

It's not 'vaccine nationalism' that's the problem, Mr President, it's our own bungling –

Rob Rose (Editor Financial Mail, 28 Jan 2021)

Is SA's inability to find enough vaccines quickly due to 'vaccine nationalism'? Or is this a wafer-thin excuse for shoddy planning?

If there's anything that Covid-19 has given Cyril Ramaphosa, it's a PhD in wielding guilt. This week, addressing the World Economic Forum's digital Davos forum, the president lamented how "the rich countries in the world went out and acquired large doses of vaccines from the developers and manufacturers".

Some countries, he said, had bought four times what they needed. "We need those who have hoarded the vaccines to release [them] so that other countries can have them," he said.

It was, to tag a comforting label to it, another case of "vaccine nationalism", in which the evil (but organised) capitalists of the developed world continue to exploit the poor. Of course, affixing such a label allows the cognitively lazy to slot this into their box of preconceived biases, nod sagely at the structural wickedness of it all, and move on, without probing any deeper.

ADVERTISING

What you didn't hear Ramaphosa say, curiously, was how those naughty countries which have already started vaccinating their populations might just have planned better and acted earlier than we did to secure the vaccine.

There may, of course, be some truth to what Ramaphosa said, but it's far from the whole story. What it is, though, is a convenient way for Ramaphosa's government to whitewash its own complicity in shunting SA to the back of the queue.

Where, for example, were SA's politicians when the manufacturers called a few months ago, to ask if we'd want some vaccines? Who knows — perhaps in the

national coronavirus command council (NCCC), debating whether Castle Free causes Covid-19, and should be banned.

If it sounds familiar, it's because you've heard this argument before. In December, the president told us that alcohol and beaches had to be taken away because South Africans can't handle their booze, and don't know how to calculate a 2m distance. It was entirely our fault — not apparently, the failure of an inept police force to curb public drunkenness, pull drunk drivers off the road, remove unroadworthy vehicles and do, you know, basic policing.

There's much you could say about this. Again, it's true that public behaviour does worsen when we're drunk, but it isn't the whole story. It's also about the government being unable to implement its own rules, and so simply adding even zanier regulations, hoping to remedy its deficiency.

The vaccine price is low in comparison to the terrible economic damage of every day of national closure

You might, for example, be tempted to ask whether, before banning alcohol, the NCCC had disaggregated mobility data to see whether trauma admissions had also fallen during the earlier curfew when alcohol was being sold. But it hadn't — revealing a government unable to ask enough of the right questions before implementing lazy policies.

This seems to be a wider malady, in which our political leaders screw up spectacularly, then attempt to reframe the picture to accord with some sort of internal narrative in which they are doing fantastically well despite impossible odds, created by someone else they have no control over. Or, put another way: once the government has tied its shoelaces together, and falls over, it pretends it had no agency in the first place, and it bought the shoes like that.

As a political gambit, it's a neat, if cynical, trick. But as a reflection of the truth, it's up there with "I was wearing a mask, but the camera captured me at the precise moment when Bill Gates/Johann Rupert/WMC secretly removed it from my face without me noticing, to make me look bad".

It's helpful to remember, as we weigh up to what extent this is about "vaccine nationalism", why it is that SA is now having to resort to using guilt to make other countries feel bad that they're getting the vaccine first.

Three weeks ago, Bloomberg reported that Pfizer had approached the presidency, and offered vaccines at a cut-price \$10 a dose — half what rich countries are paying. No thanks, said the presidency, this cost is "prohibitive".

Now, you could argue against the Pfizer vaccine on other grounds — the cold-storage requirement is onerous, for one thing — but to reject this based entirely on economics is forehead-smackingly shortsighted.

Last week, the Israeli ministry of health's Asher Salmon defended the fact that Israel paid over the bar for the vaccine — a reputed \$30 a dose — on the entirely pragmatic grounds that the price was "ridiculously low" compared to the cost of having to keep a lockdown in place for longer than is necessary.

"We may have paid more than the EU. We are a small market [and] our terms may be less favourable. But the price of vaccines is so ridiculously low in comparison to the terrible economic damage of every day of national closure that this argument is nonsense," said Salmon.

Quite. Considering just the lost taxes and investment due to the lockdown — SA Breweries recently took the commercially inevitable decision of cancelling a R2.5bn investment due to the booze ban — you have to ask how thorough the decision-making process really is in the government.

Especially since, in the end, the government went ahead with the Covax facility it was offered, in which SA will apparently end up paying \$10.55 a dose.

We can dress ourselves up as victims all we want, and pretend the countries that are getting the vaccine first are doing so because they're part of an exclusive First World cabal, but the reality is, SA's government simply bungled the purchasing of vaccines. Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and India are hardly icons of global capital, and yet they've all started vaccinating.

Understanding this dynamic isn't about a backward-looking bid to assign blame, which wouldn't be helpful. Rather, it's about ensuring political accountability for shoddy decision-making, so that next time, the politicians can't just brandish a convenient scapegoat for their failures.