

SESSION THIRTEEN OF THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

Pandemic Response and Recovery

Monday 20 March 2023, 5.30pm, Room P

MINUTES

In Attendance: Rt Hon Esther McVey MP (Chair), Graham Stringer MP (Co-Chair), Rt Hon Sammy Wilson MP, Chris Green MP, Sir Christopher Chope MP, Lord Robathan.

Apologies: Sir Graham Brady MP, Miriam Cates MP, Henry Smith MP, Greg Smith MP, Philip Davies MP, Dawn Butler MP, Ian Paisley MP, Paul Girvan MP, Baroness Foster of Oxtou, Earl of Leicester, Lord Moylan, Lord Strathcarron, Baroness Fox of Buckley, Baroness Noakes, Baroness Morrissey.

1. The Chair welcomed the APPG members to the meeting to discuss The Covid Consensus – A Critique from the Left.
2. The Chair introduced the speakers, Thomas Fazi (via Zoom), a writer and journalist and Professor Toby Green, Professor of Precolonial and Lusophone African History and Culture at King's College London:

Thomas Fazi began by explaining that the book offers a detailed chronicle of the political and biomedical response to the pandemic and tries to understand the shift of power away from elected representatives. The book looks at why certain choices were made and how it was possible that the scientific consensus on the best way to manage pandemics was jettisoned overnight in favour of a novel response, amplified by the media and social media. Fazi summarised how all pre-2020 plans, reaffirmed by the WHO a few months before in a 2019 report, were based around a clear philosophy that any public health response has to carefully balance the cost of all interventions, minimise disruption to everyday life and focus on those most at risk, an approach which was applied to deadlier pandemics than SARS-CoV-2.

He described the concept of the revolving door between business and government and how that helped to shape the policy response to the pandemic, creating huge wealth for the few companies involved. He went on to talk about how that also influenced huge changes of opinion on public health interventions, turning evidenced policy on its head, without robust scientific discussion. This in turn led to the establishment of a “single scientific narrative” whether on the use of masks, asymptomatic transmission theory or lockdowns. Fazi emphasised how any alternative views were dismissed as conspiracy or fringe and touched on the vaccination programmes which saw health policy by press release. Fazi concluded that to ensure what he described as Disaster Capitalism 2.0 did not happen again, governments must address this revolving door and the many conflicts of interest it produces between business and government.

Professor Toby Green then spoke about the global social, economic and political effects of the policy response, starting with examples in Western society such as in the UK the NHS

now faces the biggest crisis in its history with over 7 million people awaiting treatment, almost 400,000 waiting over a year, “around 231 times the number of people waiting over a year pre-pandemic in January 2020”. He also described the effect on routine school attendance and attainment gap, that 40% of deaths in the West happened in care homes, the increase in deaths from heart disease and dementia and worldwide increases in depression, anxiety and isolation.

Turning to the Global South, Professor Green described the outcomes of the policy response on access to education. In September 2021 a report found that 37% of children from underprivileged households in India were not studying at all while in Uganda 4.5 million children left education permanently due to teen pregnancy, early marriage and child labour. Malnutrition was the cause of 45% of global deaths in children aged 5 or under (WHO April 2020). In Senegal lockdowns had devastated the informal economy leading to huge increases in migration, especially into the Canary Islands. Professor Green outlined other consequences of pandemic policy on the Global South including huge increase in indebtedness meaning health spending declined in over half Low Income Countries, threatening future global health as non-covid vaccination programmes stalled and trust in government declined to new lows in countries like Senegal. Green concluded that the unscientific ‘one size fits all’ response to the pandemic had catastrophic social, economic and political impacts worldwide.

3. The Chair opened the meeting up to questions and discussion. There was interest in how easy it was to gain coverage of the book and its subject matter in the media and some debate about the questions the left must answer, the lack of rational discourse and obsession with “the science” so that it became political. It was remarked that certain left-wing governments, such as Sweden, chose not to follow the covid consensus. Media group-think and the difficulty discussing certain topics was raised, as was the structure of the WHO in relation to power, private funding and vested interests of unelected global agencies.

4. The Chair thanked all those who attended and confirmed the date of the next meeting, 5.30pm, Monday 24 April 2023 and brought the meeting to a close.