



Claire Fox says we can reflect on what kind of a changed world we want to inhabit after the pandemic – and commit to embracing some lessons moving forward

Is everything up for grabs in a post-coronavirus world? Perhaps because we are all desperate to find upsides to this grim period, many people optimistically hope the crisis will help us find new priorities. I do, too. But I have some caveats.

Some imagine that the aftermath of the virus will deliver political changes that have previously not won popular support.

For example, Corbynistas are excited that state aid may become the norm with Rishi Sunak's proposals to pay furloughed staff and help struggling companies. Others suggest that our new-found reverence for frontline healthcare staff means that there will never be any threat to the NHS – although this might mean even the mildest critiques of health service shortcomings will be off the table.

Boris Johnson's particular praise for two nurses – from New Zealand and Portugal – is cited as proof that the Tories' immigration rules will be dumped or that we should row back from leaving the EU.

Extinction Rebellion-style eco-activists seem to hope that lockdown-life means that we can live with less economic activity. Many civil libertarians, me included, worry about the normalisation of a trade-off between health and security, at the expense of liberty.

I suspect many of these predictions may be short-lived, post-lockdown. However, we can reflect on what we might want to change and commit to embracing some lessons moving forwards.

Let's vow to remember issues that we now have a heightened awareness of. One might be to not neglect those people and social conditions that have been made

visible in recent weeks.

Gradually, more people have realised that large numbers have to leave their homes and go to work so that the rest of us can receive our Amazon parcels, have electricity, running water and the internet.

I'm gratified that those who were only recently dubbed patronisingly 'left behinds', or disparaged as the UK's own 'low information' deplorables, are now lauded.

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Councils, of course, know these workers exist as they employ many of them (whether directly or providing outsourced services). And while it's positive that – at last – care workers are receiving plaudits, they have in general been treated with disdain, often enduring abysmal working conditions in a Cinderella service.

The elderly we now seek to shield are rarely treated as a political priority. This new focus on the bravery of care workers, coping with the cruelties of a virus that is so lethal to the aged, should not stop us being humble enough to admit that previous neglect – often by local authorities – may have exacerbated the situation.

Local authority staff are key to the delivery of the Government's COVID-19 response.

However, some local government roles are less helpful in building civic solidarity. Dishing out fines, hectoring strollers in parks, closing green spaces: all this seems almost second nature to local government officials schooled in public space protection orders, now over-zealously policing public behaviour.

A reminder to those local authority staff about the people who need parks today. That family playing frisbee in East London's Victoria Park may well be council housing residents briefly escaping overcrowded, cramped households that are a result of the paucity of social housing.

Meanwhile, underpaid essential workers may well live in tower block flats, without direct access to countryside rambles or sprawling gardens. That woman sitting on the park bench catching some sunshine might well be a colleague on her way back from gruelling home visits to dementia sufferers living in isolation.

Rebuilding communities and civic bonds will be essential in future months. Councils should take a lead. To do so, we will need some new priorities. Non-essential work? Officious and coercive measures that assume the worst of local citizens? Essential work?

Rewarding those invisible frontline workers and recognising their service long after the virus is defeated. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Academy of Ideas and a former MEP

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soapbox



By Claire Kober

With the country facing its biggest challenge since World War Two, health services struggling to contain demand for ICU beds and no easy answers when it comes to an exit strategy from the lockdown, it would be understandable for the country to be in a state of collective depression. But it's at times like this that our national resilience really comes to the fore.

There has been a lot of talk about the need to invoke the Blitz spirit, and we've certainly had to find our own coping mechanisms. For me, it's early morning runs and a (not quite total) media blackout.

But I've been struck by the courage and positivity the country has displayed. So, in the spirit of positivity, and recognising that this is the last thing anyone would have wanted for 2020, I've been thinking about reasons to be cheerful or, the positives that we can take from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Starting with working life, there are two standouts for me. The first is how quickly we've adapted to remote working, making use of an array of video conferencing platforms to connect with colleagues, host external meetings and carry on business as usual. Lockdown has also had a catalytic effect on a remote working pilot we've been looking to implement.

Beyond the world of work, I've found the expectation that I can simultaneously home work while home school my children, impossible. On the plus side, my children have honed formidable Minecraft skills and a career in town planning surely beckons.

More seriously, as a family our usual non-stop weekly calendar of appointments and activities has been suspended, replaced by a slower pace of life – taking pleasure from being in the garden, baking and eating together, watching a movie, playing a game.

And for the local government sector? I've been struck by the change in public perception of what constitutes an essential worker. It's taken a crisis for people to recognise the vital roles performed by street cleaners and social care staff, as well as supermarket workers and delivery drivers, but the recognition is now there.

On Thursday evenings, people aren't only clapping for the NHS but all of those workers risking themselves to perform essential roles – and so many are local government workers. Down the line it must lead to a reappraisal of the value and reward that we as a society attach to them. ■

Claire Kober is managing director, homes, at Pinnacle Group and former chair of London Councils