

SESSION NINE OF THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

Pandemic Response and Recovery

Monday 14 November 2022, 5.00pm, Committee Room 17

MINUTES

In Attendance: Esther McVey MP (Chair), Greg Smith MP, Chris Green MP, Baroness Foster of Oxtou, Earl of Leicester, Lord Strathcarron, Lord Wrottesley, Lord Frost, Lord Robathan, Viscount Camrose, Lord Roborough, Lord Ashcombe, Philip Davies MP.

Apologies: Graham Stringer MP, Rt Hon Sammy Wilson MP, Henry Smith MP, Sir Graham Brady MP, Miriam Cates MP, Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Dawn Butler MP, Andrew Rosindell MP, Sir Charles Walker MP, Ian Paisley MP, Paul Girvan MP, Lord Moylan, Baroness Noakes, Baroness Morrissey, Baroness Fox of Buckley.

1. The Chair welcomed the APPG members to an examination of media coverage during the Covid pandemic.
2. The Chair introduced the first speaker:

Dr Colin Alexander, *Senior Lecturer in Political Communications at Nottingham Trent University (NTU).*

Dr Alexander began by discussing the notion and ethics of propaganda and in particular the ethics of fear propaganda in the context of the covid pandemic. Using examples from the advertising campaigns he illustrated the way in which fear characterised the public health campaigns such as the “look him/her in the eyes” campaign. He went on to make the point that there is a difference in intent between public information that tells people/explains a threat to the community and that which causes fear. Fear has known psychological effects, affecting the ability of the individual (self haunting) and the collective (psychosis) to reason. He ended by looking at how journalism approached the pandemic, highlighting the invocation of the language of war in much of the reporting, asking whether journalism was credulous, naive, ignorant, collusive or a mixture of all those things.

Dr Piers Robinson, *co-director of the Organisation for Propaganda Studies and previously Professor in Politics, Society and Political Journalism, University of Sheffield.*

Dr Robinson talked about threats to freedom of expression referring to the Ofcom guidelines that were implemented early on in the pandemic to control the range of discourse. He went on to discuss the concepts of misinformation, malinformation and disinformation and the ongoing threats to open debate, such as the online safety bill in the UK and the Digital Services Act in the EU. Quoting JS Mill “All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility”, Dr Robinson argued that in the context of Covid-19, we risked censoring important views out of the discussion before there had been time for debate about their accuracy.

A BBC journalist who asked to remain anonymous - *sharing experiences of working in the newsroom during the covid crisis.*

3. The Chair opened the meeting up to Members' questions and discussion. Members voiced concerns about alternative scientific viewpoints being heard. Comment was also made about the gotcha-style questioning at the covid press briefings and whether it would have been more helpful for journalists to take the public on a journey of learning and discovery instead.

4. The Chair thanked all the Members who attended and the speakers, confirmed the date of the next meeting, 5.30pm, Monday 12 December 2022 and brought the meeting to a close.