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## Little by little the truth of lockdown is being admitted: it was a disaster

Public fear was deliberately stoked to justify decisions made on the hoof and based on questionable advice

Jonathan Sumption

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**L**ockdown was an extreme and unprecedented response to an ancient problem, the challenge of epidemic disease. It was also something else. It marked one of the gravest governmental failures of modern times. In a remarkably candid interview with *The Spectator*, Rishi Sunak has blown the gaff on the sheer superficiality of the decision-making process of which he was himself part. The fundamental rule of good government is not to make radical decisions without understanding the likely consequences. It seems obvious. Yet it is at that most basic level that the Johnson government failed. The tragedy is that this is only now being acknowledged.

Sunak makes three main points. First, the scientific advice was more equivocal and inconsistent than the government let on.

Some of it was based on questionable premises that were never properly scrutinised. Some of it fell apart as soon it was challenged from outside the groupthink of the Sage advisory body. Second, to build support, the government stoked fear, embarking on a manipulative advertising campaign and endorsing extravagant graphics pointing to an uncontrolled rise in mortality if we were not locked down. Third, the government not only ignored the catastrophic collateral damage done by the lockdown but actively discouraged discussion of it, both in government and in its public messaging.

Lockdown was a policy conceived in the early days by China and the World Health Organisation as a way of suppressing the virus altogether (so-called zero Covid). The WHO quickly abandoned this unrealistic ambition. But European countries, except Sweden, eagerly embraced lockdown, ripping up a decade of pandemic planning that had been based on concentrating help on vulnerable groups and avoiding coercion.

At first Britain stood up against the stampede. Then Professor Neil Ferguson's team at Imperial College London published its notorious "Report 9". Sunak confirms that this was what panicked ministers into a measure that the scientists had previously rejected. If No 10 had studied the assumptions underlying it, it might have been less impressed. Report 9 assumed that in the absence of a lockdown people would do nothing whatever to protect themselves. This was contrary to all experience of human behaviour as well as to data available at the time, which showed that people were voluntarily reducing contacts well before the lockdown was announced.

And, as Report 9 pointed out, lockdown would not destroy the virus. It would come back as soon as the restrictions were lifted. The policy therefore made sense only as a stopgap until the advent of an effective vaccine, then reckoned to be 18 months away.

It was always obvious that you could not close down a country for months on end without serious consequences. The shocking thing that emerges from Sunak's interview is that the government refused to take them into account. There was no assessment of the likely collateral costs of lockdown. There was no cost-benefit analysis. There was no planning. In government the issues were not even discussed. Sunak's own attempts to raise them hit a brick wall. Ministers took refuge in evasive buck-passing, claiming to be "following the science".

Yet the critical question was never a scientific one. It was a political question, in which the likely hospital admissions and deaths from Covid were just one element. The scientists said it was not their job to think about the social or economic implications of their advice. They were right about that. The problem was it turned out to be no one else's job.

We are still paying for this negligence, and our children and grandchildren will be paying for it for decades to come. In 2020, UK GDP fell by nearly a tenth, the biggest hit to the economy for at least a century. According to Treasury estimates, 460,000 people left the workforce never to return. The policy took a wrecking ball to the public finances. The IMF estimates that government spending rose by more than £400 billion, or about £6,000 for every man, woman and child. Most of this was unproductive spending. It went on paying people for not working and supporting businesses forced to cease operations. At one point, in the spring of 2020, the government was spending about twice as much on compensating for the

lockdown as it was on the NHS. Borrowing rose to £330 billion, a peacetime record.

Then there are the non-financial costs. Other mortal conditions went undiagnosed and untreated. In October 2020, after four months of lockdown, the Office for National Statistics reported more than 25,000 excess deaths at home from conditions such as cancer, heart disease and dementia. A year after the last lockdown ended, the NHS still has a vast backlog. Excess deaths, 95 per cent of them due to conditions other than Covid, are running at about 1,000 a week. There has been a huge impact on mental health, with children and the poor worst affected.

Children lost two terms of face-to-face schooling. The closure of schools, training establishments and universities slowed the accumulation of skills, reducing productivity. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated the cost to the economy at somewhere between £90 billion and £350 billion. The best-off, with plenty of resources at home, will probably recover. Those who are already disadvantaged will be permanently damaged. Existing inequalities will grow a lot worse.

The lockdown was an experiment in authoritarian government unmatched in our history even in wartime. Not only did the government assume powers over the lives of citizens that it had never previously claimed. In government, decision-making was concentrated in the hands of the prime minister, a man with notoriously poor judgment and little taste for detail. The cabinet was kept out of the loop until near the end. Discussion of fundamental issues was ruled out in the name of collective

responsibility.

Sunak blames the government's hysterical public messaging for aggravating the economic impact of the lockdown. Other countries did not stoke public fear in this irresponsible way. It has, he says, contributed to making the UK's recovery the slowest in Europe. That is no doubt true. But there is a more serious criticism. Throughout history, fear has been the chief instrument of authoritarian rule. During the lockdown it was what enabled the government to silence dissent and inhibit discussion.

The result illustrated some of the worst features of top-down government. The lack of wider deliberation and scrutiny leads to decisions being made on the hoof, without proper forethought, planning or research. It promotes loyalty at the expense of wisdom, and flattery at the expense of objective advice. It encourages overconfidence, banishing moderation and restraint. It was only the weakening of the prime minister's political authority after the Owen Paterson affair that emboldened a supine cabinet to overrule him and his scientific advisers for the first time in December last year when the NHS feared being overwhelmed by the Omicron variant.

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Ministers and scientists responsible for a policy that has inflicted untold misery on an entire population naturally find it

hard to admit they may have been mistaken. But closing ranks against the public interest usually fails in the end. There will be more embarrassing disclosures after this one. The official narrative is beginning to unravel.

*Lord Sumption is a former Supreme Court justice*

Lockdown

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