GLOBAL 09.06.2020

When the second Covid-19 wave hits

Balancing civil liberties and public health is a real challenge – and the science behind it must be free from political corruption

Decisions around the world to relax or remove restrictions were induced not only by the need to restart economic growth, but by public pressure for the return of personal freedoms. Putting aside the efficacy of the lockdown strategy, this pressure manifested itself in protests in the US, in Nigeria and in Germany, where there are fears over the political radicalisation of protesters.

Yet certain facts define our reality. There's no vaccine. There's no treatment. And any health official worth their salt, including the embattled Anthony Fauci in the US, has said there will be a second wave of Covid-19. Considering what we now know, it is sure to bring with it political problems and serious impacts on personal prosperity.

And so a global public health crisis is evolving into a political dilemma for leaders of democratic countries. Are policies that restrict civil liberties in order to curb the spread of the deadly coronavirus legitimate? How can governments reconcile protecting public health with protecting the personal liberties that are fundamental to democratic states?

Most importantly, we need to prevent the crisis from becoming a permanent political fix to be exploited. That would be a win-win situation for politicians and embattled public health scientists, which could also solve legal challenges to the reintroduction of civil liberty restrictions in the event of a second wave of Covid-19.

Whose politics?

This isn't the first time societies have been so troubled; the stock market collapse in 1929 led to the Great Depression. But today, as protests threaten social order and weak economies suffer growing unemployment, governments are also grappling with a virus that has infected millions, is killing hundreds of thousands and is crippling public health systems.

In the 1930s, with high unemployment and disunity, Europe's strongest economy today was then its weakest. Carl Schmitt, a leading legal German scholar at the time, proposed a 'strong state' based on 'authoritarian foundations' to 'depoliticise' Germany. Some of this is seen today in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's rule by decree with no clear end to a state of emergency has attracted the attention of the Council of Europe. Depoliticising politics clearly creates a problem that politics cannot solve: whose politics?

Come the second wave, governments will again face the demanding balancing act between public health protection and the economic interests of the state and citizens.

The politics of Trump's Republicans or the Democrats in the US; those of Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, the SPD or AfD in Germany; or those of Macron's En Marche!, the Republicans or the Socialist Party in France? At the core of the economic and political conundrums facing governments today, and certain to get worse when a second wave of Covid-19 arrives, is: how to legitimately restrain constitutionally guaranteed liberties and effectively manage resistance to lockdown measures?

Come the second wave, governments will again face the demanding balancing act between public health protection and the economic interests of the state and citizens, whose calls for personal liberties are not divorced from calls for their economic freedom – both of which were a government ambition, if not a main motivation, in easing lockdown measures. Every protester expects politicians to deliver on these government obligations. And protests raise serious legal and political concerns, for which neither the €750 billion proposed for the Next Generation EU Covid-19 recovery instrument or the additional $3 trillion now in political limbo proposed in the US will suffice.

Fading political ideas

The world watched in awe as gun-toting Americans occupied their states' legislatures because their constitution accords them the fundamental rights they used to violate that space. The spectacle is certain to be repeated when governments again resort to a proven measure that curbs the spread of Covid-19: restrictions on civil liberties. The risks of further politicising public health measures to curb Covid-19 are grave. Old groups, such as neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, now crave and receive attention from a growing number of distressed unemployed, desperate for quick solutions. By masking hate with personal liberty promises, these groups are giving life to fading political ideas and undermining public

health protection measures.

In the US, the old political guard is well ahead, having easily divided some 300 million diverse political voices along simple blue and red state lines. It's a success that has contributed to undermining public health protection measures and is certain to cloud common sense in November's elections. Here in Europe, the Poles, Greeks, French and Czechs will head to the polls this year too. To reduce deaths in the coming second Covid-19 wave, political narratives with false choices between 'crippling the economy' and 'protecting public health' must not be used to sway voters.

The solution is deceptively simple. We must get on with our politics. But we must divorce science from the fantasies of politics.

And so if – to the dismay of economists – printing money will not work, and politicians, some of whom are now part of the problem, cannot provide solutions to the eventual second Covid-19 wave; what is the answer? A smart solution that transcends politics and economics is urgently needed.

Science, not miracles

Oblivious and immune to the effects of scientific knowledge, a unified flock of Republicans shepherded by Donald Trump disregard science in favour of political ideology, provoking a partisan Democratic response. It's the sort of political corruption that Schmitt argued weakens states. A sort of political corruption that leaves a most capable country with the most deaths from Covid-19. A political corruption that builds political blocs on the backs of ordinary people. A political corruption that compromises millions of lives due to Trump's suspending contributions and repayment of debts to the WHO. All this, while the world battles a global pandemic.

The solution is deceptively simple. We must get on with our politics. But we must divorce science from the fantasies of politics. Fictional political narratives must not be scientific variables. Before the second wave arrives, we need political leaders capable of differentiating between miracles and science. We need to free science from political corruption. We need to find scientists as pure, steadfast and constant as the fact that 1 + 1 will always be 2. We need politicians who will allow them to be so.It is, after all, a human defect to believe. We must create space for scientists and politicians to work while we sacrifice constitutional rights.