same criticism applies to Boris Johnson. But here's a consoling thought.

Everywhere from China and India to Spain and Russia, and even in the United Kingdom and the United States (after stalling as long as possible), governments are putting the lives of the 'useless' old ahead of the alleged needs of the economy. Because that's what their people really want.