

## Public Health and Political Dogma – Japan Times- 21.03.20

The Western ideologists are out in force. Each school of thought is busy trying to twist and shape the current pandemic crisis to fit in with its own theories, and at each extreme, or polar point, doctrinaire views are being paraded, designed to show that they have the answer and that everyone else is wrong.

Thus we have the nationalists asserting that this is the end of globalisation and an interdependent world, while the globalists are saying with equal vehemence that nation-state policies are useless and only the most intense global cooperation, indeed complete global government, can prevail against the march of the coronavirus.

Alongside these views we have the old-style socialists claiming that the hour of the state has arrived, or has returned, but now backed by algorithms of power without precedent and capable of pin-pointing (and controlling) every individual as never before.

And against that Orwellian view we have the libertarians insisting that on the contrary salvation can only come from grassroots empowerment and a self-motivated population, and that it is governments, not the people, who need to be surveyed and controlled.

Put in such extreme form all these choices are false. They are worse than false because they cloud judgement, distract debate and create fear and bewilderment. Worst of all they blur and confuse minds in face of the new reality and the new possibilities of our age – that beliefs and credos once thought to be contradictory and in conflict now have to be accepted side by side, and that we all – especially the younger generation -must get used to an existence brim full of paradoxes.

Of course, each nation, culture and society has its own distinctive approaches, and wise leaders will work with the grain of custom and opinion. But if those same leaders disregard or, worse still, deride, lessons from other countries and downgrade detailed international linkages then they cease to be wise and have put on blinkers.

Thus, the full and continuous sharing of information across the globe between medical and scientific authorities is both fully possible and absolutely essential. So, too, should be the readiness to share and channel medical equipment and pool key expert personnel and their experience. Innovations should be openly publicised and discussed. Unlike in wartime there is no ‘other side’ or enemy nation from which secrets must be hidden – except of course, the virus itself.

Detailed and continuous intergovernmental exchange, if necessary hourly, (all made infinitely easier by the communications revolution,) should be going on about economic management and keeping open vital supply chains (in fact developing new ones). Close coordination of sensible travel restrictions should be now worked out, as opposed to the frenetic closing of frontiers to all movement which has become the default short-term panic policy in much of Europe, and seemingly in the USA as well.

Ironically it has never been easier to develop really close international cooperation. Fifty years ago there had to be endless telephone calls and telegrams, painfully organised international conferences, preparatory gatherings of officials and numbing communiqués. Now all that can be by-passed at a keyboard click.

It is obvious, for example, that with the eye of the virus storm now having moved westwards, nations like Spain and Italy, and states like New York, have plenty to learn from experiences in Japan, South Korea and China as well - if its latest report of zero new deaths is to be believed.

Ironically, too, there was never less excuse for governments everywhere, and their embracing 'shells' of bureaucratic machinery, to be out of touch with real life and detailed day-to-day problems amongst their respective populations. The age of big data and the age of the i-phone allow unending feedback, immediate response and total sensitivity to trends and changes at the grass roots. Ponderous year-long official consultation documents, ignored by most people anyway, have long since been outdated by instant flows of information and assessment which are now available. All these factors can help show how, in the hyper-connectivity age, self-isolation and social distancing can nevertheless be combined with community solidarity. It's difficult and counter-intuitive, but it can now be done.

So what is the reason that so many ideologues continue to present the issues at every level in doctrinal clothing and as such stark options?

The answer is that the most fundamental lesson of the digital age has not yet been fully absorbed, either in the spheres of governance, or in the media or in many parts of academia.

It is simply that digital technology trumps ideology and trumps the behavioural norms of the past. It knows no political left and right dimensions of the kind which the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century have bequeathed to us and which seem still to drive too much Western political thought along narrow channels which no longer connect with the issues, or crises, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Networks have taken over. Every society is linked in with every other in a tapestry of levelling bilateral connections, both at governmental and civil society levels.

The requirements now are for both national policies tailored with supreme sensitivity and practicality to differing local conditions, combined simultaneously with the most intense international collaboration on ideas, plans and programmes.

There is no ‘either-or’ any longer about this situation. Both avenues, the national and the international, have to be pursued with balance, vision and wisdom if the virus is to be comprehensively defeated. For minds imprisoned in the old adversarial world of conflicting dogmas and embattled ideologies this is hard to comprehend.

But it is the mind-opening key which every government that wants to serve its people well in this hour of crisis must now pick up.

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