

## **Covid-19, compliance, and the Blitz spirit**

In her televised address to the nation back in April, Her Majesty the Queen invoked the spirit of the Blitz. In years to come, she hoped, the people of Britain would take pride in their response to the pandemic. The “attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling” – connecting as they do generations of Britons past and present – would see us through.

Travel on the upper deck of a London bus and you may feel these attributes are in shorter supply than Her Majesty and many of her subjects imagined. If the wearing of face-masks is a test of national character, we may be in need of some grade inflation. Self-discipline and fellow-feeling seem altogether absent from the sizeable number of people who aren’t even pretending to wear a face-mask on public transport. And then there are the many others who regard the wearing of masks as window-dressing pure and simple – something you go through the motions of doing when boarding and exiting a bus or train but that you are under no obligation to keep up with when you are sitting among your fellow passengers, away from the scrutiny of petty officialdom.

The capacity for cheery conformity in the face of adversity is an important part of the British self-image – or, at least, of the self-image of the generation of Britons who grew up in, as they would see it, the shadow of the Second World War. Central to our national story is the thought that conformity on the home front – the kind of conformity required to make the blackout effective against German bombers – helped spare Britain from defeat and invasion.

And, indeed, the vocabulary of war is all around us, including on the lips of politicians keen to cast the pandemic as an enemy we must defeat and a threat like none we have faced in peacetime. It is a vocabulary that concentrates minds: it says that the stakes are as high as a nation can face. But it also gives pause for reflection and comparison. If this is a war, how are we doing? Are we in the phase of the war that is the Battle of Britain or the fall of Singapore?

Amidst these questions, none is more pointed than that of whether we are living up to the standards of our supposed national character. Lionising our forebears is a very British thing to do and most of us accept that no generation of Britons – including the one(s) that lived through the Second World War – has been a community of saints. Crime didn’t grind to a halt between 1939 and 1945. Even the blackout relied on a small army of volunteer enforcers. And yet for all this, it is hard to believe that the evasions and avoidance on display today in relation to mask-wearing would not have grated with earlier generations. Haven’t the authorities made clear that the wearing of face-masks on public transport constitutes a chain of protection no less than the chain of wartime blackouts? Isn’t it plain that if you remove yourself from the chain, you thereby break it and destroy the protection it provides to *everyone* along the way?

You may think it obvious where all of this is going – a bemoaning that things aren't what they used to be.

Allow us not to be quite so predictable. To be sure, some of the behaviour we are witnessing on public transport and in our supermarkets is unedifying and may indeed be the product of creeping social atomisation and disaggregation. But the bad behaviour remains convincingly outweighed by the good. It may not be the same *kind* of good behaviour we would have witnessed on the home front in the Second World War. It is certainly less driven by a sense both of conformity-for-conformity's-sake and of common membership of a self-contained, homogeneous island community. But goodness, aplenty, there is.

We have to ask how much of the bad behaviour of the governed can be traced back to slipperiness on the part of the governing authorities themselves. Have the authorities done all they could to harness the national spirit the Queen invoked or have they contributed to the very anxiety they should be in the business of remedying?

Here is what we know. Covid-19 is spread by people coming into contact with one another. The closer the contact, the more likely it is you will get sick or to make others sick. The more enclosed the setting in which the contact takes place, the higher the risk of infection.

It follows from this that public transport is not a safe space. It is the opposite: it is somewhere you can (relatively speaking) easily get infected. The best advice we can give those with underlying health conditions – especially, *respiratory* conditions – is plain and simple: *avoid using public transport*. And yet this isn't the advice the authorities give. Vulnerable people are permitted to travel by bus or train, if it is essential for them to do so. Moreover, in certain cases, they are exempt from the requirement to wear face-masks. And to complete the picture of exception and equivocation, public transport workers and passengers alike are discouraged from confronting those who are not wearing face-masks.

In the end, this policy serves no-one's interests: its contradictions stare you in the face, as though challenging you to pretend they are not there.

Consider first the perspective of the vulnerable person. If you are too sick to wear a face-mask, you shouldn't be using public transport to begin with: you are placing yourself in a petri dish of potential infection.

Move now to the perspective of those who are not in the vulnerable category. Either the wearing of masks is a chain of protection, analogous to the chain of the war-time blackout, or it is not. If it is a chain, then personal circumstances have no bearing on whether the chain may be broken. Householders during the Blitz were not exempted from the blackout requirements on health or any other grounds, for the very obvious reason that any exemptions would have destroyed the blackout's effectiveness. So, the mere introduction of exemptions for mask-wearing, according to personal circumstances, sends out a very clear message: this is not a chain, it matters not if it is broken.

Consider now a third perspective, that of enforcement. Shoppers in many supermarkets are discouraged, by way of in-store announcements, from challenging those who are not wearing

face-masks. The justification for this is admirably humane. The health conditions that might make the wearing of a mask difficult for someone are likely to be hidden. Asking a complete stranger to justify herself to you, and in the process to reveal intimate and quite possibly painful medical information about herself, feels like the action of an intrusive bully. It is this sensibility – alongside a worry about just how nasty a confrontation could get – that no doubt accounts for the reluctance of supermarket workers to refuse entry to shoppers who are not wearing masks and the similar reluctance on the part of bus drivers not to allow the mask-less on board to travel.

And yet a blanket-policy of this kind forces us all into an uneasy suspension of disbelief. The probability of a teenager having a medical condition that truly *prevents* her from wearing a face-mask is low. You do not need to be a statistician to realise that the probability of three un-related teenagers, travelling and shopping together, *all* having a medical condition preventing them from wearing a mask is *really* low. The next time you see such a grouping on public transport or in a supermarket, do not kid yourself that your reluctance to confront them has got anything to do with the medical embarrassment your confrontation might cause. That reluctance is much more likely down to an uneasy sense there is a vacuum in authority itself when it comes to the enforcement of the mask-wearing policy. If bus drivers, protected as they are by re-enforced screens and the back-up of the British Transport Police, do not feel themselves in a position to confront the mask-less, what hope is there for the rest of us?

So, identifying the true source and object of our current anxiety is no easy task. For some, the pandemic has revealed something about the underlying moral health of the nation and the numerical balance between the Selfish and the Unselfish. For all that the Unselfish have been shown to be in the majority, that majority is not as clear as it was imagined to be – and certainly not as clear as it was in earlier times of national crisis, most obviously the Second World War. On this view, the words of the Queen ring hollow: they are the echoes of a dying breed.

Certainly, the habits of thinking we associate with wartime Britain – self-sacrifice in the face of a grander cause and a presumption you will do as you are told by the powers that be – look like they have weakened as the conditions of wartime have receded in our collective memory. The call for conformity to combat Covid-19 has collided with an age in which the accepted bases of conformity are narrower than ever.

Then again, there is another way of looking at this. Something that runs deep in our national character – and certainly connects us to the Blitz generation – is a down-to-earth sense of when things do (and do not) add up, of what is substance and what is flannel, and of when the buck is being passed. Rubbing up, daily, against the selfishness of some of our fellow citizens induces anxiety. But so too does the sense of being expected to play by rules that are flawed and designed to get both the architects of those rules and their should-be enforcers off the hook.

Either mask-wearing is an important part of what needs to be done to protect us, collectively, against Covid-19 or it isn't. If it is important, it is baffling its importance was played down for so long. And if it is important, it cannot make sense to allow the chain of protection to be

endlessly broken while maintaining the fiction that it *is* a chain. Nor can it make sense to give the benefit of the doubt to people who common sense tells us are almost certainly in the wrong nor to leave the enforcement of the rules about mask-wearing to ordinary citizens at the same time as discouraging those same citizens from enforcing anything. A rule that can be broken without sanction is scarcely a rule at all.

For some, mask-wearing isn't about protection against disease so much as social solidarity. It is a gesture of concern, like wearing a poppy or, as occurred in the Second World War, donating your pots and pans to the war effort (even though the war effort had no use for them) so as to hasten the defeat of your enemy. If widely observed, such gestures of solidarity can be very powerful and galvanising. But if patchily observed, they can be deeply demoralising.

Hobbes' state of nature is not an account of the moral corruption of human beings. It is an essay in the debilitating effects of pervasive uncertainty. Uncertainty brings out the worst in us: it knocks us off balance and induces a spirit of anxiety and aggression all in one go. Resolving uncertainty is one of the first duties of government. We would do well to remember this the next time we are on the upper deck of that bus and wondering who should answer for the bad behaviour we see in front of us.