



Laura Dodsworth

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Vaccine Passports - Not the Happy Ending to the Horrible Story of the Covid-19 Pandemic



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Oct 5 ❤️ 21 💬 9 ➦



This is the talk I gave at a fringe event at the Conservative party conference, hosted by the #TogetherDeclaration. Co-panellists were MP Sir Graham Brady, Dr Carl Heneghan and Alan Miller of the Night Time Industries Association and co-founder of the Together Declaration, and our Chair was Dinah Glover.

Are Vaccine Passports Conservative?

Conservative Party Conference, Manchester, 4th October 2021

“In March, the government was very worried about compliance and they thought people wouldn’t want to be locked down. Decisions were made about how to ramp up the fear. The way we have used fear is dystopian. We have a totalitarian government in respect to propaganda. The use of fear has definitely been ethically questionable. It’s been like a weird experiment. Ultimately, it backfired because people became too scared.”

This is a quote from one of the SPI-B advisors I interviewed anonymously for my book *A State of Fear: how the UK government weaponised fear during the Covid-19 pandemic*.

The Covid-19 pandemic may prove to be the biggest campaign of fear the UK, and the world, has ever seen. I repeat the SPI-B advisor’s words: “The way we have used fear is dystopian.”

How was fear used? A huge marketing and social media campaign, 24/7 doom-mongering through the media, cherry-picking the big numbers, worst case scenarios pulled from simulated modelling which was not peer-reviewed, draconian laws, the most punitive fines since the Dark Ages, excessive policing, a constant barrage of behavioural science including the exploitation of fear, shaming Covidiot and using norming, encouraging people to behave like a herd.

Government and public health messaging was designed to make everyone feel that they were *at risk* as well being *the risk*, even though the impacts of Covid are highly connected to age and identifiable clinical conditions. And all of this was to encourage adherence to lockdown rules.

The behavioural science approach continues. I want to make the case to you vaccine passports are a behavioural science tool which is incompatible with conservatism, our democratic values and even informed consent.

I want to make clear that this is not about the vaccines, it is about the vaccine passport.

It is about your private medical information becoming a public matter.

This is about individual choice versus state compulsion.

It is about informed consent versus nudge and coercion.

Personal responsibility versus collective obligation

The vaccine programme appears to be the Happy Ending to the Horrible Story of the Covid-19 pandemic. But I'm cautious. Not because I am 'anti-vaxx', but because this stage of the story is being written in the language of emotional manipulation and coercive control.

There's a feeling after 18 months of restrictions that people will do anything to 'get back to normal'. But declaring your health status to use businesses and services, to work, to go to university has never been normal. The introduction of a health status ID will cross a rubicon.

The pervasive psychological approach can even be read in the new term 'vaccine hesitancy'. It implies a slight pathologisation, that those reluctant to have a vaccine may be a bit silly, rather than be making an individual choice based on risk analysis, rational preferences, cultural or religious values. It also implies the 'hesitation' is just a step towards the inevitable, part of the process – come on dear, we'll get you over that hump and you'll have your vaccination in the end.

In December 2020, the NHS published a document for health professionals called *Optimising Vaccination Roll Out – Dos and Don'ts for all messaging, documents and "communications" in the widest sense*.

It contained public health language we have not seen before. Certain recommended phrases are emotionally manipulative in a way that could affect informed consent. For instance, "normality can only return for you and others, with your vaccination".

A public health specialist and keen vaccine advocate I spoke with about this document was very concerned. She told me "I can't imagine how a doctor could use these arguments. Using peer norms as a direct form of persuasion is not something that comes readily to doctors and we don't speak that language. It goes against our professional training. A vaccine is a medical intervention and people have to consent to it. This brings up fault lines between the behavioural scientists and public health specialists. This kind of language could be profoundly damaging to the trust in government and health services."

That document was quietly unpublished from the internet, but the messaging continues.

Just this weekend, an advertorial in the Mail announced to teenagers: "Don't miss out. Why young people should get their Covid jab this autumn or risk not being able to the things they love." Similarly a letter sent directly to teens told them the vaccine will help to them not miss out on their "freedoms". This is the first time a vaccine has been pushed to reclaim freedoms rather than for the medical benefits it confers.

As data from the UK and other highly vaccinated countries now shows, the vaccine does not stop you from being infected or transmitting the virus undermining the scientific case.

Vaccines protect the vaccinated from serious disease. Once someone is vaccinated they can enjoy the protection that the vaccine gives them, and then it should make no difference to them if others are vaccinated or not. If people choose not to get vaccinated, they bear the risk, not those around them. And what is the risk? The Infection Fatality Rate is now known to be 0.096%, like a flu. We don't carry medical ID for the flu.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee found that the government could not put forward a scientific case for them.

If vaccine passports will not contain a virus, they will contain people.

People will be rejected at turnstiles. Turned around by bouncers. Turned away from employment. From lecture halls.

People will fall off the edge of society. We know that minority ethnic groups with lower vaccine uptake will be disadvantaged. Is it conservative to let these people fall off the edge of society?

This is not levelling up.

If there is no scientific case for the Covid passport the reasons may fall into three other cases.

First, pulling a lever, any lever, in order to be seen to be doing something. Something that makes some people feel safer. Given that 90% have had their first dose already and over 80% have had two doses, the diminishing returns would be eye-watering. What would the cost per additional person persuaded to have the vaccine be? I look forward to the cost benefit analysis from the government.

Secondly, scope creep. Might the vaccine passport mutate into a permanent form of ID? Are digital ID cards conservative?

When the app was unveiled, functionality was revealed which is completely unrelated to vaccination status, such as: information relating to the family of the individual and the individual's lifestyle and social circumstances; their ethnic origin; genetic and biometric details; criminal convictions or alleged criminal behaviour.

What has any of that to do with entering a nightclub or stadium?

If there is no scientific justification for Covid Passes, we are left with a behavioural science motivation. They are a tool to nudge us to adopt different behaviour. The Covid Pass is designed to force uptake of the vaccine. Be aware that aside from how that affects informed consent, and how it will re-imagine society, it's a strategy that may miscarry.

Countries that have introduced Covid passes show an immediate gain in compliance with vaccination, yet some people are deterred by the coercion. Several studies have found that vaccine passports are backfiring. Unsurprisingly, people want autonomy over their bodies.

I spoke to a scientist involved in the vaccine programme who told me that the nudgers don't consider the long term impact on trust because they are tasked with thinking about an immediate net shift in behaviour.

When I wrote *A State of Fear*, there was little public acknowledgement of the role of behavioural science. But the dial has moved and politicians, the media and scientists talk more openly of the psychological reasons behind certain measures now. Gone is the pretence that masks were brought in purely to interrupt transmission of the virus, now people talk about how they are a 'signal'.

Nicola Sturgeon said that the passport scheme will, I quote, "help encourage take-up of the vaccine". She also admitted that not allowing testing to be part of the system "reduces the extra incentive for people to get jabbed".

One famous behavioural scientist has called vaccine passports a "perk" for those who have been inoculated. Just a perk. Nudgers consider passports to preserve choice. Be vaccinated and access society, or don't be vaccinated and don't access society. It doesn't sound like much of a choice to me.

Ideas such as 'saving Christmas' from last year (and, god forbid, maybe this year too) wristbands to denote medical status and permit entry to venues, incentives such as lotteries for compliance, are ideas which all originate with the behavioural insights people.

This is the first time we have seen incentives like lotteries, fast food and clothing vouchers, and football tickets used to promote vaccines. These psychological tactics are experiments which might create a net shift in behaviour but they might also damage long term trust in public health campaigns. At least they are incentives, whereas vaccine passports punish for the unvaccinated.

An increasingly aware population is now cynical about the nudging. Once you have seen what is up the magician's sleeve you are less likely to be dazzled by the tricks in front of your eyes.

A State of Fear was the top recommended book in the summer reading list put together by conservative constituency associations. Grassroots conservative voters are not happy about the weaponisation of fear and the use of nudge.

The behavioural scientists under-estimate the ability of people to know their own mind, to act decisively and rationally. Quite simply they under-estimate you. This is the basis of nudge. I don't believe this is respectful towards people or indeed democracy. We are capable of knowing our minds and acting rationally.

The government is consulting once again on mandatory vaccine passports. The last consultation had 52,450 responses. The PACAC consultation had about 9,000 responses. Maybe we didn't offer the right answers that time around?

This consultation is smudged with the fingerprints of the behavioural scientists. It contains questions which force choices in order to elicit the answer the government clearly wants. There are questions which give no option for a negative answer. It is an absurd consultation.

Vaccination uptake has reportedly stalled at 55% of 16-17 year olds. I fear this will make the government more interested in unleashing Plan B of their Winter Plan.

History contains many examples of the almost imperceptible stripping away of rights and freedoms. The process is evocatively told in *They Thought They Were Free*, by Milton Mayer:

"Each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion, 'regretted', that, unless one were detached from the whole process... one no more saw it developing from day to day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head."

It is 18 months since the epidemic started. How far has the corn grown? It is known that fear induces a desire for authoritarian control. Here in the UK, one of the cradles of democracy, fear has created the right emotional temperature for the toleration, even enthusiastic welcome, of increased surveillance, reduced rights to protest, and breaches of human rights.

This moment is a stress test.

The proposal to introduce vaccine passports marks a shift from the solidarity we were asked to show early in the pandemic, into an authoritarian collectivism.

Vaccine passports are designed to coerce, to bully people into being vaccinated. That is not my idea of a Happy Ending.

I leave you to decide whether it is conservative.

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ExPedagogue Oct 5 Liked by Laura Dodsworth

Clearly the concept of the Covid Pass/ Digital ID is nothing more than a coercion and control tool. Your talk has made this abundantly clear.

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wehfuhtuhquth24uth4u2htu2 Oct 5 Liked by Laura Dodsworth

I don't think vax passes punish only the unvaccinated, they punish the vaccinated too. What were once basic rights are now dependent on a government app, that is a punishment too even if the app decides to allow you. This is why we must all refuse to comply, break whatever diktats are necessary to go back to true normal. The focus must be on making businesses bolder, more united and more able to forcibly say no to state busybodies.

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