

PAUL ARMSTRONG

FOREWORD BY

DICK
CLEMENT

WHY ARE WE ALWAYS INDOORS?

(...unless we're off to Barnard Castle)

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P A U L A R M S T R O N G



Contents

Author's Note	9
Foreword by Dick Clement	11

Week One

Saturday, 14 March 2020	14
Sunday, 15 March 2020	20
Monday, 16 March 2020	25
Tuesday, 17 March 2020	39
Wednesday, 18 March 2020	47
Thursday, 19 March 2020	56
Friday, 20 March 2020	66

Week Two

Saturday, 21 March 2020	78
Sunday, 22 March 2020	87
Monday, 23 March 2020	96
Tuesday, 24 March 2020	102
Wednesday, 25 March 2020	113
Thursday, 26 March 2020	118
Friday, 27 March 2020	126

Week Three

Saturday, 28 March 2020	132
Sunday, 29 March 2020	140
Monday, 30 March 2020	150
Tuesday, 31 March 2020	156

Wednesday, 1 April 2020	168
Thursday, 2 April 2020	171
Friday, 3 April 2020	177

Week Four

Saturday, 4 April 2020	184
Sunday, 5 April 2020	192
Monday, 6 April 2020	198
Tuesday, 7 April 2020	203
Wednesday, 8 April 2020	209
Thursday, 9 April 2020	217
Good Friday, 10 April 2020	222

Week Five

Easter Saturday, 11 April 2020	228
Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020	232
Easter Monday, April 13 2020	237
Tuesday, 14 April 2020	243
Wednesday, 15 April 2020	247
Thursday, 16 April 2020	252
Friday, 17 April 2020	259

Week Six

Saturday, 18 April 2020	266
Sunday, 19 April 2020	271
Monday, 20 April 2020	277
Tuesday, 21 April 2020	284
Wednesday, 22 April 2020	288
Thursday, 23 April 2020	294

Friday, 24 April 2020	299
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Week Seven

Saturday, 25 April 2020	308
Sunday, 26 April 2020	312
Monday, 27 April 2020	318
Tuesday, 28 April 2020	323
Wednesday, 29 April 2020	328
Thursday, 30 April 2020	336
Friday, 1 May 2020	341

Week Eight

Saturday, 2 May 2020	348
Sunday, 3 May 2020	354
Monday, 4 May 2020	363
Tuesday, 5 May 2020	368
Wednesday, 6 May 2020	373
Thursday, 7 May 2020	377
Friday, 8 May 2020	383

Week Nine

Saturday, 9 May 2020	394
Sunday, 10 May 2020	401
Monday, 11 May 2020	408
Tuesday, 12 May 2020	415
Wednesday, 13 May 2020	419
Thursday, 14 May 2020	423
Friday, 15 May 2020	430

Week Ten

Saturday, 16 May 2020	440
Sunday, 17 May 2020	445
Monday, 18 May 2020	452
Tuesday, 19 May 2020	457
Wednesday, 20 May 2020	462
Thursday, 21 May 2020	469
Friday, 22 May 2020	473

Week Eleven

Saturday, 23 May 2020	480
Sunday, 24 May 2020	485
Postscript	492
Sunday, 21 June 2020	492



WEEK ONE

Saturday, 14 March 2020

'Lord Olivier is indisposed and will be unable to take part in tonight's performance. The part of Macbeth will instead be played by Dave Lee Travis.'

That was the response of my Twitter account @armoaning to the news that tonight's cancelled *Match of the Day (MOTD)* will be replaced in the BBC One schedule by an episode of *Mrs Brown's Boys*.

For all my ambivalence about this country, I'm as British as it gets when it comes to expressing my feelings in public. I'm in London NW3, in the borough with the second-highest recorded infection rate in the whole of England to date, on the day official figures for coronavirus (or its latest incarnation, COVID-19, to be more specific) in the UK reached four figures and deaths almost doubled to 20. Italy, which seems to be about a fortnight ahead of us in the global science fiction movie currently playing out, is burying its dead (over 1,000 already), singing defiantly from balconies above the deserted streets and applauding its overwhelmed medical heroes. The best I can do, publicly at least, is to rubbish a hackneyed but harmless comedy show by reworking an old Paul Calf line my mate Rob Skilbeck has been using to express dissatisfaction for 20 years or more.

At least part of me is crapping myself, to be honest. I'm only ('only') 55, with a bit of a history of asthma, and Amanda is a little older with a strange auto-immune condition which can cause her to develop a cough even when nothing's ostensibly wrong. We're not in the highest 'at risk' group (though I suspect we're in the city which is going to get this worst, and first) but my parents absolutely are. Aged 80-ish with underlying health conditions, and living in Kent with my brother and his school age daughters, so potentially not able to isolate themselves properly.

As BBC Sport presenters, pundits and production teams would tell you, my tendency when I have no control over events

is to absorb as much information as possible in the hope that whatever happens isn't going to catch me on the hop. That works fairly well when you're in charge of a live World Cup broadcast, and know what analysis and features you want, with a contingency plan if the star man doesn't start or the kick-off's delayed. It's an absolute nightmare in a situation like this. Even the scientists don't seem to agree, so how can I find anything to cling on to? Worryingly, the UK government in the form of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his chief adviser Dominic Cummings appears to have taken its cavalier, maverick outlier approach to Brexit into the gravest health crisis this country, and indeed the world, has faced in a century.

The whole of Europe appears to be heading for a death toll far in excess of the Asian countries in which this virus first struck. Within Europe – and indeed the world, now that US President Donald Trump appears to have had his initial unhinged pronouncements overturned behind his back by the remaining adults in the room – Britain seems to have been ploughing a lone furrow. Maybe the 'herd immunity' described by Boris Johnson and his scientific advisers on Thursday could work in the long run. No one knows whether the populace can acquire immunity to this still-mutating virus in a way that they never did to smallpox, polio or AIDS.

In the meantime, I wasn't alone in feeling uneasy at the suggestion that 60 to 80 per cent of us need to contract this thing in order to test the theory. Call me Mr Picky, but when a man whose career has been littered with inconsistencies and controversies tells me that my elderly parents may have to be sacrificed, I'm not inclined to acquiesce. It's very difficult for broadcasters to question the government at a moment of unprecedented national crisis, though Sky and *C4 News*, as they have throughout what now seems like the comparatively trivial Brexit shambles, do so rather more often than the two traditional TV news outlets. At least they seem happy to ask ever so politely if the PM is absolutely sure that his new clothes

aren't really his birthday suit. Unpatriotic treachery in the eyes of some, absolutely necessary journalistic scrutiny in desperate times as far as I'm concerned.

God, more than at any time in my life I hope I'm wrong, and I'm not going to foment further panic by speculating on social media, as so many are. Moreover, unlike Brexit, Trump's election and Jeremy Corbyn and Johnson being chosen as our respective main party leaders, no one's offering bets on how bad this will be. Even Paddy Power, with whom I closed an online account when they offered various jokey #bantz odds on the Oscar Pistorius trial, aren't sinking that low.

I won small fortunes on all the calamitous events above, by the way. I'll rephrase that: in retrospect, they were extremely unfortunate events, this is a calamity. Then again, I have a better nose for democratic madness than I have for medical and epidemiological science. Maybe, just maybe, someone qualified is steering the good ship Britannia through this unprecedented storm.

One small sign of sanity was the U-turn last night. Twenty-four hours after blithely telling the herd that mass gatherings were just the ticket to get the jolly old virus sweeping through us, Johnson backtracked. Or rather, he didn't do it personally – as is his wont, he's now completely disappeared again – but at least someone did. Stable doors and horses spring to mind since the sporting authorities belatedly and unilaterally shut themselves down. It's beyond scandalous that the Cheltenham Festival and Liverpool v Atlético Madrid both took place in front of huge crowds this week, and it shouldn't have been left to the Premier and Football Leagues to take the initiative and moral high ground after a Chelsea player and the Arsenal coach tested positive, thus presenting the government with a *fait accompli*, but at least it happened.

As a result, for the first time since I was six years old, I didn't spend an August to May Saturday watching football in person or on a screen, or at the very least, desperately trying to

find out the scores. I was even born on a Saturday lunchtime, 3 October 1964. Appropriately, my team Middlesbrough made their longest possible domestic journey – to Plymouth Argyle – and lost 1-0. Even in summer, I've always spent as many Saturdays as possible watching cricket or other sports. Guy Mowbray, the *MOTD* commentator and club cricketer, wistfully asked his Twitter followers yesterday what on earth you can do on a Saturday that doesn't involve sport, and then pre-empted any possible answers by (rightly) opining that they were already boring him.

In retrospect, today may not have been the best day to try to find out. At the sacred hour of 3pm, we left our one-bedroom flat in Belsize Park for the first time today and headed out for a walk. At one point during the first half we were spooked at the top of Primrose Hill by an idiotic passer-by coughing without covering her mouth. By half-time, we were on the Finchley Road (like 'the coronavirus', using the 'the' in this context seems to suggest advancing years) buying some greetings cards and stamps. I tackled the still relatively civilised Waitrose shopping yesterday. I say 'civilised': in common with most of the country, there was no toilet paper or hand sanitiser whatsoever to be had, but I didn't see any actual fights break out.

In fact, I'm personally responsible for the most confrontational act I've ever seen in there. Amanda and I once saw the bejewelled, and very expensively dressed, 'outrage for hire' shock-jock Julia Hartley-Brewer in the underground car park. The best I could come out with was, 'Look, it's the Waitrose Katie Hopkins.' Just to reinforce that, a good friend passed on a tweet from JHB today in which she suggested that 'working from home' which, for many, is about to start in earnest, is a good chance for bosses to offload underperforming staff. Nice.

Then someone else I follow had retweeted Lady Karen Brady opining in *The Sun* (natch) that the Premier League should be declared null and void. Tough on champions-elect Liverpool, she admitted, but ah ... oh, yes, now that you mention it, her club

WHY ARE WE ALWAYS INDOORS?

West Ham wouldn't be relegated. Cor blimey, guv'nor, would you Adam and Eve it, eh?

Between that, and the incessant speculation about the virus from people who don't even have my clean sweep of science O levels, and the squabbling among those who know a lot more about it than I do, I've taken the drastic decision to delete Twitter from my devices. At the best of times, it's grim, albeit that's frequently countered by some very funny friends and acquaintances. Right now, it's potentially injurious to mental health, and no help whatsoever to our imperilled physical health, either. I've deleted Twitter before at the height of various political storms; it'll be interesting (to Amanda, anyway – she hates all forms of social media) to see whether that boycott or the peace and calm in Waitrose lasts longer this time. Amanda gives the Twitter shutdown a week at most. We'll see.

I'll stay on Facebook, though. For all the creepy amorality of its founder, Facebook allows me to keep in touch with most of my friends and family of a certain age. Especially since it doesn't look like I'll be seeing any of them face to face any time soon. I didn't grow up in an internet world, so it seems all the more bizarre that I (and governments and internet providers) can keep track of every movement and preference of anyone, anywhere, yet we're all seemingly completely at the mercy of a microscopic organism which mutated across the globe in three months from its starting point, an unknown animal in a wet market in Wuhan, China.

I'll keep checking into Facebook, but I really don't intend to post anything. For years I've irritated, entertained or possibly bored hundreds of Facebook friends with holiday snaps, intermittent bursts of dark humour or just straightforward rants about politics and the state of the world. The latter probably peaked in what seemed like the worst year imaginable back in 2016, but I've had my moments since. It all seems ever so slightly silly now.

In recent weeks, the magnitude of the coronavirus has become the nearest thing 95 per cent of us have ever known

to September 1939. My dad was born that month, incidentally. On the fourth, the day after Britain declared war on Hitler. We lost 450,000 lives in World War Two (the Soviet Union lost 27 million people). If we have to wait for herd immunity to kick in, this virus could wipe out an even bigger slice of our population in a much shorter time frame. The evidence suggests that the oldest, weakest members of society will bear the brunt, whereas most fatalities in both world wars were young and male. And in 1939, the country had Churchill waiting in the wings, with Attlee ready in 1945 to preside over the peace and build the NHS and the 'cradle to grave' orthodoxy which I took for granted during my childhood.

At the risk of plunging myself into despair again, we currently have Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Based on their pronouncements this week, I'd rather we had Jürgen Klopp and Nigel Pearson in charge. Pearson, managing Watford, a Premier League club which at the time had been told to play today despite having suspected coronavirus cases in their squad, wearily and adroitly dismantled Johnson's attempts at leadership. Klopp, whose Liverpool stood just six points away from a first league title in 30 years, sent a message to the fans which was chock full of common sense and fine human instincts. Sample line: 'If it's a choice between football and the good of wider society, it's no contest. It really isn't.' He also used a phrase I quoted throughout my time at *MOTD* and in my book: 'Football is the most important of all the unimportant things.' I'm not sure who originally came up with that, but I adopted it after working at the Hillsborough disaster, then watching the subsequent 30-year smear campaign and cover-up unravel. Klopp just got it instinctively, and brought his values and coaching genius with him from Dortmund to Liverpool.

I posted his whole letter, intending it to be my last Facebook contribution for some time, with a simple message of my own: 'In the weeks and months ahead, let's all try to be more like Jürgen Klopp.' I'm going to say whatever I like in this diary, but when

communicating in public, I'll try to channel at least some of Klopp's decency and humanity for as long as this nightmare lasts.

Sunday, 15 March 2020

There's a long-standing tradition in our household, dating back to my days editing *MOTD*, that I have a lie-in on Sunday mornings, while Amanda watches the Sophy Ridge and Andrew Marr shows so I don't have to. A two-minute summary – 'May said Brexit means Brexit'; 'In the event of a nuclear missile being fired at us, Richard Burgon says he'll wait until he's consulted every local constituency Labour Party before responding'; a couple of expletives from me, and we can start thinking about lunch and what live football's on TV. People are amazed when they visit our tiny flat that we manage to co-exist peacefully in it. I would ascribe that partly to my night owl hours and Amanda's early-bird regime minimising bathroom and cupboard-sized kitchen interfaces. But it's mostly down to my wife's almost unbelievably tolerant and independent disposition, something she ascribes to going to boarding school aged ten while her parents worked abroad.

Anyway, this morning, her first words were, 'You don't want to know.' We'd read books from mid-evening, then I'd typed this diary later so we were about 12 hours – or 15, in my case – behind the news cycle. So, what had happened? Well, we're all still doomed, but rabbit in the aircraft landing lights Health Secretary Matt Hancock, had apparently been on both shows seemingly trying to claim that 'herd immunity' was all a misunderstanding and appealing for anyone who thinks they might be able to construct a respirator in their garage to get in touch. Hancock first came to my attention as Culture Secretary when he tried to get down wiv da kids by saying that Ed Sheeran's all-time low point, 'Galway Girl', was his record of the year. How we laughed. But as Bob Monkhouse once said about his own comedy career, 'They're not laughing now.'

Amanda also related South Korea's foreign minister's appearance on Marr, in which she calmly explained their strategy of using state-of-the-art technology to trace, test and treat those infected and, as importantly, being open and honest at all times with the general public and giving them as much information as is available. So, 20,000 people are being tested every day in South Korea; a mobile phone app locates the whereabouts of those with the virus; and life is carrying on, certainly to a far greater extent than in the similar sized European nations which are now in lockdown with no idea where those infected are. Just 75 people have died so far in South Korea, a figure we will pass in the next day or so, thanks to only testing people when they arrive in hospital, and not even then, if NHS friends are to be believed (see below). South Korea was the first country outside China to experience a COVID-19 outbreak, but they realised that tracing those affected was paramount, so launched testing in the street, at petrol stations, and in other public spaces.

I read yesterday that symptoms tend not to show within at least five days and that you're believed to be at your most infectious after three days. The UK is still advising people to self-isolate when they experience symptoms, that is, at least two days after you're at your most infectious. To paraphrase World War One *Blackadder*, 'There was just one problem with that plan. It was bollocks.'

In other news, we've retaliated pointlessly to Trump's belated decision to add the UK to his European flight ban, by telling Brits not to go there. Er, we already can't. Turns out that even though we're Anglo-Saxon and leaving the dirty Continentals behind so we can take back control, we're not 'doing very well' after all, eh, Donny? At least he's just acting as the front man with a squirry flower full of bile while (you hope) adults belatedly cobble together a strategy to minimise the carnage in the land of no public health provision whatsoever. Still, they've now said they'll try to test people, which is more than the UK is doing. Maybe now the herd immunity doctrine has gone away, officially

at least, we could think about doing that? At the moment, the UK government is doing a passable impression of the guy in the control tower in *Airplane* who, when asked why the runway lights haven't been switched on, replies with a manic cackle, 'That's just what they'll be expecting us to do.'

Despite wanting to see how other people I respect reacted to the South Korean contribution in particular, I've managed to sustain my self-isolation from Twitter. As well as Facebook – where it seems most people are, like me, being publicly British about it all and avoiding expressing their inner fears – I'm in various WhatsApp and Messenger groups.

A bunch of guys I used to meet for a curry at the magnificent, but now sadly closed, Nepalese Gurkha in Wembley while Tottenham were playing there, is one. I'll come back to them sometime when I discuss the backlog of recommended TV series Amanda and I are planning to watch while in lockdown. Then there's a sub-group of four old friends from the Curry Club who all broadly agree politically – one works in finance, another has a tech business, another works with senior civil servants – in that we all thought, until the last week or so, that Brexit was the worst domestic development in this country in our lifetimes. It's called 'Special Measures for Eton' after I once suggested that any state school which produced Boris Johnson, David Cameron, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Cambridge Analytica's Alexander Nix in quick succession would be put in special measures. Our avatar is a picture of Johnson casting the shadow of a giant penis behind him, so although the chat is often of the gallows humour variety, it's a good way of letting off steam without inflicting too much of it on Amanda. As I said yesterday, she's far too sensible to touch social media with latex gloves while wearing a Hazchem suit.

The other much bigger and more fluid group is called 'Just for the Remainiacs' set up by Jake, an ex-colleague of Amanda's at the House of Commons – I'll return to that period another day – with assorted friends of friends from academia, nursing, campaign groups and so on. It's a bit gossipy – I've learnt things

in the last couple of years about Dominic Cummings that I can't even tell this diary – frequently swears and hilarious, but has also acted as a mental health support group as we've slowly watched our country descend into a dystopian nightmare. I went to it this morning instead of Twitter and the first post I saw was a link to an article by the 'Brexit Guru', ex-MEP and utter twat Daniel Hannan, on *The Telegraph's* website. The headline, gobsmackingly removed from reality, even for the formerly respectable publication now remodelled as the Billionaire's Boris Beano, was, 'If coronavirus has a silver lining, it should be the return of the bow and the curtsy.'

I'm struggling to formulate a sentence to describe just how tone deaf that is right now. Derek and Clive's 'What a cunt, eh?' will have to do. Then a couple of health professionals unhysterically described how consultants are being discouraged from testing elderly admissions and are simply categorising them as flu or pneumonia victims to keep the figures from being even more alarming. Oh boy.

While we wait for the full madness to play out in the coming weeks and months, Amanda and I decided earlier this week to fly in the face of government advice, so didn't go to the Cheltenham Festival to stand next to as many coughing hoorays in pink trousers, green jackets and silly hats as possible. As far as we can – and in London there are clearly limits – we're going to sit it out. Fortunately for us and unlike so many elsewhere, including my freelance friends in the TV sport industry – we are able to do it financially. Even so, yesterday was a troubling experience, and not just because there was no football.

We must have passed 500 people while walking to Primrose Hill then the Finchley Road. The government's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, admitted the other day when there were 500 confirmed cases that there were probably another 10,000 out there developing herd immunity, sorry, regrettably untested. That will have doubled by now. London is the epicentre. Being cheek by jowl with 500 other people is a form of Russian

WHY ARE WE ALWAYS INDOORS?

roulette now, whatever the government advise, as is then visiting elderly relatives. I only noticed two people actually coughing yesterday, but it felt like the pre-titles sequence in a zombie apocalypse movie. We're going to have to work out a different walk and shopping routine, particularly at weekends. At least we have both local shops we should support in Belsize Village, and the more open Hampstead Heath ten minutes away.

If we are to be stuck here for months – and let's face it, unless we end up in a tent in the Royal Free Hospital car park, then one of the 24-hour cremation centres blithely being discussed, that's what's going to happen – we're pleased that our last taste of freedom, which ended a week ago today, was a visit to our native north-east. Despite its baffling decision to vote for Brexit self-harm and then Boris sodding Johnson (yes, I know Corbyn was dire) it was great to see the aforementioned Jake, some of his Messenger group and other friends for a birthday gathering in Newcastle and a sunny afternoon on the beach at Tynemouth. We then had a night in Bishop Auckland, dinner with aunties, uncles and cousins, and a very quick detour to Whitby before dropping the hire car off at York and coming back to that there London. We're so glad in retrospect that the timing meant we were able to do that. It will be some time before we can do it again.

The only sour note for me was spotting that one of the cafes on the gorgeous back streets of Whitby, one of our favourite towns, had reinvented itself as The Blitz Café, complete with a Mark Francois/Nigel Farage-style picture of a Spitfire in the window. Amanda's marvellous auntie, Irene, who hailed from Stockton and died a couple of years ago in her 90s, served in the WRENS in London during that war, lost loved ones, and absolutely hated the modern, misty-eyed faux nostalgia for a truly horrible era she actually lived through. And that's despite seeing Clark Gable taking a stroll in Ropner Park, Stockton while he was posted to nearby Middleton St George airbase. Auntie Irene cast a postal vote for Remain from her nursing home. We're going to

find out now how the mindless ‘two world wars and one World Cup’ brigade cope with the first comparable period in British history since. It’s not a good sign that the very same types are already hoarding all the toilet paper.

Monday, 16 March 2020

When we downsized from a two-bed flat in Bayswater to this one, it was a financial necessity. After a grim period of inner ear issues and operations, I’d been told by my ENT specialist that I couldn’t work in TV any more, Amanda had left her PA job and we needed a financial cushion. That said, we were attracted to this place by a small but beautiful patio garden. Not much use for half the year, except for the bird life I’ve attracted with an array of feeders, but it comes into its own in spring and summer when we can finally throw the French windows open and emerge from the gloom. Today is that day: beautiful sunshine, the clocks go forward soon, and my favourite British garden birds – the almost tropically exotic goldfinches – have joined an array of tits and our resident robin hopping around the garden of flowering camellia and primroses. Goldfinches absolutely love nyjer seeds, if anyone’s interested. Large bags are available from the RSPB website.

Such was the beauty of the scene, I took my guitar outside and played ‘Blackbird’. We’re not in Italy, so none of the neighbours joined in, but I hope the genius who recorded the track at Abbey Road a mile south of here, and after whom I’m named – my brother, born the year ‘Blackbird’ was released, is John – would have appreciated the spirit of the performance, and forgiven any bum notes. All in all, the sort of morning another genius who lived even closer in the other direction – John Keats – would have written an ode about, as ‘light-winged dryads of the trees’ flitted about. England at its absolute best and just three weeks until I can stride, Middlesex membership card in hand, just beyond the

WHY ARE WE ALWAYS INDOORS?

McCartney back garden in Cavendish Avenue (then and now) for the start of a blissful summer at Lord's, the greatest sporting venue of them all. Oh shit, wait a minute.

'Back to life, back to reality', as Soul 2 Soul sang, though not in this context. Appropriately, given that we're being governed by Laurel and Hardy minus all the warmth and humour, the first catch-up conversation Amanda and I had this morning centred around Abbott and Costello. Diane Abbott and Professor Anthony Costello, that is. I'd foolishly looked at the newspaper front pages online before I went to bed: *The Guardian* has obtained a Health England memo suggesting that eight million British people could be hospitalised as this virus potentially lasts for a year. Well, I'm no health expert or mathematician, but I've read there are approximately 100,000 hospital beds and a paltry 4,000 intensive care beds (a fraction of most of our neighbours' ICU capability) across the UK. Eight million people in 100,000 beds in a year, even if it was evenly spread (which it clearly won't be) gives each admission four and a half days in hospital, if they were cleared of cancer patients and expectant mothers and no one has a heart attack. The average stay in hospital in Wuhan for COVID-19 sufferers was 11 days. And our NHS was collapsing in places this winter anyway, massively understaffed and just about kept going by the 40,000 mostly lowly paid (and therefore now defined as 'low skilled' by Priti Patel) EU workers who've stayed on despite the referendum result.

I know it's a trite observation, but do you remember the social media and newspaper column avalanche which descended on poor old Diane Abbott when she got into a muddle over police recruitment figures? Some of it wasn't even just because she's a prominent black woman – I wouldn't have her anywhere near the shadow cabinet, either, but not on those grounds – but I think we'd all agree that was a relatively trivial mistake compared to modelling which has eliminated testing (20,000 a day in South Korea, only 75 deaths), been laissez-faire on public gatherings and failed to change even when the better-equipped Italian health

service, about a fortnight ahead of us, has collapsed under the strain, leaving doctors to play God and decide who lives and dies. That's presumably coming here, and soon. Again, Italy has 8,000 ventilator-equipped ICU beds, we have 4,000.

Twenty-six per cent of hospital admissions in Wuhan required ICU treatment for an average of eight days. Because the outbreak was largely shut down locally and back-up personnel and resources were flown in from across China, they got the treatment they needed. Twenty-six per cent of eight million is just over two million people who will theoretically need ICU beds in the UK in the next year. If that turns out to be accurate, they'll get, on average, 1.4 days each of ventilator treatment. Or if brutal triage decisions are made, roughly one in eight will get the 11 days they need, the others will get nothing. And that's assuming an even spread across the year and no one else at all being ill. And there will be regional variations – according to Jake's Messenger group which includes those on the front line, Sunderland's quarter of a million population currently has precisely two ICU units to go around. No wonder Matt Hancock looks utterly terrified and even Johnson, the last time he surfaced, reined in the buffoonery to a solitary 'squashed sombrero' reference, as he attempted to explain the graph curve they want to see.

I'm not sharing any of this with the wider world: a) because the figures are hypothetical and b) if remotely correct, they're utterly terrifying. A statistical footnote: 3,200 people have died in China to date, their huge population meaning that's approximately one in 437,500 people. By my (A grade at O level) maths, replicating that rate here would mean around 155 deaths. Even Diane Abbott can tell you that won't be the outcome.

So, what is happening? Sky News's online headline is currently 'UK to announce new measures today – Dominic Cummings'. As a former journalist of sorts, I've been shouting at my TV for a long time that they need to name him, so it's interesting that Sky finally have. Laura Kuenssberg and Robert Peston, the political correspondents at the two traditional TV news broadcasters,

have spent recent times citing a 'Number 10 source' pretty much every time they appear on screen. Peter Geoghan has written in *The Guardian* that 'journalists should refuse to be played' and that 'many believe he (Cummings) has become the (very) thinly veiled source of a series of government announcements by anonymous briefing.'

One of the great tragedies of our times is that only maybe ten per cent of the UK population even know who Cummings is, and many of those only because Benedict Cumberbatch played a sanitised version of him in a Channel 4 drama about Brexit. Okay, he came across as weird, slightly unhinged and very Machiavellian, but I've been following his career closely for some time, and believe me, that was sanitised. Sometimes in life – when my musician friend David Eastwood handed me a brand-new copy of Radiohead's first album, or two weeks ago at the last football match I'll be attending for some time, when a teenager called Billy Gilmour ran the show as Chelsea put Liverpool out of the FA Cup – you can look back fondly and feel you were one of the first to know about something. I'm afraid that's not the case with Dominic Cummings – I knew about him before most people, but have watched on with horror as he's shaped our country, arguably more than any other 21st-century figure. I now get angrier about him than any other public figure, too, which is saying something in the era of Trump, Murdoch, Putin, Farage and Johnson.

I've no idea what will happen in the coming weeks to me or anyone else, and I don't know whether anyone will ever read this, but I'd like to have the following rant early in this diary. Scream Therapy was all the rage in the 1970s: I can't actually scream here in this confined space without scaring the neighbours, so I'll do it via the keyboard. And as I was typing that sentence, it occurred to me that Cummings bears something of a resemblance to the figure in Edvard Munch's famous painting 'The Scream', though to be honest that's the least of his – and our – problems.

The first time I really became aware of Dominic Cummings was when someone on Facebook posted footage of his appearance before the Treasury Select Committee as Vote Leave's director shortly before the referendum on EU membership in 2016. It's still on YouTube, and well worth a watch – the line I can remember without even having to look it up was 'accuracy is for snake oil pussies', sneered petulantly at the assembled MPs by an overgrown aggressive child with wild eyes, who seemed unable to sit still, then abruptly walked out saying he had to be somewhere else. This same man – whose contempt for accuracy ironically accurately reflected the fast and loose approach of the Leave campaign – is still in contempt of Parliament, having refused to attend later committee sittings intended to investigate Vote Leave's far from transparent funding.

I've been in some strange BBC meetings, but I had never seen a performance like his committee appearance, and already had a horrible feeling Leave was poised to win from my soundings in north-east England where everyone hated then-PM David Cameron and his Chancellor George Osborne, so planned to vote against anything those two supported, regardless of the economic consequences. Add in a proportion of decent people – some of whom we knew – who had misguided notions about regaining sovereignty with little else changing, and then the distinctly iffy claims of the two-headed Leave beast, and you had a potent mix which I backed heavily to win the day.

I wanted to lose that bet so badly, but there was the officially sanctioned People's Front of Leave, fronted by Johnson and Michael Gove and run by Cummings with their notorious '£350m a week for the NHS' bus and suggestion that millions might be on their way to the UK from Turkey, a country which has never been close to joining the EU. Add in unofficial Farage of the Leave People's Front, with his pint and jovial flag-waving and an infamous poster of Syrian refugees at an Eastern European border, and Leave seemed to be offering something for everyone, from the idealistic sovereignty seekers to the merely

confused to the truly bigoted. That combination harvested 52% of the vote.

But before that, I asked around about this swivel-eyed committee loon Cummings, and discovered that a mild mannered but hugely intelligent friend had worked with Dom when Michael Gove brought him into the Department of Education. This chap moved to work in another government department as soon as he could because, and I quote, ‘he was the most appalling man I’ve ever met’. I then read that David Cameron, hardly my favourite person, had described Cummings as ‘a career psychopath’.

Even when Cummings disappeared back into the undergrowth after Brexit was secured – many credit/blame his ultimately meaningless, but appealing-sounding, slogan ‘Take Back Control’ for causing that outcome – I became mildly obsessed with the man and read some of the impenetrable, rambling blogs which he inflicted on the world in the name of ‘The Odyssean Project’. From his overgrown Kevin the Teenager demeanour, random name dropping of academic theorists and dislike of ‘drivel about “identity” and “diversity” from Oxbridge humanities graduates’ (his words) of the liberal London metropolitan elite who he felt had a stranglehold on the law, civil service, BBC, you name it, I assumed Cummings was a self-taught and slightly bitter outsider. If you could penetrate his bizarre, rambling prose style, it seemed he raised some valid points about the often narrow and complacent upper echelons of our society.

Then I did a bit more digging. Like me, Cummings grew up mostly in the north-east, then went to Oxford University. Where he studied, hang on a minute, Ancient and Modern History? I could write a book about the shortcomings of the course I did – PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics, not the Personal Protective Equipment currently in worryingly short supply in the NHS) – and I’ll probably reflect further on that on another lockdown day, but at least it taught me the rudiments of economics and quite a lot about present-day political systems. Ancient and Modern History is probably second only to Jacob

Rees-Mogg's Classics for creating those unworldly 'Oxbridge humanities graduates' Dom doesn't like.

But let's cut him some slack, it's an achievement for a northern state school type to get into Oxford. Ah, right – he went to Durham School, top of the private school tree in the region. But, like me, he married a sound north-east lass. Ah, okay. His wife is deputy editor of *The Spectator*, the publication responsible for a lorry-load of casual Boris Johnson stereotyping, and many other very posh right-wing libertarian outpourings. And her dad is called Sir Humphry and lives in Chillingham Castle in Northumberland. But Dom genuinely hates London and the metropolitan elite, surely? He keeps sneerily telling journalists to get out of the capital and 'talk to real people', doesn't he? Ah, okay, he lives in a townhouse in Islington, a couple of miles to the east of our flat. And he has a library and a tapestry room, just like any other north-east son of toil.

Does he actually just hate himself? His demeanour suggests as much. How has he got away with it? Well, we live in a world where his fellow Oxford humanities graduates Johnson and Rees-Mogg are apparently fighting for the people against the establishment. And they know their enemy all right, having shared a dorm with them at Eton. So, what else do I know about Dom? Straight after Oxford, he had three mystery years 'pursuing various projects in Russia' (his words, not mine), notably running an airline which never had a single passenger. That's becoming the norm in March 2020, but seems a strange way to have spent three years in the 1990s. Still, it's not like he was anywhere where anything odd, or in any way of concern to the security services, could have happened to him. He was just like any other young Englishman, spending the first portion of his graduate life in entirely-above-board 1990s Russia.

On coming home, he got involved in the successful campaign to get the north-east to reject a regional assembly. Decentralisation AND democracy? Bollocks to that. Then he disappeared for two and a half years. I'm going to quote from

the Conservative Home website, in case you don't believe the next bit: 'He then proceeded to spend two and a half years in a bunker he and his father built for him on their farm in Durham, reading science and history and trying to understand the world.' To be fair, which of us can honestly say we haven't done that at one time or another?

So, what did he conclude? I'll quote from one of Dom's essays this time: 'We need leaders with an understanding of Thucydides and statistical modelling, who have read *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Quark and the Jaguar*, who can feel Kipling's *Kim* and succeed in Tetlock's Good Judgements.' I'm clearly not cut out for leadership because that sounds like a pretentious, name-dropping, word salad to me. But somewhere along the line, he caught the eye of (cough) a true leader, Michael Gove, hence his Department of Education and Vote Leave stints. And when the largely octogenarian Tory membership chose our Prime Minister for us last year, the notoriously lazy Alexander De Pfeffel Boris Johnson knew just the man to do most of the work, concoct some cunning plans and deal with dissenters ... sorry, assist him. Better call Dom.

Again, one of Cummings's appealing, but ultimately oversimplistic slogans – 'Get Brexit Done' – did almost as much as Jeremy Corbyn and our wildly-biased newspapers to secure a Tory majority. OK, so Boris and Dom shut down Parliament, unlawfully as it turned out, expelled the remaining 20 Tory MPs with a backbone and a conscience, watched on as decent people seeking a compromise or a non-lemming Brexit were branded traitors and faced death threats, and sent the Leader of the House of Commons to Scotland to smooth-talk the monarch. Then again, you don't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. And, potentially, the rule of law and centuries-old doctrine of Sovereignty of Parliament. Johnson's connections with the billionaire tax-exile media barons, who already loved him for preventing their subjection to proposed greater scrutiny of their financial affairs by the EU, did the rest.

I'll discuss what I know about Johnson (I was vaguely in his presence in the mid-1980s, when even the poshos at Oxford saw him as a joke) another time, but suffice to say, if you'd told me a year ago that Johnson, as frontman for Cummings, would be steering this country through an unprecedented and truly alarming pandemic, I think I would have been physically sick, but we are where we are. There would have been no pleasure in watching Brexit go horribly awry in 2021, and it would be positively psychotic not to pray for those at the helm right now to make the right decisions. Firstly, I hope they are listening to the right advice and that we won't rue an apparent schism with the thinking in the rest of the world and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Secondly, I wouldn't be in charge of this for anything. There are going to be some truly horrible, virtually impossible decisions to be made in the coming months, unprecedented in peacetime.

It may have been my state school background, but I never felt remotely entitled to run anything, let alone the country, just because of a middling degree from Oxford. Boris Johnson has seen it as his birthright from the age of five when, according to his sister, he proclaimed himself 'World King', and has never been disabused of the notion by those around him. This may turn out to be the greatest example of 'be careful what you wish for' in history. Neither he nor Cummings presided over austerity, to be fair – last week's budget was the first departure from a dry-as-dust approach to public finances in a decade. Chancellor Rishi Sunak is even proposing to ask Google, Facebook and co. to stump up a minuscule slice of actual tax. Given that interest rates have been at a historical low for that entire time, and because I broadly subscribe to the Keynesianism which got the world out of the Great Depression in the 1930s, I would argue that the UK's coronavirus death rate is going to be much higher than in many other countries, as much because of Cameron and Osborne (also substantially to blame for Brexit) as the chaotic strategy pursued since the virus first appeared in Wuhan.

WHY ARE WE ALWAYS INDOORS?

So, what do I think Johnson and Cummings have got wrong? I really don't know about the science. My brother to whom I spoke earlier about the plan for my parents (I'll come back to that another day) brought up the South Korean foreign minister and the strategy which has kept the death rate so low there. The counter-argument seems to be that there'll be a second spike in Asia, but the mass testing and tracking there, in Singapore and elsewhere, must have been the right approach, surely? A government's first duty is to try to keep its citizens – or subjects in our case – safe. Too late for that now, but the WHO's obvious concern about the UK's maverick approach, and the recent letter of alarm from 200 of our own scientists, still worry me silly. I think I do know a reasonable amount about politics and media communication, though, and it seems to me that the Vote Leave campaign which now runs Downing Street tried to adapt the approach which won them the referendum to a radically different context. It's proved counter-productive to say the least.

Much as I dislike almost everything about Dominic Cummings, and rue the damage he's caused to Britain, there's no doubt he pulled a strategic rabbit out of the hat with the Leave victory. Leaving the question of funding aside (both in terms of volume and origin) and the 'accuracy is for snake oil pussies' level of truth-telling, the messaging around both Leave and the 2019 General Election was undoubtedly effective. His three-word slogans (the second of which, 'Get Brexit Done', was every bit as superficially appealing and vacuous as the first) triumphed over a mishmash of complex arguments once again, and left the country bitterly divided.

This time, though, there's a common enemy and a craving for national unity. Plenty of ordinary people – Welsh miners, veterans of Gallipoli, and many in his own party – didn't like Johnson's hero Churchill when he got the gig in 1940. Winston's record as Chancellor in the 1920s was almost as widely lambasted as Johnson's more recent tenure at the Foreign Office. But cometh

the hour, his sense of calm and oratorical prowess was exactly what was needed. By contrast, even though he was on his best behaviour last Thursday, even Johnson's fans – the ones we saw saying 'he's one of the lads' and 'I'd love to have a drink with him' in those incessant vox pops which were broadcast during the 2019 election campaign – know he's basically a chancer. I don't particularly want to knock around with people like that, though some people, usually men, clearly do, but that raffish persona is diametrically at odds with what any sentient being needs at the helm right now. Being flanked by two scientists calms that down a little, until one of them produces a graph projection of the herd immunity theory. We'll only know the truth if someone in the inner circle is keeping a diary, but my bet is that Cummings's curiosity about science and behavioural theory was stimulated and he encouraged Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientist, to whip it out at the press conference (so to speak) forgetting that the demise of people's actual parents and grandparents was thereby being bandied about in the name of abstract theorising.

Unless you're a member of the Westminster lobby, it's difficult to assess whether, as Peter Geoghan has suggested, Cummings' obsessive level of control means he's always the 'Number 10 source' of all briefings. Within media and political circles, though, the approach adopted by the current regime is identified at least as much with him as it is with the actual Prime Minister. Unless we include the fictional Malcolm Tucker of *The Thick of It*, only Alastair Campbell has ever acquired such prominence as an unelected component of government. Campbell's take on Cummings appeared in *The Sunday Times* recently; former BBC managers and New Labour figures may have quietly chuckled to themselves as Alastair extolled the virtues of 'good manners and a desire for harmony'. Even so, Campbell worked alongside Tony Blair for nine years, so when he condemns the reported Cummings line to a team of special advisers – 'I'll see half of you next week' – and speaks of a 'culture of fear' and 'contempt for all

but a chosen few', it all begins to sound potentially problematic, to say the least.

The fact that I'd already read about herd immunity the previous day illustrates another problem. ITV's Robert Peston, as he has regularly throughout Johnson's prime ministership, ran an exclusive story, this time explaining the principles behind it. As ever, a 'Number 10 source' was quoted. Now, as I mentioned earlier, there's nothing new about this. You can question journalists becoming conduits for 'sources', though it's happened since time immemorial even in the sports world I inhabited. Both during the Brexit campaign and the torrid parliamentary period after Johnson's accession, Number 10 frequently nudged ideas into the public domain through selected journalists. Sometimes they were genuinely testing the water; by contrast, other scoops were seemingly intended as a 'look over there' distraction, the so-called 'dead cat' theory. At a time of chaos and misinformation, that scattergun approach proved successful for Cummings and Johnson.

In this context, though, it's proved a PR and communications disaster. A simple slogan up front, backed up with a volley of mixed messages and throwing things against the wall, hoping something sticks, might get you to the 52 per cent you need to win a referendum or 40 per cent for a general election, but it's not what's needed now. There's no 'suck it up, losers' when we're all on the same (losing) side, and antagonising some media outlets by favouring others, and slipping them little 'exclusives', has to stop. The announcement of a daily press conference is a small step in the right direction, though Amanda watched today's (again, so I didn't have to) and is none the wiser afterwards.

Yet again, individuals and organisations are taking matters into their own hands, and imposing restrictions upon themselves. If you're not being governed properly, that's what you have to do. Though quite how much we can do as individuals in the absence of mass testing and with some people still going to the theatres, bars and restaurants that even US cities are shutting,

is another question. I feel desperately sorry for those industries, and in happier times I regularly use their services, but Jürgen Klopp's words about football apply to all leisure pursuits right now. One advantage we have over the World War Two generation is that there's an awful lot more available for us to do virtually at home now, and in any case, boredom is infinitely preferable to infecting, and potentially killing, your loved ones.

That rant about Cummings – or Kuntings as one of my WhatsApp groups calls him – meant today's entry is longer than I intended it to be. At least I won't have to repeat all that again, especially since an over-long typing session has left me with tight upper body muscles. In these febrile times, I briefly wondered if I was developing ominous tight chest symptoms, but Amanda reminded me the same thing happened when I was hunched up at the computer writing *Why Are We Always On Last?* In those days, you could pop into the nearest spa every now and then for a back massage. It's extraordinary how the most straightforward everyday activity now has risks attached, and probably won't be happening at all for much longer.

I'll quickly summarise the rest of the day, then carry on with the novel I'm reading. Last week, I bought a few of those modern classics I should have read but haven't, once a London lockdown started looking inevitable to pretty much everyone except the government. The first is *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante. We're also ploughing through piles of TV series, so I'll try to write about them on one of the many quiet days ahead.

Having not gone anywhere yesterday, we decided to drive to the municipal dump in Kentish Town to get rid of some masonry which fell on to our patio during the winter – God knows when the missing chunk of the soffit above our flat will be repaired now – and then park up and walk on Hampstead Heath. We ended up parking at the western limit of our Belsize Park permit, in South End Green just across from the former bookshop, now a Pain Quotidien, where John Wyndham once worked. He used the back alley to the side as the setting for Bill Masen's escape

from the grocery store attack in *The Day of the Triffids*. Then we walked past the now-abandoned Magdala Tavern, outside which Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in Britain, killed her lover in 1955. Just up the street we passed a blue plaque to George Orwell and we went on to the Heath by the little passageway where an iconic photo was taken of Nick Drake during the recording of his final album, *Pink Moon*. We might have much the highest incidence in the country of this horrible virus here in London, but pretty much every neighbourhood has a lively back story.

We were surprised to find the Heath as busy as we'd ever seen it on a weekday. Thinking about it, many people will probably have started to work from home, and on such a beautiful day, a large open space is a safer place for a break than most. As I keep saying, people are making up their own rules at the moment, but it seemed like they were trying to employ social distancing.

We kept hearing snatches of passing conversation, almost all of it about the virus, with the exception of a woman talking to her young son about how well Kieran Trippier is doing at Atlético Madrid. It must be really difficult trying to strike a balance with youngsters right now. They are almost certainly not in danger themselves, but they may have to live with the lifelong guilt of inadvertently killing an older relative.

We saw a couple of school groups out there – again, there's probably less risk of passing on the virus than in a confined classroom, but are we right to still be sending them to school when pretty much everywhere else in the western world is now keeping them at home? Once again, let's hope to God we're getting this call right. Either way, it slightly marred our walk, as we entered the narrow section of pavement behind the pond at the Vale of Health, to encounter a gigantic crocodile of primary school kids coming the other way. Usually, it's a heart-warming sight to see a multicultural gaggle of young Londoners holding hands in twos and getting some fresh air. Right now, as with so much else, you don't know what to think.