
The Collective Choice of Global Lockdown

by Don Rutherford Cardinal Johnson, RFSPE



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the globe made the collective decision, through their demands and their consent, both vocal and tacit, to lock down the world, keeping individuals at home and closing down many businesses. That is, many governments imposed such restrictions, but they seemed merely to be reflecting the wishes of the vocal majority (and not every country in the world chose to shut down). The collective choice seems to be rooted, in part, in pre-pandemic attitudes against commerce, individual profit, religion, responsible use of resources, and forward-looking calculated risk; and in favor of socialism, socialist utilitarianism, secularism, and the idea that humanity is a blight on the earth. Those attitudes were coupled with, and perhaps led to, a lack of faith in institutions, for it quickly became unclear who in authority was trustworthy and what information could be trusted. It was no surprise that widespread fear quickly set in and spread faster than the virus.

There were and are, of course, alternatives to a lockdown. Each option has its own set of benefits and risks while still caring for those who are most at risk. At the moment, to suggest an alternative to lockdown is to risk the wrath of others, it seems. However, this is not the first pandemic that I have been through. This is the first time that the collective choice—and it was a choice—to lock down the world was made.

Such choices do not appear out of thin air. When each of us decides something, it is according to our personal viewpoints, beliefs, and philosophies. In this pandemic, media fueled the flames with sensational headlines and questionable statistics. Confusion reigned as scientists and politicians emotionally promoted their agendas. There was no vote to lock everything down, *per se*. There were opinion polls taken in some places, and the public often clamored to have their government “cancel everything” and lock everyone down. Governments gave the order, but society agreed;

and, thus, society as a whole is accountable for the decision and its outcome. Indeed, societal agreement with, and encouragement for, the global lockdown decision by government ultimately seem to have resulted from the collective viewpoint, beliefs, and philosophy of society at large prior to the pandemic. What, then, did society in general think before the pandemic? On one hand, it is difficult to generalize, but there are trends. I submit that the trends that existed before the pandemic led to the conditions in which a lockdown decision would be accepted by the general public. Those trends are as follows:

1. Society, egged on by the media, promoted the idea that commerce (especially profit from commerce) is bad and stems from greed. Of course, greed exists, but to apply that label to all profit-making commercial activity is both unfair and a gross misunderstanding of the nature of work. Much of commerce is providing valuable services to others. When we as individuals go to work, we are working to live—we work to put food on the table as well as to provide other necessary and even discretionary items. The money we earn is not simply money, but it is the fruit of our labor. Unless we are slaves (and slavery, sadly, does still exist in the world today), then we own our own labor, for our labor is merely the application of our time and energy, both of which are part of our individual lives. This is not a question of lives versus money, as some people now attempt to claim. Rather, it is a question of lives versus lives. That is even more true for the most poor and vulnerable people. In some cases, people around the world depend upon daily wages just to be able to eat, making the risk of starvation a greater concern for them than contagious diseases (and there are plenty of other contagious or even lethal diseases around the world at the moment than the novel coronavirus). When a business or an individual is forced into economic hardship or bankruptcy, it is, therefore, literally taking away part of the life of that individual. Consider, for example, the new college graduates who can no longer expect to get jobs this summer or the people who used

their life savings and house mortgages to start businesses just before the pandemic, only to have them fail due to being forced by the government (acting under popular opinion) to close. Yes, there are attempts by government and private organizations to provide financial assistance, but there is not a limitless pool of money. A society that believes that commerce and legitimate profit from commerce are evil will certainly not blink at businesses being shut down—that is, not until it hits them personally in the pocketbook, but perhaps not even then, depending on how deeply rooted their anti-commerce beliefs are.

2. Society has been moving more and more towards socialism and has entered into it in some countries. Socialism believes in strong state control of commerce, with a primary focus on the common good rather than a balance between common good and the rights of individuals. This applies to economic activity, such as issues of redistribution of wealth as well as personal property, health, and even personal freedom. And what is “good for society” is naturally determined by the state, for individuals under socialism are subject to, and dependents of, the state. The concept of an individual in the image of God vanishes. Indeed, a crisis benefits socialist leaders since it offers an opportunity to exercise more control and redistribute wealth as they see fit. And it will typically do so according to the utilitarian principles that so often go along with socialism. Utilitarianism says that society should choose the option that is believed to do the most good for the most people, even if it imposes costs on the minority. The state and society are all-important. The individual disappears. A society that believes in socialism, then, seems quite ripe for a lockdown that the government has determined is “good for them,” even when it imposes risks and costs on individuals.

3. Going along with an increased belief in socialism is a decreased belief in God and religion. In socialism, God is replaced by the state. If God is no longer important, then the result is what we actually see now. Clergy are declared nonessential workers in many places,

while marijuana stores are, in fact, considered essential and remain open. In some places, clergy are prohibited under criminal penalty from visiting those in need, and some churches are cited by the police even for holding services in which everyone remains in their vehicles. Furthermore, a lack of belief in God and religion naturally leads to an abandonment of the idea that there is any higher purpose for which risks are justified. A society that has abandoned God, deemed religion unimportant, and abandoned any sense of higher purpose, then, would surely not be too bothered when religious institutions are deemed nonessential and their rights are trampled underfoot by the civil government.

4. Consistent with a belief that commerce is evil, with an increase in socialist utilitarianism, and with a reduction in a belief in God and religion, society has increasingly adopted the belief that humanity is a curse upon the earth. Some even suggest that the earth would be better off if humans did not exist. Without going to that extreme, though, there was an increasing belief in society that travel, commerce, and other human activities should be dramatically curtailed. However, the principles of sustainability do not say all activity should be stopped but rather that there should be a balance between activity today and activity tomorrow and in the future. It is the principle of conservation. Complete reduction of environmental pollutants is simply not practicable, and thus it becomes a trade-off between pollution abatement and disposable income that can be used for other purposes. Yet, those that believe that humanity truly is a curse to the world would surely applaud the forced stoppage of a tremendous amount of economic activity around the globe, despite the damage it does to individuals.

5. Society has become far more focused on the present. History is often abandoned, except where it might serve a political agenda. The future (ironically in violation of the basic principles of sustainability and conservation that society claims to admire today) is ignored. When there

is no historical framework, one lacks an “internal compass” to determine the correct path. When there is no concern for the future, the present becomes all-important. As the focus becomes more on the present, people are less willing to take risks now for the future. A present-focused, risk-averse society seems quite likely to opt for a total lockdown.

These five societal trends certainly appear to be the leading influential forces that led to the (almost universal) societal collective choice to have governments lock down the population and shut down businesses. Prudence appears to have been replaced with “an abundance of caution.” Government leaders around the world also have consistently presented unclear, constantly changing messages and often arbitrary decisions, contributing understandably to public paranoia and fear. Far from the utopian promises of these five societal trends, the result has actually been a decrease in order in society. In this situation, society, both in the short run and in the long run, would be far better served by forethought and balance. In the end, society gets the outcome that it deserves based on its choices—or at least the choices of the vocal majority. How do we fix the situation in the world? Remedy the five societal trends mentioned above, and fear should diminish. Once fear is no longer part of the equation, the solution will become clear.

About the author: Don Rutherford Cardinal Johnson, PhD, STD, JCD, is a clergyman, author, and educator. He holds a graduate certificate in social justice from the Harvard University Extension School and is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Statistical Society. During the 2020 global pandemic, he has been involved in international health and humanitarian efforts and high-level international policy work, especially focused on issues impacting hundreds of millions of people, especially the most poor and vulnerable around the world. He was among those who received the 2020 Health Service Medal. [Ω](#)