

by Michael Meadowcroft

## **Context**

British society has been profoundly affected by the dramatic effects of the Covid pandemic and its attendant lockdown. Covid deaths in the UK have topped 200,000. There are a number of issues relating to the government's decisions in relation to the pandemic but these are outwith the scope of this paper which is concerned particularly with the lessons and indications for politics following the pandemic. Issues to do with climate change and the effects of Brexit continue and affect everyone, but even these topics will benefit by a greater awareness of the imperative of political involvement as a consequence of the effects of Covid and lockdown on society. There are, of course, other effects of the pandemic on individuals, some of which are ongoing, but this paper attempts to focus attention on the broader analysis and not on policies which could ameliorate specific conditions.

## **The Pandemic and Society**

There has been a significant change in the perception of social values as a consequence of the Covid pandemic. The change is present but not articulated - certainly not by politicians - but it would be detrimental to coping with future development if it was not acknowledged. The changes are specifically Liberal and the Liberal Democrats are well placed to explain the changes and to embrace and promote policies based on them.

### Post-Covid Politics:

#### 1. Solidarity between individuals

The ubiquity of the pandemic and the virus' ability to infect men and women in every social, ethnic and age group in the country has brought a recognition that "we're all in it together" and that each individual needs to accept a responsibility to every other citizen, even if it meant a considerable restriction on freedoms and on economic and educational progress. Certainly there were differences in the impact of Covid on age groups and social classes but none escaped some infection. It still continues today and, even though as a result of the widespread vaccination programme, its effects are generally less severe than when the infection was at its height, it still requires testing and isolation.

#### 2. The importance of community

The response of established communities and the development of new groups particularly during lockdown were marked and a revived spirit of communal assistance to those less able to cope was very apparent. Whereas over recent years the balance between interaction and individualism has tilted towards the latter, the pandemic has brought a reversal and many individuals, experiencing the pleasure of contact and socialising, even if only in delivering food, medicines and other help, have continued to work in community associations. The existence of food banks is a condemnation of the failure of government but they have had the side effect of bringing suppliers, distributors and users together.

#### 3. Human values over economic values

The impact of Covid on the economy, including the high cost of supporting those affected, has been significant and the over-riding importance of assisting those suffering and those in the front line of assistance took precedence over the high cost. In effect the need for a revival of Keynesian economics over monetarism in order to deal with the urgent and deep needs of individuals needs to be noted and acknowledged.

#### 4. The vital importance of the public service

For many years there has been a denigration of the public service, mainly tacitly but occasionally open. The status of the public service had been diminished, not least by contrast with that of entrepreneurs and profit making. But suddenly it was realised that it was crucial, literally, for survival. This recognition applied to all levels of the public service. It was not only doctors, nurses and teachers but also care workers, cleaners and dustbin men. That acknowledgement has

continued post-lockdown in the public support for those public service unions “forced” to go on strike. The enhancement of the public service needs to be built into our political statements and our policy making.

## 5. Internationalism

For many years the Liberal concept of internationalism has been attacked and the perverse and dangerous promotion of nationalism and protectionism has gained increased public resonance. Suddenly, confronted with the Covid virus, the world found itself in a global pandemic in which national boundaries were of no consequence. Very quickly the sharing of information across the world, the development of vaccines internationally and the acceptance of measures to minimise the consequences of the virus became the norm. Moreover the importance of the UN and its WHO function came to the fore. It would be difficult going forward now to deny the vital importance of international and global co-operation and liaison.

There are also technological changes in work and social practices emanating from the lockdown which affect the way individuals, companies and voluntary groups operate, such as online meetings and working from home. Both of these have consequential effects on interaction and the process of decision making that need to be taken into account.

### **The Liberal Democrat party’s capacity to encompass post-Covid opportunities**

It is open to all political parties to respond positively to the post-Covid opportunities but the basic philosophies of the three main parties would suggest that Liberalism is most attuned to the current possibilities. The problem is that the Liberal Democrats have for many years been focused on short-term policies and strategy rather than on the values that underpin these. The most recent publication purporting to fill these void was Policy Paper 125, “The Opportunity to Succeed, the Power to Change” presented to the party’s Autumn Conference 2016 but even this was mainly policy indications with just ten pages on the “Liberal Democrat Approach” as its statement of values. Previous to this one has to go back 2002 for a comprehensive statement of Liberal Democrat values (“Freedom, Liberty and Fairness - Liberal Values for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, Beecroft Publications, Leeds.)

A recent paper from the party’s Chief Executive, Mike Dixon, (“Our Strategy and What Comes Next”) was almost entirely an analysis of electoral opportunities allied to poll ratings of the government and how to react to them. Its only nod towards the party’s aim and purpose was a paragraph tucked away on page 7:

We all know what Lib Dems stand for: fairness, freedom, internationalism, investing in education, long term thinking, the environment, giving power to everyone, making decisions local, listening to people.

This is wholly inadequate and, indeed, Labour and Conservative politicians would give their assent to all these points, even if their interpretation was very different to the Liberal Democrats’. The other highly practical recent paper came from the estimable Dave McCobb on 20 February, (“Why we stand candidates everywhere”) but the “why” was only in connection with strategy and not because the party has a unique and attractive vision.

Allied to this lacuna is the desperate state of the party organisationally. My assessment is that over half the constituencies lack any viable Liberal Democrat organisation and the “core vote” where token candidates stand is a low as 2%. In many areas the situation is hidden by amalgamating a number of constituencies in one association. In Leeds, for instance, all eight constituencies are now one single association thus hiding the fact that seven of the eight constituencies (plus one single ward) are derelict. The party has been in single figures in the opinion polls for nine year and does not appear to be bothered. (For further reading on these matters see articles [A Liberal Democrat Programme for Action 2020-2023](#) and [The Liberal Democrat Party Crisis](#) and the article “Lib Dems in the Cities”, in the Journal of Liberal History, Issue 117, Winter 2022-23.)

Given the situation set out above it is up to Liberal groups such as JSMI and the Social Liberal Forum outside the formal mainstream party that exist to promote rigorous thinking and expression, to fill the gap and to promote a Liberal philosophy that is in tune with today’s social and political life. Only with an awareness and understanding of their

application today can the party build policies and strategies which will draw in the movers and shakers that might rescue the party.

**Conclusion**

This is just the preliminary note as requested by the JSMI. Its purpose is to alert politicians generally and Liberal Democrats in particular to the changing values in society and to point out these changes are uniquely in a Liberal direction. The JSMI needs now to decide how best it can develop this analysis and what practical policies the Liberal Democrats and other parties should adopt. If this is not done it will be yet another lost opportunity.

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