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How the west's handling of the pandemic beat its own expectations

di Janan Ganesh

No less a figure than Bill Gates expected the Covid-19 pandemic to resemble a world war. Armistice came last week, on the fifth day of the fifth month, when the World Health Organization declared the official end of the emergency.

“Armistice”, I say, not victory, because a global death toll in the tens of millions constitutes no kind of win. The 1.1mn in the US alone approximates that nation's combined losses in all wars. The lucky among us (I have never knowingly had the virus) mustn't cheer.

Beware the opposite error, though. Don't underrate, or take for granted, the west's handling of a crisis that had no precedent in the previous century or so. The WHO's announcement is as good a cue as any to make the point.

A Covid vaccine was expected to take around 18 months to contrive. Some experts viewed even that projection as optimistic, as did much of the public. In fact, it came in half the time. If that was a scientific coup, the take-up rate was a civic miracle. As late as September 2020, 49 per cent of Americans said they would definitely or probably not bare their arms for the jab. This reluctance was consistent with what we “knew” about modern voters: their mistrust of authorities, their weakness for online quackery. In the end, 82 per cent of Americans have received at least one dose. France was apparently even more cynical about the vaccine, yet also ended up with very high coverage.

The lockdown commanded similarly unlikely levels of assent. Here was perhaps the deepest ever peacetime incursion into the private realm. Had even one citizen in four defied it, the policy would have fallen, unless you believe the state can enforce penalties against a quarter of its population. The lockdown relied on a degree of voluntary obedience, of submission to authority, that was thought to be quaint in the populist age. Remember, the restrictions were actively popular. Before the pandemic, it was natural to worry that western electorates were mutinous. There are now more grounds to wonder if they are too docile. All this discipline was bribed, cynics will say. It is no hardship or patriotic sacrifice to stay indoors when one's income is being underwritten by the state. Perhaps. But this economic support was itself another benign revelation of the pandemic. Who expected Washington, the most rancorous capital in the democratic world, to unanimously pass over

\$2tn of fiscal relief at such speed? Or Brexit-era Britain to set up a furlough scheme with so much technical thought and political consensus behind it?

The surprises go beyond the pandemic itself to the Great Thaw in normal life. Global air fares are much higher than in 2019, such is the demand. Till transactions at Pret A Manger, that proxy measure of the urban economy, are almost at pre-pandemic levels in London's financial district, already there in the west end and well above in train stations. It is true that office occupancy is lastingly down. But live sports events, migrant flows, tourism, the handshake: these things came back with a vengeance that merits more reflection, if not wonder. Even I, on the bullish end of the debate, thought it would be 2025 before nightlife in a big western city felt 2019-ish. That mark was crossed last spring.

Note the range of human sentiments here: enough trust to take the vaccine, enough deference to stay at home, enough confidence to go out again. (Not to mention enough animal spirits to set up new businesses.) The pandemic was a comprehensive audit of, well, us.

Whether the west's handling of the pandemic was "good" is something years of official inquiries will try, and doubtless fail, to establish. These will try to put a number on the lives that would have been saved with a quicker sealing of borders. And work out how vaccines might have reached less developed countries quicker. And ask whether curbing funeral attendance is conscionable. The reckoning will have to include the public, too: perhaps lockdown rule-breaking was rife, but hidden, just as opportunistic crime flourished under the "Blitz spirit" of 1940-41.

For now, I just ask that we remember how low expectations of public life were in the pre-pandemic years. The theme of the age was a misgoverning elite and an ungovernable people, each problem provoking the other in a Mobius loop of civic dysfunction. There is a case, albeit prima facie, that the west has just lived through a rebuke to all that: a show of technocratic acumen and public conscientiousness. If future inquiries bear that out, it will be hard not to paraphrase the old Jeane Kirkpatrick line. We have to face the truth about ourselves, no matter how pleasant it is.