

The return of the expert, by Christina Boswell

One of the striking aspects of the Covid-19 crisis in the UK has been the apparent rehabilitation of the expert. Experts – whether economists, lawyers, civil servants or academics – were famously maligned during the Brexit debate. But the likes of Chris Whitty, Neil Ferguson and Catherine Calderwood have become household names over the past few weeks. The return of the expert is most vivid in the daily UK Government press conferences, where political leaders are flanked by scientific and medical advisors; and it's constantly repeated in the Government's reassurance that its policies are being guided by 'the scientific advice'.

So why this damascene conversion to expertise? In my book *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge* I distinguished three possible functions of expertise in politics: to inform policy; to substantiate particular claims or decisions; and to signal the competence of actors to take well-founded decisions. In fact, all three seem to be at play here.

First, it's clear that the UK Government is keen to draw on expertise to fix the problem. Unlike in many other areas of policy where the effects of policy are diffuse and long-term, the government's legitimacy in handling the pandemic is very closely dependent on actions it takes now. Whether it sustains the lockdown, rolls out testing, or expands ICU capacity, will have a very tangible effect on health outcomes. In this situation, it can't get away with compelling rhetoric and symbolic gestures – or at least not for long. Which is, of course, why populist administrations may find themselves foundering in this situation.

Adding to the potential for exposure, these outcomes are being measured and compared across countries. The daily graphs

showing trajectories in death-rates across countries can be a harsh indictment of the performance of governments. So it is crucial for political leaders to get this right, and mobilise the best evidence possible to guide actions. Contrast this to Brexit, where the effects of government actions were always going to be diffuse and difficult to attribute, partly explaining why government didn't need to be so careful about heeding the evidence.

Of course, it's never that clear what the 'best' evidence is, especially where different disciplinary perspectives produce conflicting conclusions, and where public health considerations need to be balanced against a wide range of social and economic factors. Officials are keenly aware of the uncertainty of science – which is partly why they tend to prefer trial-and-error, incremental approaches to testing new policies, rather than introducing new and untested interventions based on abstract modelling.

But this isn't just about getting decisions right – politics never is. There is also a strong symbolic dimension to the use of expertise. The government wants to make it clear to the public that its decisions are based on scientific evidence. And different protagonists are keen to use scientific claims as ammunition to support their positions – the substantiating function of expert knowledge. To complicate matters, the government isn't using expertise simply to validate claims, it also appears to be using it as an insurance policy. If things go wrong – and the curve gets too steep – it will be the scientific advice that is to blame.

And herein lies the risk, to both science and government. If science is held responsible for poor political decisions, its authority becomes eroded. Science does not, and cannot, offer definitive answers to new and complex social problems – just propositions and hypotheses that are more or less robust. So pinning policy on such uncertain claims is disingenuous, and will only serve to undermine trust in science.

The related risk for politics is that any attempt to blame the scientists will risk rebounding on them – playing the blame game will be seen as a sign of weakness and poor judgement.

So while it's good to see the return of experts, let's not burden them with unrealistic expectations, or conflate their role with that of political leaders. Science is a vital resource for modelling scenarios and developing medical and technical responses; but for many aspects of decision-making it is contested and uncertain. If we set our scientific advisors up to find policy solutions, we risk generating disillusionment with science, and, in the long term, further erosion of its authority.

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