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Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance – the quiet heroes standing up in our time of crisis

As two experts calmly guide us through coronavirus, we look at the power of understated British men (and women) to capture our hearts

By Harry Mount

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Premium

Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

Just when it feels like we're about to enter full-scale coronavirus panic mode, two quiet doctors enter from the wings – and magically chime with our [national, keep-calm-and-carry-on temperament](#).

Dr Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer for England, and Sir Patrick Vallance, the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government, are just the kind of modest eggheads we crave. They don't make a drama out of a crisis; they just quietly get on with doing the right thing, leaving the frantic jazz hands to others.

Boris Johnson normally devours all the oxygen in the room. But, in the regular public briefings at Number 10, it is increasingly the two, tall men either side of him who command attention. The ones both he and us are looking to for the answers.

Because they're so clever and understated, we trust them. When Dr Whitty quietly lays out the measures needed for the 'delay' phase of the crisis – the symptoms to look for; why we should be isolating ourselves for a week if we have them – we obey.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chief Medical Officer for England, Chris Whitty and Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance attend a news conference addressing the government's response to the coronavirus outbreak, at Downing Street | CREDIT: Simon Pool/Reuters

When Sir Patrick gently explained, on yesterday's Today programme, why it was safer to go to the Cheltenham Gold Cup and watch it live than go to a pub and watch on TV, we listen.

Theirs is a respect rooted in intelligence and achievement, as well as their air of quiet, cool command. Chris Whitty, 53, was brought up in Nigeria, where his late father worked for the British Council. Educated at Malvern and Pembroke College, Oxford, he went on to collect four dazzling postgraduate degrees. He is an NHS Consultant Physician at University College London Hospitals and the Hospital for Tropical Diseases. And he's been a professor – twice! Once at Gresham College; and at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. He's an expert in malaria and Ebola.

In other words, he is a real-life Professor Branestawm, with his high forehead and imposing, tall physique.

Sir Patrick is no slouch either. Educated at Truro School and London University, he was also a professor (at UCL Medical School). He went on to become head of research and development at the huge pharmaceutical company, GlaxoSmithKline. He's an expert in vascular medicine.

In a world obsessed with celebrities and show-offy Instagram influencers, what a contrast it is when two gentle planet-brains, against their better wishes, take centre-stage.

Yet, again and again in history, we fall for the understated hero, who dominates our attention by not shrieking for it, but by simply being quietly brilliant at their job.

During the 1982 Falklands War, the famous quiet man was Ian McDonald, the unassuming bachelor civil servant who delivered the Ministry of Defence's press briefings.



Ian MacDonald, quietly getting on with it | CREDIT: Alain MINGAM/Gamma-Rapho

McDonald, who died last March aged 82, was the complete reverse of the showbiz star. With his big, square, black specs, dark suits, high forehead and deadpan, mournful delivery, he calmed a jittery nation, worried that the Falklands War would be a colossal disaster. With no showy emotion, the Glaswegian made straight, factual bulletins in contrast to the heated bluster and exaggerated figures from Argentina.

Just like Whitty and Vallance, he drew attention by avoiding it: his most famous catchphrase in his briefings was “I will not answer any questions afterwards”.

His delivery was so unemotional that he won the nickname, ‘McDalek’. Women sent in fanmail by the sackload. He had to fight off a middle-aged stalker. In true, quiet-hero style, he refused to report her to the police

because he felt sorry for her. Like Whitty and Vallance, he was a clever one, too, dropping in Shakespeare quotes into his briefings.

There is something in the British character that responds to this kind of manner – and not just during times of national crisis either.

How we revered the low, serious tones of Brian Cobby, voice of the speaking clock from 1985 to 2007. How quickly we stepped back from the edge of the Tube platform at the stentorian, bass voice, crying “Mind the gap, please”. That voice belonged to Peter Lodge, who boomed away on the Underground for almost half a century from 1969.

It is when our lives are at threat, and panic is at its highest, that the quiet, sensible voice of reason is most valued. That’s why Colonel Tim Collins’s words on the eve of battle in the Iraq War in 2003 were so effective. His speech to the 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment in Kuwait was remarkable for its elegant prose, but also for the calm and direct statement of the brutal, deadly truth:

"We go to Iraq to liberate not to conquer. We will not fly our flags in their country...

There are some who are alive at this moment who will not be alive shortly... You will have to go a long way to find a more decent, generous and upright people than the Iraqis... Don't treat them as refugees for they are in their own country... If there are casualties of war, then remember that when they woke up and got dressed in the morning, they did not plan to die this day...

Our business now is north."

Rather more stirring than a shrieking hysterical celebrity issuing me-me-missives on Twitter.

You could call it the Sergeant Wilson Spirit – that air of diffidence and modesty, acted so well by John Le Mesurier in Dad’s Army – in contrast to the pompous bluster of Captain Mainwaring and the panic of Corporal “Don’t Panic” Jones.

In ‘Branded’ (1969), the most moving of all Dad’s Army episodes, it is Private Godfrey who best captures our love of the quiet hero. Attacked for being a conscientious objector during the First World War, he proceeds to save Mainwaring, suffocating from smoke during an exercise. It emerges that Godfrey won a Military Medal during WWI as a heroic stretcher-bearer. Godfrey’s heroism is intensified because he said nothing about it. What’s more, Arnold Ridley, who played Godfrey, was in fact a war hero, severely injured at the Somme.



Branded - Military Medal

from [Wilmington-on-Line](#)

02:50 |



The nature of war in recent history means men have dominated the Quiet Military Hero column inches. But women have been just as impressive at stepping into the breach with little fanfare.

Take Fabiola Gianotti, the Italian particle physicist who was part of the team that discovered the Higgs boson in 2012 – and quietly got on with running CERN, the Geneva research organisation that operates the Large Hadron Collider, rather than hogging the limelight.

Then there's Professor Monica Grady, the Open University Professor of Planetary and Space Science, who helped land the space probe Philae on a comet in 2014. Footage of her tears of delight went viral, as did her modest reaction to her emotion: “Sorry – now I'll try and be a professional scientist.”

Rosetta comet landing reaction - BBC News



See too Katie Bouman, the scientist who, last year, created the first ever picture of a black hole. Shortly afterwards, she wrote, “Watching in disbelief as the first image I ever made of a black hole was in the process of being reconstructed.”

It took a friend of hers to say, “That’s a pretty humble description. Isn’t it the first EVER picture of a black hole, in addition to being the first one you ever made?”

Here’s hoping it won’t be long before we see the modest reactions of Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance when, God willing, this horrible virus is conquered and our quiet heroes retreat once again to simply being brilliant behind the scenes.

*Harry Mount is author of **How England Made the English (Penguin)***

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