

# The situation in the UK and the need for a collective response

*By Diane Elson*

*23 March 2020*

The UK government is known to be influenced by behavioural psychology and 'nudge' theory, but so far, it's other tiers of government and non-government actors, who have had to 'nudge' the UK government into taking many of the measures that it has so far taken, finally issuing edicts to close bars, restaurants, theatres, museums, etc after many had already closed without waiting for the government. Similarly with nurseries and schools, not closed in England, where UK government has responsibility, till after regional governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had already announced closures of nurseries and schools under their jurisdiction. To be fair, the government did face a dilemma of how to keep essential services, and especially the health services, functioning if nurseries and schools are closed- the majority of health workers are women and large numbers have children -who will take care of their children, and those of other essential workers? Normally the answer would be grandparents but government has advised people not to turn to grandparents because older people are more at risk of serious illness and death. To address this, it has been decided the schools will be open for children of essential workers, and a list of essential workers has been issued. I would be interested to know how other countries are dealing with this dilemma- probably more acute in UK than some other countries because of high rate of female labour force participation, relative highly high rates of fertility, and late age of first birth, so that grandparents are typically older than in many countries. The demand for unpaid care work is rising at a time when the supply is falling.

In UK, as in many EU countries, the fiscal rulebook has been torn up, as its clear that monetary policy will not be enough to address the economic dimensions of this crisis, and massive public spending and borrowing is required. UK government has introduced policies that would have been unthinkable for a Conservative government at the beginning of March, such as paying 80% of wage bill for companies that would otherwise have to lay off employees, and improvements in social protection for employees who are sick or in self-quarantine. The big gap is measures to help self employed and those on zero hours contracts, whose numbers have expanded rapidly since 2008. Pressure is mounting on government to introduce measures for them, including a direct cash transfer.

And not only new fiscal policies: this morning came the news that the railways are in effect to be re-nationalized, because otherwise the train companies would go bust, as there is a 70% fall in passenger numbers. More problematic will be the response to the airlines, which are calling for special measures to help them. UK government has already decided to let one regional airline fail, but unlikely to take same view of British Airways (for many years now a private corporation). Not clear whether the response would be some extension of public ownership in airlines too.

The question is whether there will be a reversal after the crisis or if we can keep a proactive fiscal policy, improved social protection and public ownership of railways. And less flying.

Of course In terms of internationally collective response, G20 response is missing, and we urgently need that. In one hopeful sign of cooperation , Russia is sending health supplies and personnel to northern Italy, currently experiencing the highest death rates.

Some individual responses in UK have not been informed by a sense of solidarity – panic buying in supermarkets , and thronging in those public parks and beaches that still open now that good weather has arrived . More restrictive measures will have to be introduced. We are nudging the government on that.

But community action IS being organized via Facebook and Whats app to help people in self isolation, do food shopping for them, be available for a virtual chat. Etc.

Now we in UK wait for the crisis that has been rolling west across Western Europe from Italy to hit us with full force, with our free at point of delivery, universal health care system (NHS) much depleted by years of austerity, and not enough ventilators for all who are going to need them.

Obviously lessons to be learned for West from those Asian countries who were much more effective in containing the virus.