



# POST COVID A WORLD APART

*“He was the sort of man people would cross the street to avoid.”*

**T**his tired cliché has new and ironic resonance in the time of COVID-19, and the “social distancing” which has come with it. Those of us allowed out of our homes to shop or exercise will have performed a bizarre dance as we seek

to navigate the street or the shop to avoid coming within 2 metres of the next human being, including crossing the road if needs be. “How are you?” now has real meaning. What lasting effect is this social and economic shock going to have on us as we face up to its aftermath?



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As I write, UK lockdown has been extended well into May, and while new cases are falling, the death rate is still grimly high. But the weather is good and I have a little back garden area where I can sit. My family is well, though a close friend is critically ill. We have no aged relatives, no-one in a care home, no young children to entertain and educate at home. In short, I have it very easy. Many of you reading this will have had a much harder time.

How we view our families, our very notion of family, how we relate to the societies in which we live, how we run our family offices and our businesses, all will be affected by what we have experienced with this pandemic. While a lot of current altruistic and philanthropic notions will fall away, I don't share the view that at the end of all this it will be “business as usual”. I don't think our young people, already worried about the state of the planet, will allow it.

Not only will we care more, I hope, for our blood families, but the concept of family, especially for those living far away from their closest relatives, will expand in spirit to include all those friends whose support we most cherish and to whom we give support in turn. In lockdown, we have had time to care, even without the usual social tools of caring, and how our caring has been weighted in this period may shape our future priorities too.

What about our business world post-COVID? I am fortunate to work for BDB Pitmans, whose IT setup is superb, and in practical terms we can work on our systems from wherever in the world we are, exactly as if we were in the office. We can look after our clients, which always comes first, but what effect is not being able to see each other and have those watercooler conversations going to have on the social cohesion of the firm? Every organisation will face the same issue, and it should be for all a priority to restore that sense of teamwork which electronic contact cannot replicate.

From our own families and businesses ripples out our attitude to our communities. In the UK, the response to those who work for the National Health Service has been one of immense gratitude, heightened by the number of health workers who have died. That same grateful spirit is offered to care home workers, bus drivers, shop workers, and everyone who has worked to keep our basic infrastructure

running. Many of these are some of our lowest paid workers, and equally many are from overseas or ethnic minorities, notably the two nurses who were Prime Minister Johnson's chief carers while he was very ill with the virus. It is hard to see how politicians can fail to respond to this new mood, which I believe will be more than ephemeral. That will mean a more generous financial settlement for the NHS and other essential services, which may in turn mean higher taxation, and a tightening of the existing system to address perceived abuse, in a climate less tolerant of extreme inequality.

At the same time, the Government will need to maintain its extreme stimulus measures for a year at least and probably longer to get the economy back to anywhere near normal levels, with which comes the risk of inflation, not really seen in the UK for a generation. Until a vaccine is developed, the limitation of movement across borders may also lead to a reduction in global connectedness (already visible even within the EU) just when it needs to increase.

I dislike the casual use in this context of the expressions of war; but it is worth reminding ourselves that the biggest social changes are often brought about by a post-war peace, such as the setting up of the NHS and the radical overhaul of free state education by the Attlee government in 1945-50. This pandemic may lead to its modern equivalent in the years to come.

Paralysis is futile; we must be realistically optimistic, acknowledge the challenge and work together towards resolution, knowing that we will not simply be able to pick up where we left off, but need to do things differently for some time and in some cases for ever, if we are to bring about a fairer, safer and more resilient world, to which the families whom we serve will have a great contribution to make. In the meantime, I hope that we will give each other all the mutual kindness and support we are safely able to do, in our families and in our businesses, so that in our human spirit we emerge the stronger.

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