

The New Criterion

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Poll-axed

by James Bowman

In Britain, as in the United States, opinion polls consistently show that more people favor stringent public health measures against the coronavirus than less stringent measures. In Britain, however, the pollsters have been asking people about lockdowns specifically, whereas American pollsters, obsessed like the rest of the media with Donald Trump, rarely do. Instead their questions about the virus, as about other things, all seem to come back to their obsession with Mr. Trump's approval rating. How do you rate his performance in dealing with the virus? Oh! Oh! I know the answer to that one! For the benefit of the slower pupils, a recent *nbc News/Wall Street Journal* poll helpfully supplied a popular media mantra picked up from Bob Woodward's new book as one of four possible responses to this question: "He did not take the threat seriously enough at the beginning and is still not handling it well."

Not too surprisingly, 51 percent of respondents picked this over the other suggested responses—many no doubt because they had a vague memory of having heard it said before. Yet it was hardly any more of a leading question than many others asked by pollsters about Mr. Trump—which may be the best reason not to trust what the polls seem to be indicating about the election just now. Pollsters have always had to guard against asking questions that imply a "right" answer—a response that is not what people really think but what they believe they *ought* to think because other people do too. But what was once a bug in the pollsters' system of data collection is now a feature, as that question about taking the virus seriously enough shows. The pollsters, perhaps because they are influenced by their media masters' turn away from news towards advocacy and propaganda, more and more often seem to be looking for a particular response to their questions and are asking questions designed to produce it.

Nor is this dubious approach to their business limited to questions about Donald Trump. On the lockdown question, for instance, roughly two-thirds of Britons have consistently answered that the British lockdowns (now being reintroduced at the local level) are either just about right or aren't draconian enough to suit them. I think it is fair to say that there is a certain amount of skepticism about this particular result in the British mainstream press, which, unlike its American counterpart, doesn't always march in lockstep. "It makes me wonder" wrote Rod Liddle in the (London) *Sunday Times*, "if the pollsters phrased the question thus: 'Do you want another lockdown—or do you

want to kill your own grandmother, you selfish bastard?’ Because I can’t find anybody who agrees with the current government policy.”

A Fox News poll in the United States seems to be the only cis-Atlantic one to ask specifically about lockdowns. It found, in answer to the question of whether “the quarantines and lockdowns the federal government recommended in response to coronavirus” went too far or not far enough, that 19 percent thought they went too far while 38 percent thought they did not go far enough. Another 38 percent thought they were “about right.” This last response, I imagine, would have been preferred by those who thought the lockdowns unnecessarily irksome but were ashamed to say so, even anonymously.

For the pollsters didn’t have to bring up the imminent peril to poor old granny to draw on the media’s spadework over the past eight months in promoting the view that the virus is, if not invariably lethal—not just to granny but to everybody—then close enough to being lethal that you would have to be crazy to want to live your life without all the elaborate precautions suggested by Dr. Fauci or his British equivalent, Dr. Chris Whitty. Those inclined to doubt that the illness was so dangerous would have to be very strong-minded indeed to say so and risk being labeled, as Mr. Trump has been, a “science denier.”

For that’s another part of the groundwork of the media’s Covid narrative: that “science” must always speak with one voice and express a guaranteed, certified certainty, rather than the tentative hypotheses that are the coin of the realm in real science. Imagine, then, the media’s shock and horror at the Great Barrington Declaration by three bona fide medical experts, Sunetra Gupta of Oxford University, Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford, and Martin Kulldorff of Harvard, advocating “focused protection” of the most vulnerable rather than indiscriminate lockdowns. Thousands of other healthcare professionals have now signed on to this Declaration in addition to the original three. The Declaration reads, in part:

Coming from both the left and right, and around the world, we have devoted our careers to protecting people. Current lockdown policies are producing devastating effects on short and long-term public health. The results (to name a few) include lower childhood vaccination rates, worsening cardiovascular disease outcomes, fewer cancer screenings and deteriorating mental health—leading to greater excess mortality in years to come, with the working class and younger members of society carrying the heaviest burden. Keeping students out of school is a grave injustice.

To me that sounds less like expertise than it does common sense—a slightly elaborated version of President Trump’s view that we mustn’t let the cure be worse than the disease. This may be part of the reason why the media, who are inveterate touters of their own hand-picked experts as the only possible guides to dealing with the pandemic, have been thrown into something of a panic by the Declaration. Where would they be if people began to get the idea that they could form their own opinions with the help of common sense rather than buying them off the shelf from the media-certified experts?

After ignoring the Declaration for a week or two, *The New York Times*, for one, is beginning to fight back. “What Fans of ‘Herd Immunity’ Don’t Tell You,” read the *Times* headline on Tuesday to an opinion piece by John M. Barry. “These academics are clearly a distinct minority,” wrote Mr. Barry, author of a book on the influenza epidemic of 1918. “Most of their public health colleagues have condemned their proposal as unworkable and unethical—even as amounting to ‘mass murder,’ as William Haseltine, a former Harvard Medical School professor who now heads a global health foundation, put it to *cnn* last week.” Better educated people than the editors of the *Times* will instantly recognize several logical fallacies in that short passage: to wit, the *argumentum ad verecundiam*, the *argumentum ad populum*, and the *argumentum ad misericordiam* (Oh, those poor “murdered” innocents!), which last depends on the further fallacy of *petitio principii* or “begging the question,” since the alleged murders are as yet only hypothetical.

But I don’t think you have to be a logician to see that the purpose of running Mr. Barry’s hysterical effusion from the point of view of *The New York Times* lies in the newspaper’s attempt to protect its copyright on what it has consistently advertised as the only possible “expert” opinion about the best way to deal with the pandemic. And that opinion is tied, like the pollsters’ questions about the virus, to the only possible way, in the *Times*’s own expert opinion, to cast your vote on the Tuesday after next. The miseries of lockdown, like the deaths of more than two hundred thousand Americans from the virus, must be emotionally, if not logically, laid to the charge of President Trump as the final, and finally successful, push in the media’s long-term project to squeeze him out of the White House. If the pollsters are to be believed, the public is buying it too. But until the vote is in and they have been proved right this time, I will continue to think better of the American people than to suppose that they really blame Mr. Trump—or that they really approve of being told by experts to hide from the virus indefinitely.

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