

Seven lockdowns

Blog post by the Global Counsel team, 27 March 2020

Along with many of our clients, family and friends, GC staff have found themselves under varying levels of quarantine this week, in some cases far from home. Here some of the team consider the covid-19 politics and policies playing out around them.

Singapore - Andrew Yeo

Barely a month ago, Singapore had the second-highest number of covid-19 cases outside of China. But there is now a relative sense of normalcy about the island. Today I actually enjoyed breakfast the usual way - two soft-boiled eggs whipped in pepper and a dash of soy sauce - prepared by Malaysian staff in the air-conditioned surroundings of the local mall. This morning routine at the café is in fact Singapore's economy writ large, representing a facet of the economic challenges covid-19 has brought to the surface here. First, an economy underpinned by a sizeable foreign labour force concentrated in certain critical sectors faced very difficult choices on national lockdowns and travel restrictions. Second, the ubiquity of real estate developers in a REIT hub squeezed between providing rental rebates and delivering shareholder value sent a shudder through both the economy and local politics. These are huge problems that require long-term solutions. One upside is that local trust in the competence of the government is high coming out of the recent measures and that will help. Now there is the not so small matter of organising an election before April 2021.

San Diego - Elizabeth Beall

San Diego is a place renowned for its beaches, its breweries, its biotech, and its bases (military). Each provides a lens through which to observe how California's measures to contain the virus - ranked the most aggressive among all US states - are impacting on the population. In a place that prides itself on the ability of its residents to live outdoors all year round, closed parking lots and taped off beaches, hiking trails, and golf courses have seen people turn to more concrete spaces to stretch their legs. Indeed, in some ways, the wide urban spaces of suburban southern California lend themselves well to social distancing. Some breweries and tap rooms have been improvising to avoid closing down. A number of breweries have added online ordering to their website to avoid queuing on site and included home delivery for the first time. Others are refocusing production on hand sanitiser. For the local biotech industry, the race to ramp up production of covid-19 testing kits and vaccine development is the key focus, with some already receiving FDA approval. San Diego's military bases - some of the largest in the US - are not only strategic sites for quarantining, but also represent approximately 8% of San Diego's population and are comparatively much younger than the overall population. This may be one factor for why the majority of San Diego's covid-19 cases have been under the age of 60, providing useful data for how the virus may spread and impact a group generally thought to be less susceptible. In sum, San Diego may provide a useful microcosm for how to stay fit, keep calm, innovate and learn more about the virus.

London - Benjamin Wegg-Prosser

It was not until this Monday night as the British prime minister asked people to stay in their homes that the London streets fell properly silent for the first time. Looking along Wigmore Street the buses re-directed from Oxford Street pass on an irregular basis with few passengers. What used to be called white collar workers have successfully made the transition to home working. Construction workers continue to build buildings, security guards protect empty buildings and taxi drivers pass without passengers to ferry. All of this for a London that may work very differently in future. The evening of the lock-down I took a late-night taxi home, and I asked the driver how busy he had been. He said, "I have had six fares since 6:30", I replied: "That's not bad in the circumstances." He said: "6:30am. This is a subsistence existence; it cannot go on like this". The schemes to help the self-employed taxi drivers may ease some of the pain but the sacrifices in this crisis, if you put the health concerns to one side, are - for now - not being paid by the remote-working Wifi-using, Zoom-calling keyboard warriors.

Washington DC - Erin Caddell

In Washington, DC, the streets are quiet, though not empty, as unlike many parts of the US, a full "shelter in place" order has not yet been issued. Most shops are closed, however, as are the schools. Those who can work from home are doing so, though many congressional staffers and government agency employees are in their offices or the halls of the Capitol, risking their health to do the people's work. As if in defiance of the dour news around them, over the weekend the city's cherry-blossom trees emerged into full bloom. Yet even this was bittersweet, as the Park Service had to close down parking lots near the National Mall to keep crowds from gathering. A neighbour, when I asked him from across the street "How's it going?", merely said: "It's catastrophic." He owns a for-now-shuttered pub. He shrugged and said: "Guess we're all going to get it in the end, right?"

Brussels - Ermenegilda Boccabella

The politics of covid-19 has broken a Belgian political deadlock, of sorts. Belgium is accustomed to political stale mates, holding the record and the runner up spots for 'most days without a government' in modern western history. The country's politics, generally divided by language, tend to cluster at either end of the political spectrum. The more prosperous, Dutch-speaking region of Flanders leans to the right with a dash of popularist separatism. The majority French-speaking region of Wallonia is a socialist heartland. Before the virus, Belgium had struggled for 18 months to find a governing majority. However, faced with an international crisis, on March 15th, Sophie Wilmès became prime minister by securing enough support to form a caretaker government for a period of six months. As soon as she was sworn in, she moved quickly to restrict the movement of the population until April 5th. She is joined by the Minister for Health, Maggie De Block, who has called for calm and patience, expecting this crisis to last eight weeks, though hopefully the shutdown will be less. The virus has disproportionately affected Flanders, with most cases and most deaths, and it is in this context that the deeply divided fractions have come together. Seeing Belgian politics act swiftly and effectively, albeit in a global crisis like no other, has given a small

sense of reassurance. We are realising that fundamentally, the health of any nation starts with the health of its people.

Glasgow - Gregor Irwin

Four conversations with neighbours, all from a safe distance, illustrate how hard it will be for governments to ensure that the economic cost of covid-19 disruption is spread equitably. The sub-contractor, whose current job was abruptly ended on Friday. It would have been easy to pick up another job two weeks ago, but not now. The musician, who finds herself on the wrong end of industry practice - while others in an orchestra are on employment contracts, not the pianist or the harpist. The small businessman, who usually has a healthy mix of commercial and household customers, but whose order book right now only has the latter. He was asking me if I knew how the government's wage support scheme might help his staff. All appeared remarkably relaxed in the circumstances. My fourth conversation was more positive, with a writer specialising in dark thrillers. It's good for productivity. And there's plenty of new material to work with.

New York - Tom King

New York State is the epicentre of the American crisis, with 5% of the world's cases. Partly this is because it's one of the few places conducting high numbers of tests. The city mayor and the state governor - so often at loggerheads - are united in contempt for the federal government's perceived inaction. They've done what they think they must, and now Manhattan is like the world's biggest movie set. The city that never sleeps is in a coma. Our cautious daily walk reveals stark new behaviours each time. Whole Foods now has bouncers shepherding a queue - a line? - of patient shoppers, waiting six feet apart. On the opposite corner, a Pentecostal church has gathered the faithful to sing, packed together lemming-like. The wine store a block over is moving to on-street pick-up only, the masked, gloved shopkeeper ruefully explains. Within this stasis, there are signs of innovation and solidarity: street-sellers hawk toilet paper and detergent, and Red Rooster - one of Harlem's most famous soul food joints - is serving its food free to the homeless. The financial engine of the world's largest economy may be running on fumes, but America's greatness is still evident if you look for it.