

The British Political Dishonesty Pandemic: The Multilayered Political Dishonesty Regarding Covid-19 Policies

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Abstract

The paper submits that UK Government overestimated how dangerous Covid-19 was, was wrong to impose national lockdowns, replied in a disproportionately harsh way to the real health threat posed by Covid-19, and constantly lied to the public for various reasons, including scaring parts of the public into following unnecessary restrictions, and justifying imposing unnecessary restrictions in order to please a public that was a victim of moral panic that was created by the media and government itself.

The pandemic itself may or may not have been unprecedented, but the state's response to it, and the gravity and frequency of the political dishonesty that unravelled during these two years were most probably unprecedented. Both probably caused more harm to the public interest than Covid-19 itself.

This political dishonesty pandemic was also unique, or at least extremely unusual, in the sense that it entailed lies that government told and to which government itself did not believe yet they were welcome by the public and were at times demanded by the ill-informed, manipulated, and frightened public.

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I. Introduction

This paper focuses on the multiple political lies that were told by the UK Government or Governmental agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. from early 2020 until the end of 2022. We will discuss the reasons for this on-going political dishonesty and its political implications.

The common discourse about political dishonesty within the context of the pandemic, focused on the UK Government underestimating how dangerous Covid-19 was, not imposing the first lockdown soon enough, not replying harsh enough, unjustifiably lifting social restrictions, and so on.

Our view, however, is quite different. We submit that UK Government overestimated how dangerous Covid-19 was, was wrong to impose national lockdowns, replied in a disproportionately harsh way to the real health threat posed by Covid-19, and constantly lied to the public for various reasons, including scaring parts of the public into following unnecessary restrictions, and justifying imposing unnecessary restrictions in order to please a public that was a victim of moral panic that was created by the media and government itself.

Even though that will be the context within which we are going to list the numerous lies told by government during the pandemic, we do not intend to directly elaborate on our view above, according to which lockdowns and many social distancing rules were disproportionate response to the pandemic. We will not make a detailed case against lockdowns and the strict social distancing rules that were imposed during the pandemic. We do not have to do it here, because the lies that were told by the government are a matter of fact, a fact that does not depend on views or beliefs regarding the necessity of lockdowns and social distancing rules. We will describe the lies that were told by the government. These lies remain lies, regardless of whether one is a lockdown sceptic or lockdown enthusiastic. However, the understanding of the context within which the political dishonesty was prevalent, and identifying its motives, meaning, and political implications, may depend on one's general view about the necessity and proportionality of Covid lockdowns and other restrictions. Put differently, while accepting that government constantly lied to the public does not depend on one's views about lockdowns and other restrictions, making sense of these lies – may depend on that. Hence the need to describe our general view about the necessity and proportionality of Covid lockdowns and other restrictions, yet without establishing this view with great detail.

The purpose of this paper is not to broadly criticise the way government replied to the pandemic. There is much to be said about the government's incompetence, corruption, lack of consistent policy, cynicism, and more, all within the context of the pandemic, but our focus here would be on examples of political dishonesty, their motives and implications.

The purpose of this paper is also not to investigate the major role the media played in creating the moral panic regarding Covid-19. We will assume this point, that does deserve separate research. Our argument, in short, is that the Covid 'moral panic triangle' included the media, the public, and government. Popular media, both traditional and 'social', was the first to spread panic regarding Covid-19, that in turn moulded public opinion, that then pressured government to take disproportionate measures to tackle the pandemic. Government, and only after the public was already the subject of media created moral panic, started with its own 'project fear', to ensure obedience and tell the public what it wanted to hear, a project that enhanced the panic

levels of an already anxious public. Throughout the pandemic, the media continued supplying the public the winning formula that sells news: fear and panic. This vicious triangle deserves a separate research project. Here, we will only focus on the lies that were told to the public by government.

II. Lie Number 1: ‘Following the Science’ into the First Two Lockdowns and into Strict Social Distancing Rules

During the pandemic, the Government repeatedly stated that it ‘followed the science’ at every turn. However, what became apparent was that was simply not true. Even worse, it is extremely likely that Government knew it was not true.

The fact that the UK had one of the worst ‘COVID-19 performances’ sits uncomfortably with the self-perception that the UK is a world-leading science super-power. The strong scientific base that the UK has, should have given it an advantage while replying to the pandemic. However, from the early days of the pandemic, the government ignored the science, despite the UK having a well-developed system for feeding scientific advice into government policy. The reasons for this failure are multifaceted. They will be discussed after we describe the ways in which government knowingly lied when they said they were ‘following the science’.

In this section, we will first describe the lies that led to imposing the first lockdown, and then the lies that led to imposing far too strict social distancing rules.

1. The lie about following the science into the first lockdown

The first-time government lied to public about ‘following the science’ was in the weeks the led to imposing the first lockdown on 23 March 2020. One of the main reasons that pushed government into imposing a lockdown it never wanted, was the notorious Imperial College’s Covid-19 Response Report 9 that was published on 16 March 2020 (hereinafter: Report 9). This report used a model, predicting the following two years, which generated a worst-case scenario of over half a million deaths from Covid within 4 months (by the end of July 2020). All epidemiological models at the time had suggested that there was the potential for a huge epidemic. The main problem with Report 9 and its worst-case scenario was that it was not, nor was it ever intended to be a realistic scenario (Woolhouse, 2022). This was the most extreme of all plausible scenarios, where cases, hospitalisations, and deaths are at their highest. Such a scenario was based on a situation where the virus spreads without any countermeasures and without considering voluntary changes in human behaviour should measures short of lockdown be imposed. Shortly before the first lockdown was imposed, allowing the virus to spread without any countermeasures was not an option. By 16 March 2020, the Prime Minister issued a ‘social distancing advice’ which was quickly followed by ordering pubs, cafes, restaurants, bars and gyms to close (on 20 March). Other measures short of a blanket lockdown, that were applied elsewhere, such as mass testing, isolating only risk-groups and more, were also available to the UK government. The ‘reasonable worst-case scenario’ presented by Report 9, was therefore never reasonable but rather hypothetical. Prof Mark Woolhouse (2022) (Professor of infectious disease epidemiology and SAGE member) called it ‘the unreasonable worst-case scenario’. Moreover, and as Woolhouse (2022) states, the outputs Report 9 presented ‘were based upon a single set of assumptions – or, if you prefer, guesses – about the impact of each intervention’. He concludes by saying that ‘Report 9 was condensed to the simple but misleading message that, if the government

didn't impose full lockdown immediately, over half a million people would die' (Woolhouse, 2022).

That is not to say that worst-case scenarios should not be created and discussed. They may be necessary in times of uncertainty yet should be used with appropriate caution. The media did not resist the temptation of treating this hypothetical, unrealistic scenario of '500,000 deaths within a few months' as prediction, intensifying fear and panic amongst the public. That was not surprising, as panic and fear sell newspapers and attract readers, but we would expect more from government. Despite the obvious hypothetical and speculative nature of Report 9 and its limited value, when it was presented to government (and then published), the details the scenarios modelled, alongside the analytical assumptions, caveats and uncertainties, were forgotten. Quite simply, and as Prof Woolhouse (2022) stated: 'anyone who supported the lockdown because of the half a million figure was misled'. In his statement before the UK Covid-19 inquiry, Woolhouse (2023, para. 132) described in detail the many flaws of Report 9 and concluded that Report 9 'was not a good basis for making policy'.

Notably, on 20 March 2020, 3 days before the first lockdown was imposed, SPI-M-O (Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, Operational sub-group), a sub-group of SAGE, issued a consensus statement, according to which they 'did not consider it possible to meaningfully model the impact of additional measures at present, reflecting the many uncertainties that existed at the time, uncertainties that had not been fully reflected in Imperial College's Report 9 published four days earlier' (Woolhouse, 2023, para. 141).

It is doubtful whether government or its advisers fully trusted Report 9. In an email exchange between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer between 4 February 2020 and 5 February 2020, it was stated that the death toll for the predicted worst case scenario was 100,000, yet Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer, preferred not to use this figure or similar figures available at the time, as he thought they were all "too soft" and that figures could be expected to be higher (UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2024a). Eventually, Report 9 gave the Chief Medical Officer the scary numbers he was looking for. Despite the well-known fact that reasonable worst-case scenarios '*are intended to be read as a scenario, not a prediction, and are often subject to significant uncertainty*' (UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2024b, section 3.21), government either understood Report 9 as prediction or treated it as such, with its scientific advisors not doing enough, or at all, to prevent this misconception, as the misconception served a desirable purpose: imposing lockdown and scaring sceptic members of the public into obedience.

Report 9 was therefore a sad example of bad science. The way it was understood or interpreted by government, or the way its findings were conveyed to the public both by the media and by government was misguided and misleading, and under no circumstances can be perceived as 'following the science'. It is unclear who played the leading role in this political dishonesty fiasco. Was it those who composed Report 9, those who presented it to government, or government itself. Perhaps a future report from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry will clarify this point. For now, and as we shall prove below, it is safe to assume that it is very likely that none of the players above believed the unreasonable worst-case scenario presented in Report 9, and lied to the public about it, albeit for different reasons.

A nation-wide lockdown was the most extreme, draconian, scientifically controversial, and morally suspicious measure that could have been taken as a response to a health

threat of the kind that was created by Covid. It was never applied before 2020. Before first imposed in non-democratic China in 2020, a blanket lockdown was never seriously considered as an anti-pandemic measure and was never included in any plan or model that anticipated a pandemic of the kind the world faced in 2020. It was always a well-known scientific fact that short-term, intermediate lockdowns will never result in zero infections (Woolhouse, 2022; Kissler et al., 2020), so it was very likely that the virus will spread again shortly after the lockdown ends, as indeed happened, more than once, around the globe. Lockdowns, therefore, may bring temporary relief (or the appearance of it), so temporary benefits, if any, but will always cause severe long-lasting harm.

The decision to enforce the first lockdown on 23 March 2020 was, therefore, the result of bad science and a misleading, hypothetical, unrealistic and unreasonable worst-case scenario. Quite astonishingly, the exact same thing happened when it was decided to impose the second lockdown in November 2020. Woolhouse (2022), in his truth-revealing book, under the section ‘misleading graphs and a loss of trust’, describes how, on 21 September 2020, Patrick Vallance, the UK’s Chief Scientific Advisor, presented a misleading, distorted graph at a press briefing, that yet again, showed only one possible scenario, that illustrated or projected a frightening number of Covid cases in the UK if a second lockdown was not imposed. Woolhouse (2022, p. 159) stated the obvious when he said that ‘it is never good practice to show a single line as if that’s the only scenario possible, a lesson that should have been learned back in March’.

Woolhouse (2022) then describes a troubling situation that should be quoted in full: ‘almost unbelievably, the September 21st saga was played out again at the October 31st press briefing by Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty that presaged the Prime Minister’s announcement of a second lockdown in England. This time the briefing included a projection... of up to four thousand deaths per day, several times higher than the previous peak in April. It quickly became apparent that this projection was already inaccurate on the day it was shown. Nor did it take into account the fact that the second wave was already beginning to slow... all the other model projections {that were never made public} gave much lower numbers’ (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 161). This is a sad and disturbing description of two senior scientific advisors to government, engaging in bad science for the purpose of forcing government into another unnecessary lockdown. This is in fact a case of misinformation that is being spread by the most senior scientific advisors to government. The political dishonesty here is multifaceted: by using partial and manipulative information, the advisors lied to the press, the public, and government. Government, in turn, lied to the public when they later said that they followed the science into the second lockdown. Reading this decision-making process and then arguing or thinking that science was followed, is a bit far-fetched.

When imposing the first lockdown, and then the second, government never ‘followed the science’ but rather followed China – and the manipulated, ill-informed public opinion in the UK. Like many other governments around the globe, the UK government followed a totalitarian and cruel approach, that pays little attention to the general welfare of people, transparency, accountability, and open debate. As stated elsewhere (Nehushtan, 2022), Prof Neil Ferguson, one of the architects and keen advocates of British lockdowns, admitted that when the scientists who advised the UK government observed the Chinese lockdown, they initially presumed it would not be an available option in a liberal Western democracy. He said that ‘we couldn’t get away with it in Europe, we thought... and then Italy did it. And we realised we could’, and that ‘if China had not done it, the year would have been very different’ (Ferguson,

2020). It was China, not ‘science’, that made lockdowns a possibility in the West. Non-democratic, totalitarian China was in fact the role model for not properly balancing a health-related public interest with all other rights and interests that human-beings have and the general interest of living in a free and democratic society, and for ignoring the multiple and long-term harms that are inflicted by lockdowns.

2. The lie about following the science into imposing strict social distancing rules.

Here, we will only focus on the restrictions regarding leaving the people’s homes and meeting people outdoors, yet similar arguments can be made regarding other social distancing rules. On 23 March 2020, the public was instructed ‘to stay at home’ with leaving the house only allowed for essential purposes. This ‘house arrest’ measure was in place for two months, until mid-May 2020, with restrictions regarding outdoor activities lasting until later in June. Similar measures were taken during the second lockdown (from November 2020) and the third (from January 2021). For many months, people were either not allowed to leave their homes or were subject to severe restrictions regarding meeting others outdoors. The multiple harms that were caused as the result of these restrictions can’t be overstated. Government continuously argued that imposing these restrictions or not easing them was informed by science. The truth is that, yet again, government lied to the public when they said that.

As Woolhouse (2022, pp. 70-71) insightfully reminds us, Covid-19 was not completely unknown to scientists. It was merely a ‘novel coronavirus’ that shared many attributes with other, well-known viruses of the ‘coronavirus family’. The ones which are relevant for our discussion here are the following: first, the ideal environment for transmission is a dark, closed, poorly ventilated space. Second, the virus spreads most efficiently when people gather in proximity for a prolong period, i.e. for longer than 15 minutes. Third, the risk of transmission is reduced by 90% by being two meters apart, and by 80% by being one meter apart. These facts were known to scientists and the World Health Organisations well before Covid-19 started to spread. That led Woolhouse (2022) to conclude that ‘by far the safest place for people to get together is outdoors. As far back as March 2020 there was evidence from China that outdoor transmission of novel coronavirus was extremely rare’ (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 73). He added that ‘one study traced over seven thousand transmission events; just two occurred outdoors. For whatever reason, this knowledge did not influence UK government policy when it came to lockdown. We were told to stay at home and not meet others, even outside. There was no need for this’.

Yet again, we can see the moral panic triangle in action: First, the media inserted fear into people’s life, creating the false impression that a single, brief encounter with people outdoors can be deadly (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 72); that gathering outside, even while keeping 2 meters distance, can be deadly; and that any human interaction of any kind and length and under almost any circumstances is potentially deadly. Then, the frightened public demanded strict restrictions (and opposed lifting them), and finally, government succumbed to the panic/public, imposed completely unnecessary restrictions which were not informed by credible science, and kept them in place for months, while lying to the public about their necessity.

III. Lie Number 2: ‘Following the Science’ While Ignoring the Social Sciences

Imposing long lockdowns or strict social distancing rules was always likely to result in immense harm. In the UK, the unprecedented and on-going harm to the financial, social, and mental well-being of millions, is still unfolding. As noted elsewhere

(Nehushtan, 2022), the British government had not initially tried to measure the harm caused by lockdowns. No such attempt was recorded before imposing the first lockdown in March 2020. It was not until later, on 30 November 2020, that an impact-assessment was released, before the tier-system, or regional lockdown, was introduced to the UK. In that impact-assessment, there was no real attempt to weigh the benefits from imposing lockdowns – against the harm that is likely to be caused by them. The British government openly admitted that since this impact-assessment process is ‘too complex’, they were not even going to try to measure the harms that are caused by lockdowns. The impact-assessment from 2020 did refer to the question of how lockdowns may affect the economy, yet it concluded that ‘given the unprecedented nature of both the virus and the restrictions that have been required to mitigate it, it is not possible to assess the balance of these effects.’ (HM Government, 2020). Thus, the most draconian measures were imposed, including unprecedented harsh measures that had clear potential of inflicting immense harm on millions and society as a whole, without any real effort to assess the harm that they may cause.

The problem here is twofold and interrelated: first, the overreliance on scientists who acted as advocates rather than advisers. Second, ignoring the fact that the question of how to reply to a health risk such as Covid-19 was never a purely scientific-medical question, but rather a multi-disciplinary question that must have been answered by taking into account multiple areas of knowledge and the multiple effects of imposing lockdowns and social distancing rules. Woolhouse nicely described both aspects of said problem. As to the first problem, he said that ‘during the pandemic we often heard ministers say that they were following the science... I’ve always been wary of it. It lets ministers off the hook by hiding behind the scientists...it became routine during the pandemic for scientist advisors and commentators to push for one policy or another... when there is a constant stream of government scientific advisors in the media calling for a lockdown... then we have crossed a line. This is not advice, this is advocacy’ (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 226). As to the second problem, Woolhouse said that ‘the ramifications of lockdown extend far beyond any short-term public health benefit. Yet, as Patrick Vallance has openly admitted, SAGE was never tasked with the bigger picture. Its primary role was to advise on the controlling of the pandemic... its advice was always going to err on the side of averting an immediate health threat with too little emphasis on long-term harms’ (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 227).

In his statement before the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, Prof Mark Woolhouse said that SAGE ‘did not have the appropriate expertise to assess the harms being done to the economy, nor the harms to education, mental health or societal well-being’ (Woolhouse, 2023, para. 18). Woolhouse added that even though the issue of lack of attention to other harms ‘was not SAGE’s role’, the issue was repeatedly raised by himself and others yet Cabinet Office observers were not able to advise on whose role it was to take into account the harms caused by lockdowns and social distancing rule. Woolhouse describes an incomprehensible governmental policy that for almost two years mostly cared about minimising the health-related harm caused by Covid, while paying little to no attention to the immense harms caused by lockdowns and social distancing rules.

The Covid-19 Inquiry, in its first report, acknowledged the above, and concluded that ‘interconnected risks and a “domino effect” were not adequately taken into account. There was a failure to appreciate how a whole-system civil emergency caused by a pandemic had the potential to spiral, as a result not only of the pandemic *but also of the response to it*’ (UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2024b, section 3.17). It was added that ‘there was a failure to appreciate long-term risks and their effect on vulnerable people... as

well as those who may be vulnerable *to the response to the pandemic* (UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2024b, section 3.17).

‘Following the science’ is a problematic term. First, within the life/natural sciences, there is not always ‘one science’. There is not always one accurate scientific answer to every question. Second, the question of whether to impose a nation-wide lockdown was never a purely ‘scientific’ question. It was always a multifaceted question, the answer to which depends on facts or predictions taken from areas of knowledge such as economy, psychology, sociology, philosophy, health (in the broadest sense possible), and many more.

Accordingly, the political dishonesty and the lies the government told the public within the context of imposing nation-wide and regional lockdowns, were also multifaceted. First, government explicitly lied when they told the public that “following the science” must lead to imposing lockdowns and that that was the only way or the best way to save as many lives as possible from the threat of Covid. The experience of many states in which lockdowns were never imposed, yet they performed better than the UK (Sweden being the obvious example), proves that point. Second, government lied when they created the impression that the question of whether to impose lockdowns was a pure medical-scientific question, rather than a multi-disciplinary question. That lie was well received by the media and the public, with both either silencing, ignoring, or showing hostility towards attempts of non-scientists, including academic leaders in their fields, who questioned the efficacy and necessity of lockdowns and social distancing rules.

When Government said they were following the science, they lied because ‘following the science’, broadly understood, means following facts and reason, while taking into account all relevant considerations, whereas government in fact often did not follow any credible medical-scientific advice and completely ignored every social science aspect of the practice of imposing lockdowns and social distancing rules. Government lied because the public was entitled to expect that when government says they are ‘following the science’ by imposing lockdowns, government would do that only after making sure that the harms that may be caused by lockdowns will not exceed the harms lockdowns are designed to prevent, yet government never made any attempt to engage with that question.

One aspect of the political dishonesty in this case is a bit unusual. In short: government lied to the public in order to justify a harmful policy that the public supported and in fact demanded. In the weeks that led to the first lockdown on 23 March 2020, the popular media injected fear and panic into the public sphere. The media created the false impression that Covid was a modern plague that was going to result in unprecedented public health catastrophe. The scared public, in turn, demanded harsh response from government. The public panic was unprecedented, to the extent that when the first lockdown was finally imposed, an astonishing 93% of the population supported the lockdown (YouGov, 2020). In order to give the already brainwashed, ill-informed, and scared people what they wanted, government lied when they said that ‘following the science’ inevitably leads to lockdown and then strict social distancing rules. Government used the slogan ‘following the science’ as opium for the masses, and the masses enthusiastically accepted this political dishonesty overdose. This dynamic of moral panic that is first created by the popular media; followed by a frightened public that demands imposing restrictions and objects to lifting them; and ends with government that contributes to the moral panic, lies to the public to justify popular

but scientifically and socially indefensible policies, policies that government itself never thought were necessary – repeated itself during the best part of the pandemic.

Quite shockingly, even after it should have been clear that there was high probability that lockdowns may cause more harm than the harm they are designed to prevent, and even though during and after the first lockdown UK government still refused to conduct any research into the multiple short and long term harms that will be caused by lockdowns, government imposed two further national lockdowns, yet again - without an attempt to evaluate the potential or inevitable harms they may cause. This is not unrelated to the fact that a poll from November 2020, shortly before the second lockdown was imposed, revealed that 72% of the British public supported returning the country to lockdown, and only 23% opposed the move (Smith, 2020).

With such support from the (ill-informed, manipulated, frightened) public, government saw no reason to base its decision on science, reason, and facts.

IV. Lie Number 3: ‘Following the Science’ into Imposing Travel Restrictions

When the first meaningful travel restrictions were introduced, on 8 June 2020, the policy required nearly all international arrivals at UK ports to quarantine for 14 days. The open purpose of the quarantine policy was to ‘save lives’ by keeping overall levels of infection down. It was quite clear though that the quarantine policy was not going to achieve its purpose, not even remotely, because there was never any logical or causal relation between the means (14-day quarantine for international arrivals) and the end (keeping the levels of infection down) (Nehushtan, June 2020). That was the case because compared to other countries worldwide, the UK at the time had one of the worst ‘COVID-19 performances’ in terms of both infection and death rate (McCarthy, 2021). Back then, the UK was rated as the third worse-performing country in the world. It was never clear how applying the quarantine policy to tourists or UK residents coming from countries where the infection and death rate was lower than in the UK, could keep the level of infection down within the UK.

Countries like New Zealand and Australia, that had incredibly strict border controls during the pandemic, came close to eliminating COVID-19. However, COVID-19 was never properly established there before the strict travel restrictions were imposed. And even then, Australia and New Zealand still had to contend with a steady trickle of outbursts which were dealt with using localised lockdowns. When these isolated countries could not prevent the flow of imported COVID-19 cases, it was difficult to see how the UK could. Border controls and travel bans have greatest impact when they prevent the movement of infection from a location where it is already established to a location where it is absent (Woolhouse, 2022). That was not the case in the UK. In the UK, travel restrictions did not bring any public health benefits yet inflicted immense harm on many. As Woolhouse said, travel restrictions, which he described as a ‘costly intervention’, are expected to have much less impact if infection is already present in both source and destination (Woolhouse, 2022). The UK was not alone in its unreasonable border control policy. A study published in late 2020 confirmed that for most countries in the world, and after Covid already started spreading, imported cases had made only a small or very small contribution to the spread of Covid (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 145).

The above insights are not insights in hindsight. They were all known to scientists in the UK and beyond. They were known to the UK government as well. Even though section 2.5 of the government policy regarding travel restrictions stated that the policy

was ‘informed by science’, and that ‘government will continue to be guided by the best scientific and medical advice to ensure that it does the right thing at the right time’, government refused to reveal the scientific advice behind its travel restrictions and border control policy – presumably because there was none (Grierson et al., 2020). The government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, Patrick Vallance, a lockdown and social distancing rules enthusiastic, refused to back the blanket quarantine policy, saying that the advice from the Sage advisory committee was that ‘quarantines worked best when... applied to countries from higher rates’ and that the decision to introduce the policy was ultimately one for ministers (Grierson et al., 2020). Other leading scientists described the policy as one that makes no sense (Hussain and Tapsfield, 2020).

Why did government come up with a policy that was so clearly pointless regarding public health yet destructive regarding people’s well-being, while acting against the advice of its own scientific advisory team? The only reasonable explanation for implementing such an unreasonable and irrational policy was the government’s attempt to please the scared, ill-informed public, to create a false sense of security, and to boost public support in a government that was heavily criticised because of its poor results in terms of protecting public health during the pandemic (The Guardian, 2020).

From the early days of the pandemic, and much like regarding lockdowns and strict social distancing rules, vast majority of the British public enthusiastically supported imposing and strictly enforcing travel restrictions. On 12 March 2020, shortly before the first lockdown was imposed (on 23 March), 51% of the British public supported completely closing the borders. A week later, 74% of the public held that view (Lacey, 2020).

A year into the pandemic, in February 2021, after the UK already imposed strict travel restrictions (including travellers entering the UK from 33 red-listed countries having to quarantine, at their own expense, in a government-approved facility), 78% of the British public would support the United Kingdom fully closing its borders (R&WS Research Team, 2021).

Also in February 2021, 59% of the British public did not think border restrictions were strict enough. 22% thought they were appropriate. The same survey found that earlier in the pandemic, in April 2020, 66% of the public said they would feel uncomfortable with the UK keeping its borders open to people traveling from other countries. The frightened public held a rather simplistic and completely misguided view according to which more people being allowed to enter the UK (either at all or without being subject to 14 days quarantine) - equals ‘more Covid’. Government made no attempt to reassure the public by conveying the more complex truth. Instead, government imposed strict travel restrictions, to satisfy the public, yet without telling the public that there were no scientific justifications for said restrictions, and in fact by lying to the public by saying that imposing the restrictions was ‘informed by science’.

This is another example of the triangle of moral panic in our case: the media fuels the moral panic amongst the public with scary and misleading reports about Covid; the scared public demands a response from government; and government, instead of telling the public the truth about the real risks that result from the pandemic and the efficacy of certain mitigating measures, lied to the public by arguing that the response that the public demanded and eventually got, was informed by science.

V. Lie Number 4: 'It Can Happen to Anyone'

How dangerous Covid actually was – and to who exactly? During the pandemic, most people overestimated the Covid health risks in two related ways: First, by overestimating the risks that Covid posed to society as a whole. Second, by overestimating the risks to individuals, for example by thinking that 'anyone can get it'; that one can get it anywhere, i.e., both indoors and outdoors; and that if one's gets it, then their life is likely to be at risk.

As to the first type of overestimation, regarding the risks to society: an opinion poll from November 2020 (between the first and second national lockdowns) found that 41% of the British public thought that Covid has been the single biggest cause of UK deaths in 2020, whereas, and as of September 2020, it was the 19th cause of death in England and the 24th in Wales (Tominey, 2020).

During the two years of the pandemic, around 230,000 people in the UK died *with* Covid (so not necessarily *from* Covid). This is approximately 0.38% of the populations, so around 0.19% (115,000 people) per year. However, in August 2020, almost 50% of the public thought that during the first 6 months of the pandemic, Covid caused the death of 1% of the population (600,000 deaths). 18% of the public thought that during the first 6 months of the pandemic, Covid caused the death of no less than 5-10% of the population (3-6 million deaths). 15% of the public thought that during the first 6 months of the pandemic, Covid caused the death of more than 10% of the population (more than 6 million deaths). Less than 4% of the public came close to the real number (Panjwani, 2020; KekstCNC, 2020).

Public ignorance is not uncommon. It can result from many reasons (lack of time, indifference, low intelligence, consuming news in 'echo chambers', psychological biases, and more). However, it is reasonable to assume that the gross misconception of how dangerous covid actually was and of the harm that it actually caused, was the result of 'project fear' in the popular media that was embraced by government as well. That 'project fear' included a series of misinformation, disinformation and blunt lies (Dodsworth, 2021).

To put things in perspective (Nehushtan, 2022): according to the ONS (Office for National Statistics) website: from March 2020 to March 2022, there were 163,000 cases of deaths *with* Covid (i.e., deaths due to whatever reason, within 28 days of a positive Covid test), so 81,500 deaths *with* Covid per year. It is estimated that in 2020, around 50,000 people died *due to* Covid. Also in the UK, there are 106,000 deaths *with* influenza and pneumonia per year (24,500 more than Covid), of which 30,000 are deaths *due to* influenza and pneumonia. In 2020, deaths due to influenza and pneumonia were consistently lower, by up to 30%, than the five-year average. It is safe to assume that many of those who would have died from influenza and pneumonia in 2020, died from covid instead. When we put Covid in context, we can appreciate that even though it did pose a real health risk, more severe than influenza and pneumonia, one that also caused distinctive harms other than death – it appears that the magnitude of the health risk was severely exaggerated, both by the media and by government, which, in turn, resulted in an ill-informed, deceived, and frightened public.

As to the second type of overestimation, regarding the risks to individuals: an opinion poll from November 2020 (between the first and second national lockdowns) found that 24% of the public thought that the average age of those who died of Covid was 60-

69. 35% thought the average age of those who died from covid was lower than 60 (Tominey, 2020).

The truth is that Covid was dangerous mostly to the elderly and vulnerable. It is important to note that the real risk from Covid had become known even before the UK imposed its first lockdown in March 2020. By early 2020, it was already known that persons aged 85 years and above accounted for 41% of deaths; persons aged 75 and above accounted for 74% of deaths; and those aged 65 and above accounted for 89% of deaths (ONS, 2020a). Age was, therefore, and by far, the most important risk factor. This has not changed, as a year into the pandemic, data showed that 99% of Covid deaths were in people aged 50 and over; 74% of Covid deaths were in people aged 75 and over – and that more than 40% of deaths were in people 85 and over (ONS, 2021a).

At the start of the pandemic, 90.9% of those who died in March, April and May 2020 either from the virus or ‘with the virus’ had at least one pre-existing condition. On average, those who died between the age of 60-69 years had 2.1 existing conditions, and those over the age of 70 had 2.3 existing conditions (ONS, 2020b). From the second quarter of 2021, those with a pre-existing condition accounted for 81.2% of deaths in England and Wales from Covid (ONS, 2021b).

In the UK, the median age of death for males is 82.3 and for females - 85.8 (ONS, 2021c). The median age of those who died due to Covid or ‘with Covid’ between March 2020 and August 2021 was 82 (ONS, 2021b).

Also in the UK, deaths in care homes accounted for around a third of fatalities from the pandemic (Booth and McIntyre, 2021). The median life expectancy for people admitted to nursing beds in England is 418 days - and for residential beds is 665 days (Forder and Fernandez, 2011). Thus, care-home residents who died from or with Covid, had an average life expectancy of no more than 1-2 years.

The data above shows that the risk from Covid to healthy people under the age of 65 was minimal, and from a broad social perspective - negligible. It shows why Covid was, from the very beginning, a highly discriminatory virus, in the sense that it posed a serious health risk almost exclusively to older people with pre-existing conditions.

The crucial point is that almost all the above was known to the media, SAGE, the senior scientific advisors to government – and to Government itself – before the first lockdown was imposed. Yet all these actors decided to hide this information from the public, convey misinformation and disinformation instead – or to not attempt to refute it when it was spread by others, thus willingly spreading ill-founded fear amongst the public. The public, in turn, demanded and then got lockdowns and strict social distancing rules that were never in the public interest.

VI. Lie Number 5: ‘Government not Believing Its Own Lies – PartyGate and More

There are three main types of political dishonesty: in the first, the dishonest politician believes their own lies. In the second, the dishonest politician is indifferent to the distinction between lies and truth. They will say whatever they need to say to achieve their purpose, without giving any regard to the question of whether what they say is true. In the third, the dishonest politician knows they are lying. Within the context of Covid and the dishonesty pandemic, the dishonest politicians were of the third type. Our argument here goes as follows: regardless of whether lockdowns and social distancing rules were scientifically and socially justified, the Prime Minister and many

other ministers and civil servants never thought they actually were, thus they lied to the public when they kept arguing for their necessity. The examples that prove this argument are numerous. They started from the moment the first lockdown was imposed and lasted until the restrictions were lifted. Here, we are only going to refer to very few representative, notable examples.

The first example is Boris Johnson's live speech to the nation on 23 March 2020, where he announced the first national lockdown. In his speech, Boris Johnson told the public that 'the coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades. All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer... from this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction — you must stay at home' (Johnson, 2020). Within the speech, Johnson's words were designed to strike fear into its listeners. By using the words 'invisible killer', 'lives will be lost', 'funerals', and so on, Johnson called fear and death into the mind of his listeners. As Dodsworth highlights, we were told that we must follow the rules to 'save many thousands of lives' and by highlighting that the police were enforcing the rules, this was designed to threaten us into compliance (Dodsworth, 2021, p. 12).

Not only did this speech create a sense of unease amongst critical thinkers, with the concept of quarantining the healthy mimicking the totalitarian response to Covid of the Chinese – but the speech itself 'felt off' (Dodsworth, 2021, p. 95). As Dodsworth (2021, p. 8) cleverly highlighted, Boris Johnson's body language showed clenched fists and staccato speech pattern. Such behaviour seemed the polar opposite to Johnson's usual performance of a likeable buffoon – presenting as 'controlled, stern and at a basic level, ingenuine'. Following these points, and well before Partygate and the discoveries about the Prime Minister not following the rules he set to the public, Dodsworth (2021, p. 10) asked two experts to decode Johnson's body language and speech style. Dodsworth's initial reaction to the speech was echoed by Naomi Murphy, a clinic psychologist, highlighting that whilst Johnson's words conveyed one message, his body language said another. Essentially, Johnson's message did not seem authentic – he did not believe in the essence of the words he communicated to the public (Dodsworth, 2021, p. 10). Whilst this appearance of inauthenticity could result from nerves, especially due to the momentous speech which was being given – Johnson is someone who is used to being on the limelight. Neil Shah, founder of the Stress Management Society and International Wellbeing Insights and an expert in reading body language, agreed that within his speech, it appeared that Johnson did not believe the words he was saying. Although it appears he did believe his words when describing the impact on the NHS, this appears to disappear when being more authoritarian in his message.

The assertion that Boris Johnson never believed that lockdowns and other social distancing rules were necessary, thus lying to the public when he clearly said that they were, could have remained an assertion, perhaps even speculation. But then Partygate happened.

Partygate ended with the Susan Gray report which found that several Covid rules had been broken (Cabinet Office, 2022). Following the report, 126 Fines were issued to 83 individuals, including Boris Johnson and the then Chancellor Rishi Sunak (Reality Check team, 2022). In the following we will partly describe the relevant timeline, with many similar incidents being left out, and will then discuss the obvious and hidden aspects of Partygate, within the context of political dishonesty.

15 May 2020: a photo from May 2020 (during the first lockdown) showed Boris Johnson and his staff in the Downing Street Garden with bottles of wine and cheese boards (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 8). When questioned, Boris Johnson said that the picture showed people at work talking about work. The strict legal restrictions at the time stated that you could not leave your house without a reasonable excuse. Government guidance was that you could meet one person outside of your household in an outdoor setting while exercising. The guidance never allowed co-workers to have a picnic outdoors, even if work-related issues were discussed. This event was not investigated by the police (Cabinet Office, 2022, para. 4).

20 May 2020: roughly 100 people were sent an email that invited them to join “socially distanced drinks in the No 10 Garden that evening” (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 9). The BBC (2023a) was told that Boris Johnson and his wife were among the 30 people who attended. Boris Johnson later apologised to MPs for attending the event and stated that he spent roughly 25 minutes thanking staff before returning to his office. The police investigation determined that the event did breach the rules in place at the time.

This gathering was arranged by Downing Street officials a week in advance, with invitations being sent to about 200 people on behalf of senior civil servant Martin Reynolds (Reality Check team, 2022). Invitees were told to “bring your own booze” to the event (Cabinet Office, 2022, pp. 10, 11). Boris Johnson stated that he was not notified in advance and “believed implicitly” that it was a work event. One responder to the invitation flagged that there would be a Downing Street press conference finishing at the time of the event so it would be helpful if staff were “not walking around waving bottles of wine etc” (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 11). The mentioned press conference was the one which stated that the nation was in a Covid Alert Level 4 where “A Covid-19 epidemic is in general circulation” and that “transmission is high or rising exponentially” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020a). The report says that the Prime Minister attended the drinks at approximately 18:00 for around 30 minutes to thank staff before returning to his office (Reality Check team, 2022).

At the time, the rules in the first lockdown stated that gatherings of two or more people in a public place were not allowed (Reality Check team, 2022). Whilst the law was later changed, the regulations at the time stated that people could not leave their homes – or be outside where they lived – without a reasonable excuse (*The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, No. 350, Regulation 6*). A reasonable excuse included work where you couldn’t work from home.

Whilst Boris Johnson told Members of Parliament that as a “work event”, he believed the gathering was technically within the guidance, this same guidance stated that only “absolutely necessary” participants should attend meetings, and that social distancing should be observed. There was nothing in the guidance to suggest that drinking or socialising would have been allowed (Reality Check team, 2022).

19 June 2020: up to 30 people gathered in the Cabinet Room at No 10 on Boris Johnson’s birthday to present the prime minister with a birthday cake. It was stated by No 10 that staff had “gathered briefly” to “wish the prime minister happy birthday”. No 10 also added that Boris Johnson had been there for less than 10 minutes, although the report shows he was there for 20 (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 17). At the time, the restrictions in place banned most indoor gatherings involving more than two people and the police investigation determined that the event did breach the rules in place at the time. From this event, Boris Johnson, his wife Carrie Symonds and Rishi Sunak all confirmed they paid fixed penalty notices.

18 December 2020: although it was initially denied by Downing Street, a video came out of a party which took place where the prime minister's then press secretary, Allegra Stratton, saying that "This fictional party was a business meeting and it was not socially distanced" (BBC, 2022). Stratton later resigned following an angry backlash, saying she would "regret the remarks for the rest of my days" (BBC, 2023a). The police investigation concluded that the event breached the rules in place at the time.

The event featured alcohol, a Secret Santa gift exchange, and an awards ceremony, with people working elsewhere in the building complaining about the noise it generated. A cleaner noted the following morning that red wine had been spilled on one wall and on a number of boxes of photocopier paper (Reality Check team, 2022).

At the time, and on the 17th of December 2020, London had been moved to tougher tier 3 restrictions which meant mixing indoors with people outside your household or bubble was not allowed (BBC, 2020), and fines were issued for going to indoor gatherings with two or more people. Furthermore, the government's guidance for the Christmas period specifically said: "Although there are exemptions for work purposes, you must not have a work Christmas lunch or party, where that is a primarily social activity and is not otherwise permitted by the rules in your tier" (Cabinet Office, 2020).

14 January 2021: a gathering for farewell drinks occurred in No 10 to mark the departure of two private secretaries (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 32). The police investigation concluded that this event breached the rules in place at the time.

Gray's report states that there was alcohol available at the gatherings and that Boris Johnson attended to give a leaving speech (Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 33). At the time, England had entered its third national lockdown on 6th January 2021 and a "stay at home" order was in place (Cabinet Office, 2021). People were allowed to leave home for work (if they could not reasonably work from home) but were not allowed to meet socially with others. The fines were for attending an indoor gathering of two or more people.

On 21 April 2022, the House of Commons passed a motion calling for the then prime minister, Boris Johnson, to be investigated by the Commons Privileges Committee for having potentially misled parliament over 'Partygate' allegations. The committee's final report, setting out its conclusions and recommendations, was published on 15 June 2023.

After the events described above, and many similar others, were unfold, Boris Johnson stated that his media advisors had assured him that the rules were adhered to. However, the committee stated that it was inappropriate to draw general conclusions about rules being followed at all times from this advice, which was provided in response to news reports. According to the report, Boris Johnson ought to have consulted government lawyers or otherwise obtained an 'authoritative assessment' prior to making this statement. A statement from an unidentified No 10 official indicating that there was a 'wider culture of not adhering to any rules' in the building was among the new evidence released by the committee. Birthday celebrations, farewell parties, and end-of-week get-togethers 'all continued as normal' throughout the pandemic, the official continued.

In addition to the actions that made up Partygate, the report claimed that Boris Johnson was 'complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the committee' and that he had knowingly misled the Commons regarding lockdown parties at No 10. The primary conclusion was that he purposefully misled the House of Commons by claiming time and again, following the Partygate scandal, that

Downing Street had always complied with Covid regulations. He has previously acknowledged that his initial remarks misled the MPs, but he maintains that at the time he thought they were accurate because of assurances he had received from officials. He did, the report discovered, have personal knowledge of violations of No. 10's guidelines and regulations. Furthermore, it stated that he amounted to a 'deliberate closing of his mind' because he did not actively seek out authoritative assurances regarding compliance. It was concluded that there was very little chance that he had actually believed the assurances he made at the time, and even less chance that he could believe them now (BBC, 2023b). This form of misleading the House of Commons was one example of the acts which led Boris Johnson to be in contempt of Parliament by preventing MPs from carrying out their essential task of holding him accountable. In fact, the committee found that the contempt was all the more serious because he was the most senior member of the government.

There were more than a few cases in the UK where policymakers (the Prime Minister, members of Government, legislatures, civil servants, and scientific advisors) did not follow the Covid rules that they either advocated, decided, or conveyed to the public. We are not going to mention these cases here, as the above examples are already plenty.

The political dishonesty that finds its expression in the example above is multilayered. Most of it is obvious but important part of it is not. The obvious political dishonesty regards (a) public officials who repeatedly and bluntly violated strict, unprecedented social distancing rules that they themselves created, and that were harshly enforced regarding the entire population; and (b) lying to Parliament and the public when arguing that said violations never happened, or that those who broke the rules were not aware that said rules were broken. This outrageously appalling political dishonesty got immense coverage and was rightfully criticised by the public and the media.

Yet Partygate revealed a hidden aspect of political dishonesty, that got no media coverage and was largely ignored by the public. Partygate was the ultimate proof that the Prime Minister, many of his ministers, and many civil servants, never believed almost anything they told the public about the risks that Covid-19 posed to individuals and society as a whole. They never believed that any of the strict social distancing rules and restrictions was necessary. Had they believed any of it, they would have never repeatedly acted the way they did. Their repeating behaviour was not one of people who had any concerns about Covid-19 related health risks. Thus, the lies government told the public should be perceived in a new, even more disturbing light: government lied to the public when they said that Covid-19 restrictions (lockdowns, social distancing rules, travel restrictions, and more) were informed by science; government lied when they echoed or never refuted the misinformation and disinformation that was spread by the media regarding the risks that Covid-19 posed to individuals and society; they lied when they broke the Covid rules that they created and imposed on the public; *and* they lied when they told the public that these rules were absolutely necessary to save lives, as they never believed it and never acted on it.

VII. Conclusion

This paper listed just a few of the multilayered lies that the UK government told the public during the Covid-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2022. The pandemic itself may or may not have been unprecedented, but the state's response to it, and the gravity and frequency of the political dishonesty that unravelled during these two years were most

probably unprecedented. Both probably caused more harm to the public interest than Covid-19 itself.

This political dishonesty pandemic was also unique, or at least extremely unusual, in the sense that it entailed lies that government told and to which government itself did not believe, yet they were welcome by the public and were at times demanded by the ill-informed, manipulated, and frightened public. It seemed that during the best part of these two years, huge majority of the British public did not want to know the truth, tried to ignore it, harshly criticised those who spoke it, and focused their energy on demanding that government will restrict their freedom to protect them from partly real, but mostly imaginary health threat.

We noted the special nature of the triangle of moral panic in our case: the media fuelled the moral panic amongst the public with scary and misleading reports about the risks that Covid posed to individuals and society; the scared public demanded a response from government; and government, instead of telling the public the truth about the real risks that resulted from the pandemic and about the questionable efficacy of certain mitigating measures, lied to the public by arguing that the response that the public demanded and eventually got, was informed by science, and by imposing restrictions that government itself never thought were necessary.

Instead of following the science, reason, and facts, government followed an ill-informed, manipulated, and irrational public opinion. Some may argue that the moment the first player in the 'moral panic triangle', i.e. the popular media, played its role and infused fear into people's hearts, government was left with little choice but to give the public what it wanted, or it would risk loss of trust in government. It is indeed important to maintain public trust in government, especially during times where public obedience to (sensible) governmental policies is essential to protect public health. Here, however, the public supported and demanded irrational, unreasonable and destructive measures that harmed the true interests of the public itself. Here, and in similar cases, it was the government's duty to do what the public needed and not necessarily what the public wanted. Government will gain the public's trust in the long run, if it tells the public the truth, and explains in good faith how its policies will benefit the public good. Acting on ill-informed public opinion and against the true interests of the public, just to please the public in the short run, demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the purpose and responsibilities of government.

In this paper we focused on a descriptive approach that revealed the political dishonesty pandemic during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is still mostly hidden from the public and mostly absent from the public and academic discourse. We discussed in brief said political dishonesty's context, reasons, and implications. This descriptive work, which is by no means complete, could set the ground to a more theoretical, analytical discussion of the breakdown of the social contract during the pandemic. Troubling questions should be asked about the true meaning of political-popular consent and whether it was given regarding the Covid measures that were imposed; about the general and democratic legitimacy of these measures – and government itself; and about the role that the media and government had in creating moral panic at a probably unprecedented scale with unprecedented harmful results.

Popular and academic perceptions of political dishonesty range on a scale from seeing it as an inevitable, at times forgivable aspect of politics, to seeing it as one of the more serious threats to democracy and liberalism (Nature 2024). Elsewhere (Nehushtan and Flügel Assad 2025) we argued that first, expressing and implementing the will of

the people is a necessary component of democracy; second, that the majority rule is meaningful and can democratically legitimise political institutions, laws, and public policies, only if voters are well-informed, rational, and autonomous; and third, that political dishonesty renders the majority rule meaningless to the extent that it can't accord democratic legitimacy to political institutions, laws, and public policies. That is so because political dishonesty results in voters being ill-informed, irrational, and non-autonomous.

Political dishonesty, regardless of whether it is accepted or being treated with indifference by citizens, transforms political participation and public debate into an empty exercise, a facade of democracy. Within the context of this paper: a vast majority of the British public consented to being subjected to lockdowns and other restrictions and often demanded that they will be imposed and objected to them being lifted. This consent, however, failed to democratically legitimise said Covid-19 measures, because it resulted from manipulations and lies that were told by both the media and government. The constant and systematic lies told to the British public during the pandemic go to the core of the broken social-political contract between government and its subjects. This paper can be used as a starting point for further exploring this social, political, and moral issue.

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