STAND WITH THE REST OF US: Shoppers wearing masks in Belfast city centre after the Stormont executive announced closures of schools, pubs and restaurants on Wednesday PICTURE: Brian Lawless/PA

Difficult decisions for politicians but way ahead clear for us

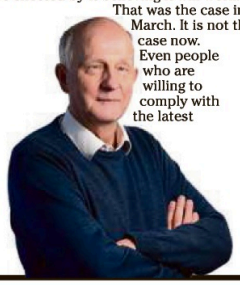
Alex KANE

AT THE start of the lockdown there was a wonderfully gung-ho approach to the crisis we faced.

That's probably because, generally speaking, we aren't afraid of a challenge and we aren't afraid of personal sacrifice or inconvenience if we believe it's for both the personal and collective good. Unseasonably good weather helped; massive government support eased the worries of millions; and we managed to alleviate the boredom with box-sets, gaming marathons and house/garden projects. And in the back of our mind was a high level of hope that a vaccine was around the corner and we'd soon be back to the 'old normal'.

It's different now. Increasing numbers of people don't believe that things will have changed in four weeks time. They know there won't be a vaccine. They know the virus won't have disappeared. They know it's likely the infection rates will grow again if the latest restrictions are eased (which is what happened the last time restrictions were eased). The furlough payments are being reduced, which means people who weren't really struggling from March through to now will begin to take a financial hit. Crucially, many businesses which, just about, held on, are likely to go to the wall this time.

Any strategy – even if it is deployed in a number of ways – is ultimately dependent on those effected by it believing it will work. That was the case in March. It is not the case now. Even people who are willing to comply with the latest restrictions acknowledge that it's probably not going to be enough. But they comply because they haven't been persuaded by the arguments of those who, while complaining about lockdown or partial lockdown restrictions (or Johnson's three-tier approach), don't seem to have a coherent alternative. Whinging about mask-wearing or access to pubs may get lots of 'likes' on social media, but it doesn't amount to a policy.



Talking about whingers. One of my followers on Twitter likes to describe the crisis as a 'scamdemic' and recently dismissed me as a 'bed-wetter' because I said I would observe regulations, including the wearing of a mask. He even boasted that no-one would take his freedoms from him. I recognised him on a forecourt a few days ago. He had chosen the pay-at-pump option. He was wearing gloves and a mask. I introduced myself and asked about the 'protections': "One of my children has underlying health issues, so I'm putting her interests first." Maybe the mask disguised it, but I didn't get the impression he was aware of the irony in his explanation.

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The concerns people seem to have about the potential effectiveness of this round of restrictions is reflected in a recent opinion poll by LucidTalk, which indicated two-thirds (67 per cent) worry more about the health impact than the economic impact (27 per cent) of the virus. That figure represents rare good news for the executive, for it suggests most people will obey the restrictions because they are worried about contracting the virus. And anecdotal experience suggests that most of the 27 per cent will be like my forecourt man (which sounds like an entirely new polling demographic) – happier behind a keyboard than leading an anti-restriction rebellion.

What cannot be denied is that we are in a very strange place: obeying restrictions we're not convinced will work anytime soon. Obeying them and hoping for the best. Obeying them while knowing their consequences might result in closures, redundancies and higher taxes. Obeying them, yet expecting even more in a few weeks time. It isn't, by the way, blind obedience. It's much more than that. It's something I would describe as survival obedience: that sense of being in a once-in-a-lifetime crisis which we defeat collectively or not at all. So yes, there will be errors of policy and overreactions, but if we hold our nerve most of us will get through it in one piece.

That's why it's essential that the executive stand as one: stand with the rest of us, in other words. Tuesday was a bit of a dog's dinner day for them, taking forever to reach agreement and briefing against each other along the way.

There is no Orange and Green dimension to CV-19. No constitutional dimension, either. It's an indiscriminate beast that doesn't recognise our personal views.

The message to the executive couldn't be clearer: if you want as many people as possible to continue complying and cooperating together in common cause then demonstrate that compliance and cooperation in your own actions.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 16 1920

Lisburn 'Specials' Resign

ON THURSDAY Messrs W J Hardy and H Jones, Resident Magistrates, sat in Lisburn Courthouse and heard a number of cases connected with the looting during the disorders in August.

Sergeant Rourke deposed to seeing Henry Magee on the night of Sunday, 22nd August, rolling a barrel of porter towards Market Square. Others were the defendants. The public house of Mr McKinney was being looted and there was a crowd of thousands on the street.

The Magistrates, having consulted, the Chairman said the cases were deplorable. It was clear that there was what one might call an orgy of lawlessness in Lisburn at that time. It was a strange commentary on human nature to see the depths that sudden wild frenzy had driven those men into. It was their duty to impose such a punishment as would make men think seriously upon embarking on acts of that kind again. Unfortunately, the defendants had brought discredit to the town and district by acts that were deplored by all law-abiding citizens. They would each be sentenced to three calendar months imprisonment with hard labour.

Following the sentences, an interesting state of affairs developed rapidly in Lisburn. It should be understood that shortly after the fierce outbreak of incendiarism and disorder which amazed the world, steps were taken to establish a force of 'Special Constables'. From 300 to 400 men were selected, drawn from the more respectable and 'responsible' section of the local community. However, strong objection was taken almost at once to the action of those who excluded the 'rank and file' of Orangeism and, as a result, the agitators were pacified by the enrolment of nearly 300 of their number.

The first batch of Specials had been armed but arms were denied to the second batch and much unpleasantness arose from this distinction. The 'Special Constables', who might be fairly described as members of the 'rougher element', clamoured loudly for the privilege of carrying firearms on their rounds. Shortly after the riot cases above were decided, nearly 300 members of the force of 'Special Constables' met and resigned their positions as a protest against the sentences passed on their friends. The town was in a state of uneasiness.

Yesterday the County Inspector visited Lisburn, addressed a number of Special Constables and warned them that peace would be preserved and that the military would be called in immediately any sign of renewed disturbance manifested itself. **(The criminal conviction of a number of 'Special Constables', hastily enrolled in Lisburn in response to the 'Swanzy Riots', did not inspire public confidence in the proposed Ulster Special Constabulary – an exclusively sectarian force.)**

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