

## **Government dependence on SAGE has ‘avoided many of our democratic standards’ – and ‘should be reformed without delay’, says think-tank report**

Britain’s past and current ‘Plan B’ responses to Covid-19 marks the emergence of a new phase in the growth of ‘the regulatory state’ – a new report published by Civitas suggests – in which, crucial decision-making is outsourced to leading quangos.

In this new report, Jim McConalogue finds ‘Future reforms need to recognise that the Covid-19 government decision-making process has appeared to be arbitrary, opaque, inadequately scrutinised and subject to pressure by insulated expertise within central state committees and quangos, beyond regular means of democratic accountability.’

### **Counter our dependence on scientific advisers**

- The author finds ‘that ministers’ near-total dependence on one committee, namely SAGE, has produced a network so much greater than an advisory group.’
- ‘The subsequent structures put in place between ministers, SAGE and the Cabinet Office produced a set of policies that often avoided many of our democratic standards and conventions, and should be reformed without delay’.
- ‘It is for the Cabinet Office to ensure that the Covid-19 Cabinet committees are provided with an institutional framework that integrates health, social, economic and other advice in coordinating the response to the pandemic.’
- The report argues for the roles of SAGE and its subcommittees to be made ‘more directly accountable to the public and parliament’.
- It argues that we should ‘invite a vastly expanded panel of lay members – from retired GPs through to former parish chairpersons to finance managers – to serve on their boards in order to respond to particular policies or guidance in the documentation presented.’

### **A new Social & Economic Advisory Group for Emergencies – a SEAGE?**

- To remedy the fact that SAGE did not have a parallel specific economic group, the report argues that this ‘should suggest to the government that they build a parallel committee of economists and social scientists. A Social & Economic Advisory Group for Emergencies (SEAGE) would provide economic and social advice to support government decision-makers during emergencies.’
- ‘The importance of social scientists and economists being involved is that they should illustrate the public trade-offs – setting out a balance of harms – for each of the different courses of action that could be pursued.’

### **Countering ‘Groupthink’ in Cabinet and Cabinet committees**

- ‘It is noticeable that the structures and practices of modern Cabinet government have increased the likelihood of ‘groupthink’ occurring.’
- ‘The move from COBR-led meetings and the grand Quad meetings – which may well have isolated Cabinet at certain times – through to the later Covid-S/Prime Ministerial and Covid-O/Gove committees – suggest the structures never truly worked, nor seemed completely settled.’
- ‘The British public were being governed from March 2020 onwards by largely unscrutinised scientific advice (outside of SAGE), unfiltered by ministerial Cabinet and, for most of the pandemic, all unamended by parliament.’

### **'Following the science' or 'taking account' of it?**

- 'A crucial aspect of the secretive but powerful elaborate networks that developed throughout our experience of Covid-19 has been the reverence that government ministers demonstrated in following the science of advisory groups, which had toxic implications for democratic standards.'
- 'There are now several stark comparisons that can be drawn between restriction-enthusiasm for Covid-19 and other current zero-tolerance emergency projects for which excessive state power is deemed necessary.'
- 'For MPs and peers in Parliament with social sciences backgrounds, we should do more to upskill them to ensure they have good scientific literacy and knowledge.'
- 'Much closer consideration should be given to the evidence suggesting women with a science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) background are far more likely to become passionate STEM advocates in Parliament than men.'
- 'The notion of 'following the science' presents several convenient paths to avoid or limit accountability, rather than the more realistic ambition to 'take account of' such science.'

### **The principle of cost-benefit analysis and understanding impacts**

- When looking at the reduced role of impact assessments or larger cost-benefit analyses, the report finds "These have been disproportionately downgraded to the extent that no sufficient impact assessment (pre- or post-policy) has been conducted on the various health interventions and Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions."
- 'The Government is making important decisions without proper regard to all their impacts, both on health and the economy, with the public not being given both the reasons for, and the impact of, the restrictions imposed upon them.'
- 'The ambition of improved cost-benefit analyses could be achieved by bringing forward a new Public Health Act (as some MPs have suggested) to enable government to provide evidence for the proportionality of future lockdowns.'
- 'A law which requires ministers to evaluate the benefits and harms of each proposed restriction with regards to its impact on health, education and the economy would be welcomed. Such legislation could also be tied into giving MPs the power in the House of Commons to vote on regular, amendable motions.'

### **The Democratic Flaw: Ministerial decree versus parliamentary scrutiny**

- 'Leading governmental explanations as to why important measures came into effect before they were laid before parliament were either unpersuasive or implausible.'
- 'Hybrid arrangements were at the forefront of why parliament did not work effectively.'
- '...parliament's inability to scrutinise and amend is shown by the fact that those who might have been expected to take an oppositional or critical stance towards the regulations, simply did not. In short, a parliament had been created with only varying degrees of restriction-enthusiastic positions.'
- '...parliamentary votes should in future be held before the introduction of all new UK- or England-wide measures.'