

“Leadership lessons from the pandemic” : Speech to the Irish Association of Chief Executives of State Agencies (ACESA) 28 July 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning everyone. Thank you for the introduction and thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts on leadership during this challenging period when the quality of leadership – be it political or the kind of leadership we collectively exercise in our respective roles in national and European public administration – has arguably been the single most important defining feature of the response to the pandemic.

COVID-19 has been an exercise in exposure of all kinds. As it spread across the globe it allowed for no hiding place for any deficiency in the multiple systems that states administer both directly and through agencies such as yours. The administration of public services came under the most severe and rigorous scrutiny as panicked citizens made it clear to their respective state authorities that the single most important state responsibility was – as it has always been – simply to protect them.

COVID-19 has therefore been the ultimate stress test of the state and of its public administration. It tested not just our health systems, but also our economic systems, our education systems, our systems of social care, our transport systems, our service and goods supply chains systems, virtually every element of the support systems that enable us to live our lives, to feed and house and educate and protect our families was subjected to the most severe and punishing appraisal.

It also brutally exposed our moral priorities. The failure of so many states, including our own, to protect its most vulnerable at the start of the pandemic laid bare the lip service we pay to our elderly people, to those with disabilities, to children marginalised from mainstream education, to the homeless and to the low paid particularly in healthcare settings and service industries. For a time, a survival of the fittest mentality took over but the pandemic made it clear that that mentality already had roots within our society. COVID 19 simply allowed it to flourish.

This was a crisis largely impervious to spin and to PR. I say largely impervious as some Governments, some political leaders, continued nonetheless to attempt to duck and dive from an honest acknowledgment of the tragic and irrefutable evidence of the impact of the pandemic,



or at least from their own hapless role in managing it. But access to social media and to the real time accounting of spiralling infection rates and mortality meant that most citizens – other than those living in highly controlled authoritarian states – were acutely aware of everything that happened.

It will of course be a long time before a full accounting will take place of the political and administrative decision making during this time. It is vital that it is done, not to shame or to blame, but at least to accept - with humility - the gift that this event has given us – an unprecedented opportunity for a forensic examination of our public systems and the possibility of at least trying to fix them.

For me, the biggest general learning point from this time was the extent to which politics and culture – not science – dictated a country or a region's response to the pandemic. It turned out that following the science was not the straightforward, logical, humane act that we previously might have imagined it to be. Instead the responses were dictated by cultural norms, political leanings, political ambitions, feelings of national exceptionalism, authoritarianism expressed through macho denial of obvious realities, the pressure of certain economic sectors – a smorgasbord of pressures, prejudices and politics that – put bluntly – decided in many cases whether a citizen lived or died.

I should acknowledge however that at times the science wasn't straightforward either or impervious to a kind of politics. I ordered face masks for my family two months before either Irish, European or global agencies recommended their use having previously effectively warned against them. Am I a genius? Hardly. But even I had figured out that many Asian people habitually wore masks for a reason, to protect against the kind of respiratory infection that COVID was turning out to be, many Asian countries having suffered the worst effect of the SARS epidemic at the start of the century. Within months of even the WHO playing down the potential protective role of face masks, citizens in many countries became liable to be fined if they didn't wear them.

I tried to explore this issue when my office carried out an investigation into aspects of the work of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control last year, the ECDC having also counselled against the need for masks in the early months of the pandemic. Part of the reason, I believe, was a concern about limited supplies for healthcare workers if ordinary citizens moved to buy them up en masse. That on one level may have been a reasonable even necessary approach but in my view it is never right to dissemble when it comes to messaging about health in particular.

The mixed messages about face masks also fed into the later depressing so called culture war surrounding COVID when the wearing or otherwise of a mask defined one politically in some parts of the United States. A friend in Washington declined to stop wearing a mask even when permitted to for fear he might be mistaken for a republican...

COVID brought home what an artificial construct the nation state and borders are as the virus spread rapidly across the world yet the blindness of the disease to borders and states did not



stop the people who ran them from acting as if it was fitted with a political sensibility that matched their own.

I will never forget Boris Johnson boasting about shaking hands with hospital patients – many of whom, he assured us proudly – almost certainly had COVID. It was as though the libertarian Johnson was certain that the equally libertarian virus would flit like a butterfly but never actually sting like a bee. Until of course it did.

One could argue that the US under Trump and the UK under Johnson were political outliers when it came to their approach to the virus, alongside other testosterone fuelled leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil. Ultimately the pandemic became enmeshed with their own notions of power and virility, the men incapable of separating out their own delusional self-belief from the gargantuan and clear-eyed self-belief of the virus. For Trump, and for Johnson for the period at least before his near- death experience, infection and death rates were simply irritants, obstacles in their political way, neither man capable of grasping the tragic human core of this global disaster.

But while the US and the UK were exceptional to some degree, every state made political choices when it came to managing the pandemic. Italy and Spain imposed draconian lockdowns while Sweden initially adopted the opposite approach with no mask wearing and little controls on movement or assembly. When its death rate began to exceed those of its nearest neighbours however the country decided that it wasn't that exceptional after all and finally began to impose restrictions although not without a lot of opposition.

France, where I live, imposed lockdowns of varying degrees of severity but did manage to keep its schools largely open for much of last year and this year.

Australia and New Zealand, profiting from their geography, imposed severe restrictions on their people preventing even their own citizens from returning from abroad to their homes. The aim was clearly to reach the point of zero COVID. But while many admired and envied their approach, Australia's inexplicable failure to implement a comprehensive and speedy vaccine programme is now causing significant problems for that country.

And while the focus has understandably been on the immediate and on COVID itself the aftershocks vis a vis other health issues are also now being felt, delayed treatments, delayed diagnoses, many people COVID free yet succumbing to it nonetheless. Arguably, decisions that were rational in the moment may in time be reappraised but such are the challenges of leadership and who would envy anyone making such monumental decisions?

So what did good leadership look like during this time? We saw of course many good examples **Angela Merkel** clearly explaining in a [video address \[Link\]](#) what the R rate is and how to get it down. **Jacinda Ahern** explaining New Zealand's pandemic approach. **Joe Biden** putting the pandemic response to the top of the political agenda. We have seen it in this country I believe in more recent months with the Government refusing to bow to the demands of certain sectors to re-open faster and displaying a caution that does stem from a recognition of its single duty to its



citizens – to protect them and not necessarily to provide them with three course meals indoors in a restaurant if they haven't been vaccinated.

And when I look at those examples and consider what unites them, I think it has to do with those in charge really grasping what leadership means as opposed to how they sometimes exercise it in normal times. Too often leadership isn't about leading at all, but rather following whatever herd is more likely to keep an individual or a government in power, bowing to lobby demands, dodging politically sensitive decisions, indulging in short termism, refusing to summon up the strength and courage to do things that may inflict an electoral body blow at some stage.

And this tension between leading and following is what led to poor decision-making in several countries largely by Governments refusing to impose restrictions on the lives of their people despite the threat of the virus. While I admire recent decisions by the Irish government, I think it must also be acknowledged that allowing a 'meaningful Christmas' last year was not an act of good leadership even if done in good faith and even if it had convinced itself that the people would not have tolerated anything else.

In France, where I spent last Christmas, every bar and restaurant remained shut and the French people did not protest. On the other hand, many of them are now loudly protesting restrictions on the unvaccinated while we are largely not so I guess that no country is perfect.

Good leadership is yes, about taking risks but it is also about leading by example (following the same rules as you set for others); about compassionate, empathetic messaging; about transparency; about communicating the negative possibilities but projecting hope about how the pandemic can be managed together. Trust is literally vital in these circumstances and that trust is lost when the truth is sugar coated out of a misplaced desire not to offend, or, like a weak parent, when they give into demands for excessive sugar even in the certain knowledge that their children's teeth will eventually rot.

The EU itself has had its good and bad leadership moments. The Member States have chosen historically to share very few public health responsibilities with 'Brussels' and so it was an unprepared Union at the beginning of the pandemic, the result of which you are all aware, diverging and sometimes chaotic approaches to its control and ultimately a failure to limit its spread a lot more when arguably, a Union of that size, capacity, resources and know how, should have been able to.

The initial vaccine procurement was also problematic but several months on, the EU leads the world in terms of vaccination roll out. A good political decision was made by the Commission to push ahead with vaccine procurement reasoning that otherwise richer MS would buy up all the available vaccines. This was also a new area of activity for the Commission foreshadowing the **historic deal in summer 2020 on a €750 billion recovery effort to help tackle the economic fallout of COVID-19, later finalised as the Recovery and Resilience facility**. The Commission was allowed to raise funds on the capital markets and, critically, for the first time ever, there was an agreement on debt sharing among the Member States.



In my own work as European Ombudsman, we tried to highlight the importance of transparency and accountability in crisis times. Building trust helps to persuade people to do what is best for society and for individuals (such as taking vaccines).

We asked the ECDC to orientate its communication more to the general public and to explain its policy decisions more clearly. We asked the European Medicines Agency for the highest standards of transparency regarding approval of COVID-19 vaccines. We reminded the Commission and the Council of the importance of transparency in crisis times and to make sure that the pandemic was not used as an excuse not to be as open about its decision making.

In our biannual Awards for Good Administration we saw several examples of good leadership during the pandemic such as the **Council Secretariat proactively helping other institutions** on how to cope with new working practices, contact tracing etc during COVID ; and the roll out of EU emergency money to help people stay in employment the - **SURE fund** – a hugely vital measure for people's wellbeing and which was agreed in record time.

All of you have led agencies through this period and it is for you to evaluate your leadership strengths and weaknesses, but also to give yourselves a pat on the back for having led your agencies successfully through it. I know you will have felt a powerful responsibility, not just for the people that you serve, but also for the colleagues that you manage. No matter how good our IT connections were, no matter how seamlessly our work could continue, every individual colleague had their own stresses whether by way of small children, dependent parents, domestic disharmony, illness, or simply the inherent stress of getting through this time. To have got through that reasonably intact is a great tribute to you and to your colleagues.

For all of us, this has been a test of leadership. The pandemic has displayed our power and exposed our weaknesses. Good leaders with clear and credible strategies will have weathered the storm better than those without good moorings. In times of panic and uncertainty leaders will have been relied upon as never before both by those they work for and those they work with. Good leaders will use this experience not just to feed the learning gained throughout their organisation but also to feed it up to higher levels, to help the big decision makers make better decisions across all of the sectors that you work with.

Stripped of so much, brought down to the same terrifying earth that the rest of us were living on, we saw our leaders as very ordinary people making extraordinarily difficult decisions. I recall the Taoiseach, deprived of the social rituals that accompany the taking up of that great office, being greeted movingly but simply by his family and neighbours on the street outside his home.

Never before probably in their careers had leaders been forced to make decisions with such monumental and immediate consequences. Your task, I believe, also as leaders, is to support that decision making into the future by using the experience gained from this time, to reimagine if necessary your function, how you do it, how it could be better done and how ultimately it can benefit the wider public good.