

Losing the plot in times of Covid-19

Is apathetic depression becoming the new normal? Are we all being so ground down that we cease to care? Is everything just too difficult to face? Well yes, yes and yes, almost. Almost but not quite. As Covid-19 continues to ravage the country socially, medically and economically, we are getting used to restrictions and scary death rates. We're getting used to feeling low and upset.

But at the same time we are more than ever engaged with what is happening in the news. We're more than ever aware of how government ineptitude impacts our daily lives. We're more than ever aware of the extent of hardship.

And Covid-19 is only part of it. The list of our government's failings is long, from food safety to social care. Even here in the southeast, a relatively prosperous part of the UK, Covid-19 is rampant and inadequate policies are having a terrible impact on peoples' lives. But sadly Covid-19 has become a convenient distraction, one that allows the government to act with impunity.

Food safety fools

The new rules governing post-Brexit food safety are a case in point. The Future British Standards Coalition (FBSC) was set up to protect British food standards in law and last November published its Safeguarding Standards report. The FBSC study found that UK ministers now have substantial and unscrutinised powers for changing the rules governing food imports.

According to the FBSC, ministers can rewrite food safety laws without the bother of parliamentary debate and voting. This means that Parliament is being bypassed and regulations ensuring the safety of our food are in the hands of government ministers, instead of all elected representatives.

Chlorinated chicken could end up on supermarket shelves, if rules are changed without oversight and accountability. Controls governing the use of antibiotics and hormones in farming could also be disregarded at will.

A steady erosion of laws to ensure that food, animal welfare, environmental controls and beyond are protected, is underway. It's happening in the background, hidden behind Covid concerns.

Apparent efforts to protect food safety, animal welfare and the environment are really more no more than box ticking exercises. Defra's new consultation* on genetic modification of food and gene editing considers the use in UK agriculture of genetically modified crops that can withstand pests, extreme weather or disease.

This is a contentious topic with far reaching implications both now and in the future. But not much has been heard about it. When the consultation ends on the 17th March, the outcome could be the framework for less stringent rules on genetically modified crops and ultimately food.

Food safety, genetically modified foods and environmental protection affect us today and in the future. We need commitment from our politicians to protecting life now and in decades to come, with a mix of short term and long term policy development. We deserve better.

*[https://consult.defra.gov.uk/agri-food-chain-directorate/the-regulation-of-genetic-technologies/supporting_documents/20210106 Gene editing consultation document FINAL.pdf](https://consult.defra.gov.uk/agri-food-chain-directorate/the-regulation-of-genetic-technologies/supporting_documents/20210106_Gene_editing_consultation_document_FINAL.pdf)