

of economic, social and political turmoil than most European countries. The desire to return to some kind of normality may be especially strong here; taking proper anti-Covid precautions would be an acknowledgement that we cannot do that.

These dozen years of crisis have also hardened us. Last week, researchers at the University of York revealed that between 2010 and 2015 alone, Conservative austerity policies in England led to more than 57,000 deaths. Yet, like the thousands of English Covid fatalities since “freedom day”, the revelation did not receive much coverage. Ever since the Tories began to dismantle the protective state in 2010, with very obvious social consequences, much of the media and the public have got used to looking the other way. To face up to the enormous human cost of modern Conservatism would make supporting them, as the supposedly safe choice of government, much harder to justify.

There is also a more subtle side to England’s Covid complacency. One of the reasons for Johnson’s strong position as premier, which is rarely discussed, is the complicity that exists between him and many voters – even some who don’t support him. His cynical optimism feeds an appetite for easy solutions, and the hope that crises such as the pandemic can be wished away, even though we know they can’t be. At the Labour conference last month, as speaker after speaker rightly condemned the government’s Covid insouciance, many in the packed sessions sat without their masks on. Such behaviour is contagious: after a few sessions, I also took mine off.

Mixed in with this wishful thinking is a degree of fatalism: the widespread belief in England that the Conservatives are so politically impregnable that there is nothing we can do about their approach to the virus except go along with it. Earlier in the pandemic, things were different: many people followed their own Covid rules, more cautious than the government’s, for example by cutting back on socialising when it was still officially permitted. There is less sign of such caution now. We seem to have learned to live with the Tories’ deadly incompetence, as they have told us to live with the virus.

In England, there may also be a diminishing awareness about how other countries are dealing with the pandemic. At the start of it, following the different Covid strategies around the world was a way of coping with the crisis, of finding small sources of hope, and the media provided such material accordingly. But the pandemic is covered in a more insular way in England now, with little reference to comparable countries’ stricter rules and lower death tolls. With travel to the rest of Europe still much less common than usual, many English people have no concrete sense of how the latest anti-Covid measures there, such as vaccine passports, are working out. Such measures are also being tried in Scotland and Wales, but much of the English press is profoundly incurious about how these countries are diverging from England. In public health, as in much else after Brexit, England is following its own risky path.

That could change. Over the last few days, as many more people have realised how bad England’s Covid situation is, the government has said that it has no intention to alter its virus strategy “for now”. Previously in the pandemic, such evasive language has been the prelude to a change of policy.

In the crowded part of London where I live, where the Covid toll has already been terrible, slightly more people are wearing masks and keeping their distance in the street this week. It’s possible that England’s pandemic ethics experiment may, finally, be about to produce more encouraging results – some signs that we want to protect each other as well as our own interests. But for Covid’s victims since “freedom day”, it will be too late.

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