

Opinion – Government Was Made for the Coronavirus

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, APR 16 2020

As the world continues to experience the effects of the coronavirus, this pandemic already feels like one of those seismic events that will shape the lives of many countries and citizens for a generation. It is a truly global event akin to a war, with the enemy combatant striking countries of all sizes and revealing just how interconnected our societies are. In time, the coronavirus has the ability to serve as a great leveler in society. It is a reminder of how small the world is and how large some people are. In a time of increased populism and nationalism, the coronavirus pandemic promotes the role of the individual in service to government and not against government. It is a repudiation of the politics of division and a reminder that government relies on the addition and inclusion of individual citizens and not the splintering of them. The role of government and the role of the individual are intrinsically linked in this crisis, and our politics will likely come to reflect that link in the years ahead.

In just over a decade since the 2008 financial crisis, voters around the world have had the chance to experiment with a broad range of political actors and populist alternatives to the more established and centrist parties. This includes former comedians, reality television stars, wealthy oligarchs and businessmen, and leaders such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil who were previously marginalized as fringe figures. Over the next year, the coronavirus will open many wounds and expose the limits and benefits to these political outcomes and the profound structural dilemmas that still exist in so many societies from the developing world to the industrialized West.

In contrast to the grievances that animate populist movements, the coronavirus pandemic is not about a voter's political recognition or representation, but rather survival, in its most basic form. The institutions and expertise of the center were built to respond to a crisis as it happens and as it affects the survival of all citizens. Populist parties have been successful in recognizing the fear of the unknown and the desire for a sense of security on the part of voters in a way that mainstream and centrist parties have often missed. However, the coronavirus pandemic is fear-inducing on its own and it is frightening, affecting almost every community and country on the planet. It does not need to be injected with more fear by a political party or actor in order to spur a specific political outcome.

Unlike most political events, the coronavirus is a social, economic, and health crisis that has no regard for the political calendar or the political persuasions of those it infects. It is a deeply apolitical crisis that is not inherently polarizing or discriminatory, although it can tragically affect some groups of people more than others and highlight persistent inequalities. In a time of deep polarization, the coronavirus can also bring out the best in humanity and it may serve as a reminder of the healing nature of politicians from the center in a time of crisis. In response to this crisis, it is time for the center to rise again, not in opposition to the populist left or right, but in service to the institutions of representative government that have allowed those populist forces to flourish.

The political center is not revolutionary or reactionary, it is sustainable and built upon a foundational belief in a government in service to the individual. In time, the individual voter will likely reward the political party which values reason and expertise that is sourced from established institutions as the antidote to the crisis and not as the cause. Expertise in both the United Kingdom and the United States suffered in 2016 with the Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump. However, both nations have a deep bench of established experts and renowned institutions that were built for this moment in history.

In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) is revered by both sides of the political spectrum, and the coronavirus

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has further exposed it as an apolitical and foundational institution of social welfare. The US lacks an NHS equivalent but has epidemiologists and public health experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci who are capable of bridging the political divide with reasoned, scientific evidence backed up by institutions like the CDC and National Institutes of Health. This is in addition to the leading research universities in both countries which will spearhead the scientific response to this pandemic through vaccines, trials, and other groundbreaking research that will be supported by the federal government.

While there are strong anti-intellectual and anti-expert currents that still exist in both the US and UK – and beyond – expertise is one of the most precious commodities against any crisis. It doesn't care about the polls or a political advantage. In its ideal form it is apolitical, reasoned, and able to withstand the next crisis while political leaders may come and go.

Expertise is essential to good governance and the coronavirus is an event that merits a whole of government response. It is time to put aside Ronald Reagan's famous maxim that the scariest words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.' The government is here now and it is helping. It has a role to play, no matter what your politics are. This role and response is often dull, bureaucratic, and sclerotic. It is mired in the institutional weeds and it is rarely exciting, but it is essential. It is not made for the headlines. It is made for those rare moments of extraordinary consequence that require the collective mobilization of all segments of society.

The coronavirus pandemic is one of those moments that government was made for. It is up to both political leaders and their constituents of all persuasions to ensure accountability and the delivery of all that government is capable of in the months ahead.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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