

SESSION THREE OF THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

Pandemic Response and Recovery

Monday 28 February 2022, 4-5pm, by Zoom

MINUTES

In Attendance: Esther McVey MP, Graham Stringer MP, Chris Green MP, Philip Davies MP, Lord Moonie.

Non-voting attendees: Dr Gary Sidley, Laura Dodsworth, Professor Marcantonio Spada, Darren Birch, Bradley Goodwin (Steve Baker's office), Jemma Moran (Secretariat), Rachel Marcus (Secretariat).

Apologies: Sir Graham Brady MP, Miriam Cates MP, Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Andrew Rosindell MP, Sir Charles Walker MP, Sammy Wilson MP, Ian Paisley MP, Paul Girvan MP, Baroness Noakes, Philip Davies MP, Baroness Morissey, Lord Robathan, Baroness Fox, Baroness Foster.

1. The Chair welcomed the APPG members to the second session to discuss the Government's Covid communication strategy, which followed guidance from Independent Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B).

2. The Chair introduced the four speakers and the Group heard evidence from each:

- **Laura Dodsworth**, author of *'A State of Fear: How the UK government weaponised fear during the Covid-19 pandemic'*, talked about the way in which fear was deliberately used and "weaponised" in the government's marketing and media campaign, with no exit strategy to "de-fear", and on the advice of the behavioural scientists in SPI-B, highlighting the £300 million plus spent on advertising and its frightening, 24/7 and hyperbolic nature to make people think they are the risk. Laura talked about the way fear was struck into people's hearts for example, with constant big number death data but no recovery data, non-peer reviewed worst case modelling scenarios or draconian laws with the most punitive fines since the Dark Ages. Quoting a SPI-B member, Laura illustrated how fear was ramped up "*The way we have used fear is dystopian, we have a totalitarian government in respect of propaganda. The use of fear has definitely been ethically questionable, it's been like a weird experiment. Ultimately it backfired because people became too scared*" Laura also made the point that an enormous amount of public money is spent on behavioural scientists with no accountability to the public, citing the Loan Charge APPG as another example, and the urgent need for a public enquiry and consultation on the government's deployment of behavioural science.
- **Darren**, a retired police officer gave a first hand account of the impact the Government's fear messaging had on him, someone who, the Group heard, in his career policed riots and the miner's strikes, carried firearms, worked on search teams and fatal traffic accidents to illustrate what he had dealt with before Covid-19. He was alarmed at the start, being deemed clinically extremely vulnerable as a terminal cancer sufferer, but an initial feeling of being looked after turned to abject fear with the constant text messages and letters from the NHS confining him to his house where he watched the daily podium announcements and constant barrage on TV. He described how he believed everything and was left very angry with himself, with the government and with the opposition as there was no-one giving proper facts and information. Darren called for the population to be allowed to make informed decisions from fact and treated with more respect. Darren made the point that in his old profession if somebody had sought to instil the fear that he personally felt and was made to feel, that person would have been subject to the law.
- **Dr Gary Sidley**, a retired Consultant Clinical Psychologist, spoke about the three specific nudges which caused major ethical concerns: fear inflation; shaming; and peer pressure or scapegoating, or in the language of behavioural science affect, ego and norms, sometimes called normative pressure. Dr Sidley added that behavioural scientists know that a fearful population is a compliant population citing how the explicit intent of SAGE was clear in their advice to the government in the March 2020 minutes. Dr Sidley went on to illustrate how these nudges were used with examples of how each was exploited in the advertising, constant fear messaging that operated below the level of conscious awareness and government announcements. Dr Sidley highlighted three main areas of grave ethical concern: should a civilised society deliberately, strategically increase the emotional distress of its people as a way of getting them to comply and the unintended consequences; informed consent

prior to the delivery of any clinical intervention, a cornerstone of ethical practice; and the legitimacy of the goals to which these nudges are applied. Dr Sidley added he had written to the British Psychological Society (BPS), letters co-signed by many colleagues, about these concerns and had received dismissive and delayed responses, pointing to apparent conflicts of interest in some SPI-B members also holding senior BPS positions. Dr Sidley ended by reporting he had also now written to PACAC asking for an enquiry.

- **Professor Marcantonio Spada**, Professor of Addictive Behaviours and Mental Health at London South Bank University spoke about his concerns over how the messaging about the risk of the virus was skewed towards catastrophic outcomes, was fear enhancing with very little information provided about risk in relation to age or number of comorbidities. He illustrated his point that, even today, people believe the average age of death from covid is between 40-55. Prof Spada spoke about how constant negative media exposure could lead to mild/severe mental health issues and activate a perpetual state of fight or flight response which would inevitably cause severe psychological problems. He outlined his fear that a multiplier effect over time will cement maladaptive behaviours that maintain the fear and eventually cause an escalation of associated psychological distress. Prof Spada talked about his research which has identified the emergence of Covid-19 Anxiety Syndrome, constituted by behaviours which lock people into anxiety states, behaviours directly or indirectly fostered by the deployment of behavioural scientific techniques which inflated the fear of covid and saw 47% suffer psychological distress, a threefold increase. Prof Spada ended by pointing out the enormous mental health costs associated with these interventions and the secondary and tertiary mental health costs.

3. All the experts argued against the use of use of nudge techniques, calling for a formal enquiry into the use of behavioural science by government, in particular looking at the ethics, informed consent, the maladaptive behaviours which brought on Covid Anxiety Syndrome in many previously well people, the lack of exit strategy and need for greater degree of accountability.

4. The Chair invited Members to ask questions. Members were able to probe the experts further on particular points of concern following examination of the evidence, such as the need to hold the government to account, establishing an ethical framework and how reforms to the Human Rights Act might enshrine protections against such future measures.

5. The Group then gave consideration to possible actions arising from the discussion, which included writing to PACAC to request an urgent enquiry, submitting questions in the House as well as to the current Science and Technology Committee enquiry.

6. The Chair thanked all who attended, confirmed the date of the next meeting, Monday 28 March 2022, and brought the meeting to a close.