

Just A Thought 12 HOURS AGO April 11, 2020

A lot of journalists have lost sight of the wood for the trees.

Go back to the actual science of disease. The only cure for a virus is herd immunity. That isn't a policy statement. It's a scientific one. You can achieve herd immunity through natural progression (with many deaths on the way) or artificially (via a vaccine programme, with some deaths while you wait for the vaccine). But you have no choice not to achieve it. That's how viruses progress. If they are non-lethal it doesn't matter much, but this one clearly isn't that.

A lot of the debate has been polluted by a nonsensical duality which will now be very hard to get past - that there is such a thing as a 'herd immunity strategy' (which is what the bad people want) and the opposite is a lockdown (which is what the good people want). The FT has played its part in promoting this misconceived view. It is rampant in the comments section.

The real policy choice is actually whether you lock down indefinitely (with great social and economic damage, and always imperfectly, so many will die anyway) and wait for a vaccine (that you may never get to), or you attempt to isolate only the most vulnerable and manage the rest of the population to achieve herd immunity naturally.

Complete isolation of the vulnerable (effectively taking them all to medical camps based on government decree) is just not possible in Western societies, and open ended economic closure is just not possible anywhere.

So the only practical policy balance, at least in the West, is a short, temporary shutdown to rapidly build emergency care capacity, then a reopening and progression towards herd immunity, hopefully accelerated by a vaccine if and when it emerges, making use of the massively expanded care capacity and enforcing selective isolation.

That really is the only possible policy choice. That's why all governments are following it, and will take the next steps to follow it. If journalists get clear on this, they will be much closer to the ball on next steps.

When this is over, the differentiating death rates between Western societies will be fundamentally a function of their different healthcare capacities going into the crisis. The variations in policy responses within the above overall framework during the crisis will actually make a far smaller difference than the (perhaps understandably) obsessive media focus on them implies.