

Shortage of Science

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As the national enquiry into what happened in government during the Covid period unfolds, I reprint a letter published in the Oxford Times in April 2020.

In this learned, medical city, PPE means different things to different workers. To university lecturers and students PPE means the gentle study of Philosophy Politics and Economics. To NHS frontline staff PPE stands for Personal Protective Equipment – and is a matter of life and death.

The UK's political leaders who have nervously addressed the nation from the Downing Street podium over the past weeks took degrees as follows: Johnson (classics), Raab (law), Patel (economics), Sharma (physics), Hancock (PPE) Jenrick (history), Sunak (PPE).

The government front bench might manage a bit of calculus but would struggle to explain how Einstein amended Newton. They may have their bevy of medical advisers and Dominic Cummings (history) – and may be adept with social and financial matters - but the nuances of science have escaped their largely Oxford education. Never again will a Health and Social Care Secretary be appointed who is not a medical doctor.

For the record, the Opposition's front bench reads: Starmer (law), Dodds (PPE), Nandy (politics), Ashworth (politics and philosophy), Thomas-Symonds (PPE), Reeves (PPE) – a similarly science-free diaspora.

Perhaps it is our political leaders' partial education which begins to explain why they have been reluctant to set a path to reopening the country. Step outside their favoured PPE and they are marooned. Contrast Angela Merkel, a doctor of chemistry.

As we plot possible ways forward from kitchen tables and sofas – with NHS practitioners and keyworkers modelling great leadership - we see brought into sharp focus the good which makes up any society: its physical and mental health, its social fabric, its economic underpinning.

This is a vicious, unpredictable pandemic. Politicians globally are hesitating over unenviable decisions. Open up too quickly and deadly consequences may arise. Wait too long and social and economic fabrics start to fray.

To inform these decisions at home, different sectors of British society need to step forward and advise our politicians. Banking leaders and hospital trusts should publish their recommendations for a virus exit strategy. The third sector, headteachers, vice-chancellors and county council leaders should do the same. The nation's small, medium and big businesses must offer their perspective.

In my experience of working with policy makers across the globe, *practice shapes policy*. Never has the time been more ripe for practitioners in their different arenas to lead this country's political class.

Children have been painting rainbows across the nation. Courageous leadership paints a vivid picture of a better tomorrow. Our political leaders need help.

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