

# Alternative views

Lord Sumption, writing in The Mail on Sunday, is deeply critical of SAGE and of government policy. Fiona Fox, writing in The Guardian, makes the case for the defence. In the end, of course, the public will decide.

## JONATHAN SUMPTION

The Mail on Sunday columnist

*Tim says:* “Former Supreme Court judge Jonathan Sumption says that SAGE member Professor Sir Jeremy Farrar is “the most hawkish of lockdown hawks”, but is “self-obsessed” and “represents most of what has gone wrong” – and is also someone who “speaks well of Chinese methods of disease control”.

Farrar is at the other end of the spectrum from the Swedish approach because, as Sumption says, “he believes in coercion” and “brushes aside ... the appalling collateral consequences of lockdown”.

Farrar is also at the opposite end of the spectrum from the approach which Wetherspoon uses to run pubs, which emphasises the intelligence of the public, as outlined on page 4.

Unfortunately, Farrar and SAGE, coming from hierarchical academic backgrounds, underestimate the public’s intelligence and mistakenly believe that coercion and propaganda are legitimate management techniques. Compare Professor Johan Giesecke’s Swedish ‘trust the people’ approach (page 58).”

# “ TYRANNY OF THE COVID EXPERTS: FINGER-WAGGING SAGE SCIENTIST JEREMY FARRAR PENNED A BOOK ABOUT HOW HE’S THE ONLY PERSON BORIS JOHNSON SHOULD EVER HAVE LISTENED TO, WRITES EX-SUPREME COURT JUDGE JONATHAN SUMPTION

**Professor Sir Jeremy Farrar is a distinguished epidemiologist, a member of the Sage scientific committee, the director of the Wellcome Trust health research charity and an influential government adviser. He is also the most hawkish of lockdown hawks, and he has written a book with journalist Anjana Ahuja, called Spike. It is a revealing read.**

Spike is basically about Farrar himself: how he saw it all coming, how he personally forced the Chinese government to release the genetic sequence of the Covid-19 virus that allowed scientists to develop a vaccine, how he warned the world of imminent doom, how the Government could have saved lives by treasuring his words more, and how he risked assassination by the Chinese (‘If anything happens to me, this is what you need to know’, he told friends).

The talk is all of wars, battle plans, and people heading for precipices. All this is a bit melodramatic and self-obsessed for my taste. but Farrar is a distinguished scientist who means well. He is terrifyingly sincere and really does have the interest of mankind at heart. Therein lies the problem.

There are few more obsessive fanatics than the technocrat who is convinced that he is reordering an imperfect world for its own good.

If Spike is largely about its author, it also tells us much about those who have been in charge of our lives through Covid-19.

Farrar represents most of what has gone wrong. His main target is the British Government. But he actually agrees with nearly everything they have done.

Farrar’s complaint is that they did not do it quickly or brutally enough when he suggested it, and stopped doing it before he gave them the all-clear.

His views about how governments should deal with public health crises are broadly the same as those of Dominic Cummings. Both men are frustrated autocrats who believed that from Day One we needed ‘a command-and-control structure’. He speaks well of Chinese methods of disease control.

‘Panic was called for,’ in March 2020, he says at one point. At another, he tells us that at a time when governments were panicking all over Europe, there was not enough panic in Britain.

This is all very odd. It does not seem to have occurred to Farrar that the jerky, ill-considered and inconsistent improvisations that passed for policy-making in the Johnson Government, and which he rightly criticises, were the direct result of the panic that he recommends.

The great object is of course to ensure that ‘the science’ is applied. No ifs, no buts and no delay. In Farrar’s world, this is easy as there is only one science, namely his own.

He is convinced he’s right and the Government should listen to no one else. Challenge from other scientists is normally regarded as fundamental to scientific advance. But for Farrar disagreement is a ‘hurdle’. It just gets in his way.

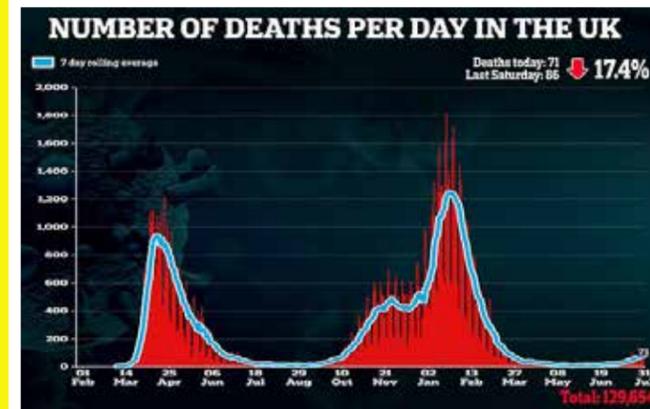
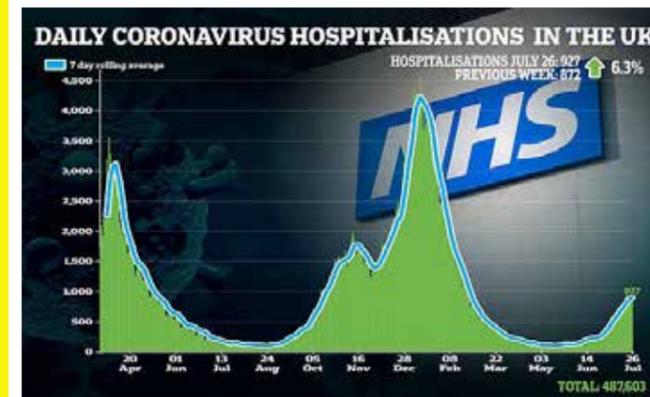
So, serious scientists such as Professors Carl Heneghan, Karol Sikora and Sunetra Gupta, who have had the temerity to offer opinions differing from his own, are dismissed as being ‘responsible for a number of unnecessary deaths’, although Farrar has had a great deal of influence on Government policy and they have had almost none.

This kind of attitude to colleagues is, frankly, unworthy of a scientist of Sir Jeremy’s eminence.

Anders Tegnell, the Swedish state epidemiologist, is dismissed in a brief footnote, although Sweden is a standing repudiation of much that Farrar stands for. Sweden has avoided a lockdown, yet has done much better than the UK.

Like many technocrats, Farrar believes in coercion. Otherwise, people might not do what he wants. ‘You cannot tell people to stay at home only if they feel like it,’ he says.

This is an obtuse misunderstanding of the argument against coercion. The point is that people differ widely in their vulnerability to Covid-19. It causes serious illness among the old and those with severe underlying conditions, but the symptoms are mild for nearly everyone else.



We therefore have to be able to make our own risk assessments. It is simply untrue that the vulnerable would ignore advice ‘if they felt like it’. People have a basic sense of self-preservation.

This was Sage’s consistent advice right up to the first lockdown. Farrar denies it, but the record speaks for itself.

On March 10 and 13, the minutes record that Sage advised guidance on isolation, selectively directed to the old and vulnerable.

On March 13, they said that the public should be treated as ‘rational actors, capable of taking decisions for themselves and managing personal risk.’ Farrar participated in both meetings.

Of course, selective coercion would be impractical, as he points out. But universal coercion is pointless, inefficient and wasteful.

It treats people as if all were vulnerable, when only some are. Instead of spending several times the cost of the NHS on paying young, healthy people who were at negligible risk not to work, we should have been pouring resources into protecting the vulnerable.

Interestingly, Farrar accepts that lockdowns only push infections and associated deaths into a future period after they are lifted.

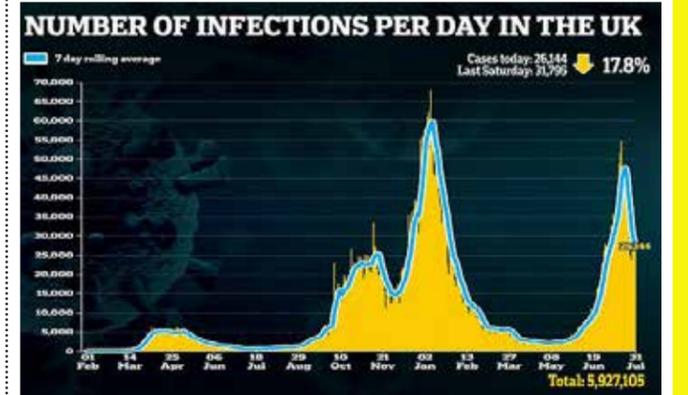
He also appears to accept it would have been intolerable to lock down the whole population until a vaccine was developed and everyone had received it, which would have taken at least 18 months and possibly never happen.

His preferred course seems to be a series of lockdowns starting each time that we look like approaching the intensive care capacity of the NHS. In other words, very much what we have had. However, Farrar has wagged his finger every time that restriction has been lifted.

In theory, we can switch lockdown on and off like a malfunctioning internet router, but in practice it seems that the time is never ripe. We only have to look around us to see that lockdowns have failed to halt the virus, either here or anywhere else in the world. The problem is in the concept, not the application.

This brings me to the most remarkable feature of this book, which is Farrar’s brushing aside of the appalling collateral consequences of lockdowns: other illnesses which go untreated such as cancer or accelerate like dementia, impacts on education, equality and public debt, not to speak of the worst recession in 300 years.

Farrar regards all this as a regrettable but unavoidable result of desirable measures, and not as reasons for questioning whether they were ever desirable in the first place.



In keeping with this blinkered approach, he refers to the collateral disasters as consequences of Covid-19. They are not. They are man-made consequences of the policy responses he has been advocating.

I shall resist the temptation to apply to him the criticism he gratuitously and unfairly applied to Messrs Sikora, Heneghan and Gupta.

Entirely missing from Farrar’s worldview is any conception of the complexity of the moral judgments involved. Of course public health matters, but it is not all that matters.

Interaction with other human beings is a fundamental human need. Criminalising it is a sustained assault on our humanity. Doing so without assessing the wider consequences is irresponsible folly.

Sir Jeremy Farrar adopts the current habit of using ‘libertarian’ as a word of abuse.

But I am proud to be a libertarian. Personal autonomy is a basic condition of human happiness and creativity. I am a libertarian because the opposite of liberty is despotism.

By Jonathan Sumption  
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