



Jez Buffin is a principal lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire and a member of the Centre for Citizenship and Community

In the same storm maybe, but not in the same boat - who will pay the price for recovery from Covid-19?

On Covid-19, numerous academics and political commentators have now debunked the myth that, *“we are all in this together”*. While it is true that, on an individual level, Covid-19 has struck prime ministers and monarchs as much as it has supermarket workers and support workers in care homes, as one community development worker put it to me recently: *“we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat”*. That this is the case has been easy to imagine from day one of the lockdown. It does not take much imagination to appreciate that a single mother on a zero hours contract with two school age children living on the fifth floor of a tower block with no balcony will have a qualitatively different experience of being locked down than a family, headed by a salaried professional who can easily work from home, living in a four bedroom house with a garden, three television sets, good broadband, a good supply of lap tops, tablets and smartphones, and easy access to the countryside. The differential impact was easy to spot, if less easily acknowledged, from the moment that the first ten NHS staff deaths were announced – all people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Since then it has become apparent that calls to both domestic violence and child protection helplines have increased. Pity those poor children for whom school was previously a sanctuary. The differential impact has been underlined by recent ONS statistics revealing that people from black and minority ethnic and economically deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience ‘excess deaths’ than other communities. With its implication that some level of death is acceptable and only to be expected, the very phrase, *‘excess deaths’* speaks to the cold divide that exists between government scientific advisors, ministers and everyday folk like thee and me. That Covid-19 is impacting so much more on the most deprived communities than it is on the wealthy only serves to confirm and underline the health inequalities that Michael Marmott, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, amongst others, have evidenced for us over many years; inequalities that mean that poor people can expect to live both fewer years and fewer years in good health.

So, we are not all in this together.

If we are not all in this together then, as we begin to contemplate coming out of lockdown, so too it becomes pertinent to ask, who will benefit and who will pay the price for Covid-19 in the longer term. Boris Johnson has been keen to distance himself from the ideas of austerity, but let us not forget that it was the poorest who paid the price for the greed of the bankers. In an age of welfare which is underpinned by a philosophy of the deserving and the underserving poor, let us not forget that it was the care workers, the delivery drivers and the supermarket workers, as much as the doctors and the nurses who kept us all on our feet.

Let us try and come out of this together, and not as a divided society in which we decide who is more important than who and who might contribute most in terms of value to the economy.

While Theresa May's lament about localism and the lack of international co-operation may smack of hypocrisy in the light of her campaign for Brexit, she had a point. It will be all too easy for us to plan a way out of this crisis that plots a course through self-interest and that fails to recognise the huge sacrifices that others have made in the fight against Covid-19. Such a divide is evident in the local towns and villages surrounding the immediate area where I live. By the way, I am the family, headed by a salaried professional who can easily work from home, living in a four bedroom house with a garden, three television sets, good broadband, a good supply of lap tops, tablets and smartphones, and easy access to the countryside cited above. In the next village to me, a huge hand painted sign has gone up. It reads:



200 hundred yards further up the road another slightly less confrontational sign reads:



And then there is a road block with a notice:



Of course I am sure that these signs are motivated in part by fear. But they are also indicative of a divisiveness; a sense of blame and othering; and an incitement to exclude.

So now is the time to start thinking about what kind of world and what kind of society we want as we emerge from this. I am glad that Boris Johnson has criticised Margaret Thatcher for her assertion that “there is no such thing as society.” But such words and platitudes are cheap. What is required is a deep commitment to acknowledging the disparities that have existed in the way that Covid-19 has impacted upon us all, at an individual, family, street, ward, town, county, regional, national and international level; and a promise that we will not play the blame game or decide that some (probably poorer and less enfranchised communities) should shoulder the burden and the price for recovery.

To return for a minute to the road signs: I couldn't help but contrast this localised sense of lockdown with the friendliness and courtesy that I received from the grandmother who loaded my click and collect groceries in to the boot of my car in a nearby town. “Don't worry”, she said, as I apologised for not being allowed to get out of my car to load the shopping in to the boot myself, “I am paid to do it and I am glad to do what I can to help. After all, we're all in this together.” Thank goodness she and the other residents of the town had not erected a sign saying, “*Closed: Go Home.*”