

European Vaccine Wars

Gawain Towler takes a detailed look at the EU's Covid vaccine crisis, and finds that Brussels' attempt to accrue more power to itself has backfired.

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No matter what happens, I cannot see Ursula Van der Leyen, the German President of the European Commission, ending up on the island of Elba, let alone St Helena. However, her attempt to reinvent a sort of medical Continental system is doomed, as was Napoleon's, to failure. It will fail for much the same reason that Napoleon's did. Imposing trading restrictions on the UK will cause the subject nations of the EU to rebel against the strictures, which will, in turn, create increased pressure on the central bureaucracy, a bureaucracy that is already failing in its supposed duty to the citizens of the EU.

Attempts by the EU to sabre rattle about the delivery of essential Covid vaccines are as effective as a hypodermic in a gas main. The scrap has the EU threatening pharmaceutical manufacturers with production facilities on mainland Europe with sanctions if they continue to send doses to the UK. The bottom line is simple, because of Brexit, the UK has a newly rediscovered ability to act rapidly in its own interests on the international stage. We are way ahead of the continental block in terms of developing, licensing, and delivering Covid vaccines.

To date, the UK has vaccinated over 7 million people. The rest of the EU has managed 8.7 million. That is with a relative population of 70-odd million against 448 million. That is 10% of the UK; 3% of the EU have been vaccinated. Not only that

but the vaccines that have been developed include the Pfizer–BioNTech version that was developed in Germany, and produced mainly in Belgium, but first licensed by the UK on December 2nd (by the EU on the 20th). Then there is the Oxford AstraZeneca (a UK Swedish conglomerate) vaccine, which was developed by scientists in the UK, and is largely produced here and in Belgium. Again, it was licensed by the UK on December 30th. (This has yet to be licensed by the EU.) The problems with the delivery of both seem to be in the low production quantities in these Belgian facilities.

The EU member states are up in arms. They were bullied into handing over the ordering and licensing procedures for the vaccine to Brussels and the European Union. This was to show 'solidarity' (read: fealty) and for the European Union to prove that their disasters from the first lockdown, where they stood paralysed by the glare as the virus ripped through Italy and Spain were things of the past. Sadly, on a matter of absolute importance, the sclerotic central bureaucracy has failed. The stark reality is that thousands of European citizens will die as a result.

As the French CEO of AstraZeneca, Pascal Soriot, has put it:

'Actually, there's nothing mysterious about it. But look, the sites that have the lowest productivity in the network are the sites that are supplying Europe. The UK agreement was reached in June, three months before the European one. As you could imagine, the UK government said the supply coming out of the UK supply chain would go for the UK first. Basically, that's how it is. In the EU agreement it is mentioned that the manufacturing sites in the UK were an option for Europe, but only later.'

In a sideswipe at the behaviour of European politicians trying to queer the pitch for the UK and for others he is very clear:

'for Europe to say they are going to control exports is the contrary to what they said a few months ago, that they were

going to give access to everybody.'

National governments are being blamed by their citizens for these failures, and the sight of a newly independent Britain acting effectively, is just too much for some to bear.

Earlier this week (25 January), the trusted German financial newspaper *Handelsblatt*, in what appears to be a fit of pique, claimed the AstraZeneca vaccine was only effective for 8% of over 65s. This produced a furious response from the firm and the UK. The German Health Ministry has had to slap the newspaper down: the 8% referred to the number of over 65s the vaccine had been tested upon, not its efficacy rate. *Handelsblatt* is now blaming the government for the mixed messages. The spat shows quite the necessity to do the UK down. It is a matter of humbled vainglory.

Worse news for the EU came from France on Monday, where the prestigious, Paris-based, Pasteur Institute has thrown in the towel. It had to admit that its vaccine was no more effective than standing around with no medical assistance, in fact, it was worse. This combined with the French firm Sanofi estimating that its vaccine will not be ready until the end of 2021 – despite having well over \$100m pumped into its program by the EU – has caused national soul searching on the banks of the Seine.

One German lawmaker, Dr Gunnar Beck, a member of the European Parliament, said, 'It is a nightmare for the EU that Brexit Britain's vaccine scheme is working better than the EU's'. As he put it:

'The slow, dysfunctional approach has been a huge failure for the Commission. They were determined to control this at EU level, they must be held to account as much as national governments are. Outside the EU, the UK has been able to fast-track approval, purchase doses and start protecting their citizens.'

All this has to hurt, which leads us to the situation where we the European Commission, the German, Spanish, and other European governments are trying to strong arm AstraZeneca into possibly diverting vaccines meant for the UK to the EU. This action, against a friendly neighbour, has precedent. In March last year one French company, Valmy SAS, was forced by French customs officials to divert an order back to France for PPE from the UK's National Health Service. And the battle for protective masks amongst European nations, supposedly driven by fraternity and brotherly love was unedifying, to say the least. That system too was supposed to be managed by the central bureaucracy and resulted in demonstrations in several countries against the EU itself. Now, with the European vaccine crisis we may slowly be seeing that while the EU may be effective during normal times at accruing power to itself, when things are hard it is clear that it is the nimbler, independent nations that can best serve their populations.

When that the message gets through to the peoples of Europe, the internal pressures and differing national priorities will make it very hard for Mrs von der Leyen and her cohorts to reassert control. The exile options are still open for her, however. Sadly, the virus has hit Elba, where last week they reported 8 new cases of the virus. St Helena, mind you, is entirely Covid free.

Gawain Towler was recently the Director of Communications of the Brexit Party and has run his own Communications and Strategy company. Before that he worked in the European Institutions in Brussels.