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INVESTIGATION

Lockdown, a political and unscientific decision

POLITICS

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What did members of government say to each other when they were making key decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic, when they ordered us all to stay at home? Almost simultaneously, Whatsapp chat conversations between politicians in the respective governments of that period in **Italy** and **UK** were published in the media. But where is the news?

So far, very little news has emerged about the changes in strategy, even sudden ones, by the major decision makers of the time. To be expected, there is the superficiality and cynicism of leaders and politicians, at the highest levels, who also made fun of the most terrible issues and joked even in the midst of the tragedy. The less and greater expressions of pettiness, typical of every era, will certainly stir public opinion and fuel the political controversy for time to come. But the real crux of the matter is another. From the "private" conversations of public figures, both Italian and

British, it clearly emerges that the decisions for lockdown were made for political rather than scientific reasons.

Above all, it is evident in the British "Lockdown Files", as the *Telegraph* newspaper calls them, where it becomes apparent how the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson **changed his mind**, even going from one excess to another, depending on how the polls changed. He even counted considerably on his own personal experience. Before being hospitalised with Covid-19 and before being close to death, Boris Johnson was skeptical about the lockdown, when not openly against it. After his recovery he changed his attitude and became a zealous advocate of closures. But it was public opinion that determined all subsequent changes in strategy, in the three British national lockdowns. Consultants were called and not only epidemiologists, but **experts in political communication**, electoral strategy and pollsters.

From the Lockdown Files we also learn that some decisions were made even though it was known they were questionable or completely wrong, from a scientific point of view. In a message, for example, Johnson admits that the second lockdown was decided on the basis of "completely wrong" data. In a conversation between the then Minister of Education, Gavin Williamson and that of Health, William Hancock, the former candidly admits that the teachers' unions **do not want to return to face-to-face lessons** and "make every excuse not to reopen", "they just hate to work." While the obligation to wear masks at school was introduced **"to avoid quarrels with Nicola Sturgeon"**, the then prime minister of Scotland.

There is little or nothing scientific in these decisions. The lockdown was a strategy chosen, for political reasons, to manage the rampant panic. In Italy things did not go very differently from what (limited information, for now) emerges from the now public conversations of managers and ministers in office in 2020, published as part of the survey on the management of the pandemic in the province of Bergamo. **Corriere della Sera** reports what Giuseppe Ruocco, general secretary of the Ministry of Health, said to an official, on the risk of dangerous decisions: "You cannot review choices. They must first arrest the ministers and staff of 190 countries who have done less than us. The others have not isolated anyone".

This discourse is very significant: it is a government driven to "do something" in the face of a still unknown enemy, in a race to show itself more interventionist than the others. This is politics, not science. The same transpires, even more directly in the conversation between Goffredo Zaccardi, head of the cabinet of the then Minister of

Health, Speranza, with Pierluigi Bersani, then secretary of the Democratic Party: "I think it is clear that from Ruocco on down ours were not up to par - wrote Bersani - People who returned from China passing through any airport in the world should have been placed in quarantine. *This would not have protected us completely from the virus, but certainly from any responsibility*". (our italics, ed.)

If we have discovered that the lockdown was adopted for political rather than health reasons, our question is: why was this strategy adopted and not others? And why were previously researched and published pandemic plans not followed, none of which involved locking people up in their own homes, nationwide? Moreover, the Italian investigation into the province of Bergamo is even considering to condemn those who were not timely enough to impose the closures, without questioning the validity of it. In the British investigation, it is unlikely that different conclusions will be reached.

These are questions asked by *Telegraph* columnist Esther McVey: "I have not yet heard a valid answer to the question of why the 2011 Pandemic Preparedness Strategy, revised in 2014, was apparently discarded in 2020 for no good reason. Closures were never part of the plans of the other 27 European countries, all published by the European Center for Disease Control on February 5, 2020. Sweden had the courage to stick to the plan and not only its death rates are substantially better than ours, but it has also avoided some of the collateral damage of the closures, which continues to plague Britain." And yet... how much mud slinging Sweden had to endure, attacked by the media day and night throughout 2020!

From the surveys, there is something we would like to know sooner or later.

Why lockdown? Why did we apply a Chinese strategy, typical of a totalitarian regime, in our free societies? Why did the media systematically attack those who did not impose it (Sweden) or those who expressed doubts (Johnson at the beginning, Trump, Bolsonaro)? Why have we inflicted this economic, social, health damage on ourselves (for all those who were not treated for other illnesses, for example), in the name of what?