

Coronavirus is not a natural disaster

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For those of us of a certain age the empty city streets that have come to characterise the corona virus pandemic tend to elicit a simple question: 'Do you think we're the survivors?'

This is not a straightforward question, but a reference to the 1970s BBC television series, called *The Survivors*, which saw Lucy Fleming and Ian McCulloch struggle each week to cope in a post-apocalyptic Britain in which less than 0.02% of the population had survived an unexpected and deadly viral outbreak.

In the television series the pathogen is released accidentally by a Chinese scientist after he somewhat clumsily drops a phial filled with it on a laboratory floor and then embarks on what looks like a world cruise, infecting every country he visits.

It is hard not to draw comparisons with the corona pandemic, even though it is widely-accepted by scientists that covid-19 was not a man-made virus, but jumped species, possibly from bats into humans, somewhere near Wuhan, admittedly in China. I have no desire to contradict that suggestion. It seems unnecessary to look for human sources for the virus when, as Dr Shi Zhengli of the Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute, who helped identify covid-19, has said there are plenty of natural sources, particularly in bats.

But still the covid-19 virus pandemic was not a natural disaster. It was a natural phenomenon, but the disaster was man-made.

It is now well-established that for most people covid-19 is an illness that is eminently survivable without medical intervention. This fact has been drummed into the public through numerous media briefings, often accompanied with the non-committal phrase 'mild symptoms'. Rarely has it been made clear whether 'mild' means a runny nose and sore throat, or a week laid up in bed with a heavy chest, stiff joints and blinding headache. Yet the response to the virus of effectively shutting down the world and throwing hundreds of thousands of people out of work and into potential long-term poverty has always suggested it is something more serious. The events in Italy have been the first to show what that terrible something is. It is not the natural phenomenon of the disease itself but the inadequate governmental preparation for it.

For about twenty percent of the population covid-19 is a dangerous disease, although in normal times the chances of death from it, even for this unfortunate group, should still be very low. The problem is we do not live in normal times.

It is easy for governments to present the covid-19 narrative as an abnormal event, that came out of nowhere which they could not see coming. The problem with this narrative is it is a lie. It is true

no one could not have known the next global pandemic would be a corona virus originating from eastern China. But governments have long known that a global and potentially deadly pandemic was on its way. We even had portents of it with the SARS and MERS outbreaks, as though nature itself was trying to warn us. But we did not have to rely on nature for this. Scientists too have consistently stated that an equivalent to the deadly Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, which killed at least one-tenth of the world's population, was inevitable. Had those warnings been heeded of course we would not have a vaccine for covid-19, but we could at least have had enough hospital beds, ventilators and oxygen supplies in emergency reserves to save more lives. Instead the warnings were ignored.

For decades governments who claim their primary mandate is to protect their citizens have allowed small numbers of individuals and corporations to grow unimaginably wealthy, rather than focusing the precious resources of our planet on adequate health care for everyone. This has been a problem around the world, but in Britain we are acutely aware that far from resourcing the NHS for inevitable emergencies the system is run on an annual just-about-managing basis. Every year its workers are terrified that the winter temperature might drop a degree or two lower than normal and they will be overwhelmed by only a few hundred extra cases of seasonal flu. It is impossible to imagine how a system run on that basis could ever cope with the predicted global flu pandemic, let alone the corona surrogate that came in its place. It is a grim truth that had the global flu pandemic we were warned about materialised instead of covid-19 we would still now be seeing the NHS run out of respirators and the government asking car manufacturers to start producing them as a matter of urgency.

It is hard not to conclude from this horrible episode that around the world our governments have failed us. It is true that covid-19 was an unexpected pathogen that emerged from nature, but the global pandemic it led to was anything but unexpected. Our governments have been told to expect a pandemic for decades. It is the lack of preparedness for what was expected that has turned the arrival of covid-19 from a serious problem into unmitigated disaster. There is nothing inevitable or natural about that.

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