

The Government needs to open up to be saved from itself

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If a week is a long time in politics, then a whole year really is a long old time. For a year as packed as 2020, this is perhaps truer than ever. Think back to the UK leaving the EU. It feels like a different age, but it was only the start of this year that Brexit 50p coins were rolling into circulation and Nigel Farage et al. were singing and dancing around Westminster. The Government has done a lot since then, but a deeply concerning theme has emerged that ties much of it together.

I'm going to cheat slightly by starting in September 2019. A time of relative tumult compared to usual times, but perhaps of relative peace compared to now. A time when the issue of the day was the Government unlawfully proroguing Parliament. Lady Hale remarked in her judgement that the Government's actions "had the effect of frustrating or preventing the ability of parliament to carry out its constitutional functions". Fast-forward a year to September 2020. Now, it's the government being criticised for avoiding having their Covid legislation subjected to scrutiny by MPs. The Commons Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, accused the Government of a "total disregard for the House".

The lesson from the first time around clearly hadn't sunk in and a pattern has started to form: the government is shrinking away from Parliament. Engaging properly with Parliament is risky business. It opens the government up to criticism from unexpected places and puts their flaws on show for all to see. But it is not optional. Washing away parliamentary scrutiny from our constitution does not leave a cleaner democracy, it leaves an ugly authoritarian stain.

Let's now turn from the Government's shaky relationship with Parliament to the Government's shaky relationship with the media. Again, I'm going to rewind to the end of 2019. This time to the Government's General Election campaign. I think their '12 questions to Boris Johnson' video pretty much summed up their media strategy for it. If you haven't seen it, it was basically a knock-off of Vogue's '73 questions' series, just with a sixth of the questions. Don't worry though, the difficulty of the questions was the same, featuring Paxman-esque head-scratchers like "when was the last time you cooked?" and "what's your favourite band?" This, Boris hiding in a fridge from Piers Morgan, and refusing to go on *The Andrew Neil Show* were very much in the same vein.

The Government's shyness towards media scrutiny has continued since then. Whenever possible, they like to do things in-house (think 'People's PMQs' and the evening Covid addresses from Boris). There was a period where things seemed to be improving, with the Government holding regular televised Covid press conferences with members of the media. But all good things must come to an end: they have hired former journalist, Allegra Stratton, to lead the briefings in a style mimicking Trump's White House – that bastion of healthy media relations.

So, the pattern continues; the government is shrinking away from the media too. These two strands are intimately connected. They point toward the bigger problem at the root of the pattern: the government is shrinking away from the public. Parliament and the media are the public's lifeline to government. If the Government is hiding from them, it is hiding from the public. When this Government boycotts television programmes or rams through fresh Covid restrictions without consulting our representatives, it is the public that ultimately suffers.

Former Commons Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, recently commented that, "In my 47 years in Parliament, under 9 prime ministers, I have never seen trust in a government fall so far and so fast". Trust is a difficult thing to build and an easy thing to ruin. If this Government does not start to open up and attempt to build back this trust it risks destroying trust in the institution of government itself.