



Together Divided: Our Country

The intensification of restrictions in England through the 'Rule of Six' measure is provoking division. Some of it is warranted and some isn't, but it essentially brings up the idea of the 'Common Good'.

To some, the Rule of Six is sensible. It is a brake on the spread of the virus. They note that the country went into Lockdown too late in March, which meant not only that tens of thousands died, but that the ensuing Lockdown was longer than it need have been. Better to err on the side of caution, to avoid a similar scenario (or worse).

To others, the Rule of Six is an infringement of personal liberty. Not only is it unnecessary, but there is the belief that it may well be driven not by epidemiology but a desire for state control over individual lives. In that sense, it demands to be resisted.

Meanwhile for everyone, there is a general malaise, because we've been doing this six months now.

You would think that there would be no link between this and the Brexit-Remain debate; what has epidemiology got to do with European trade laws after all? But the evidence shows otherwise; there is a significant overlap between Remainers and people who believe the restrictions are a good idea, and Brexiteers and people who believe they are a bad idea. In the backwater of the debate, I suppose, there is a patriotic idea of Britain as a country that upholds freedom.

What makes it more complicated is that the Prime Minister promoting the move, as backed by the Chief Scientific Officers, was swept to power on a Brexit tide. So the people keen to follow government advice in this instance may well not have voted for Johnson. Of those that did vote for Johnson, a lot think he's now making a mistake. Further still, there is the wider issue that in the last nine months, the government has struggled to stick to its guns on a raft of issues, from summer time free school meals to exam grades, so there is a feeling that if you apply enough pressure, Johnson will give way.

Personally, it seems to me that the only way to live together through this pandemic is to follow the government advice, whatever that is. There is little point half the country following the rules if the other half don't. We have to be aiming for the Common Good. In that sense, I think it's clear what you or I should do, even if you don't agree with it.

But I think what will enable us to hold together may be a recognition of valid difference in view about how to achieve the Common Good. As a country, broadly speaking we lost that perspective over Brexit; 48% of the country couldn't see where 52% of the country was coming from and vice versa.

Just saying, "Can't we all be sensible about this?" without recognising one person's good sense is another person's wilful disregard is a recipe for toxic division.

Sept 11 2020 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.