



'Amid the bedlam, she is in our corner, soothing the country with an effortless bedside manner,' said Vogue magazine in 2020 | CREDIT: Pippa Fowles / No 10 Downing Street

Headline writers were especially taken with Harries's response to a question thrown at her on the eve of the first national lockdown on how lovers should navigate the coming months. Standing at a lectern next to Matt Hancock (who we can surmise was not listening), she said: "I'm clearly going to start a new career here in relationship counselling, so I will tread very carefully... If the two halves of a couple are currently in separate households, ideally they should stay in those households. The alternative might be that, for quite a significant period going forwards, they should test the strength of their relationship and decide whether one wishes to be permanently resident in another household."

"Shack up or break up," the papers shouted as the shutters came down the next day.

Harries is big on the power of human experience and thinks we have learnt a huge amount as a population about infection control over the past few years. So much so that if we were to face another pandemic tomorrow the UK would take a more Swedish approach to social distancing, she suggests. Social contact fell broadly to the same extent in both countries during the pandemic but, while stay-at-home orders were legally mandated here, in Sweden they were voluntary for the most part.

"What we saw with omicron and later waves of the pandemic, and even now, is that people are good at watching the data and they will take action themselves," says Harries. "You can see it in footfall going down. People actually start to manage their own socialisation, and the [viral] waves flatten off and come down."

So next time round we will be more like Sweden, changing our behaviour but without the need for legislation?

Harries is far too savvy to have the word Sweden or – as I later try – South Korea put in her mouth, but the direction of travel is clear. The key, she says, is to be transparent about the risks and build trust with the public.

“The more people trust the organisation to give them early, accurate, honest and straightforward information, then, yes, the likelihood of us moving to extreme forms of transmission management reduce all the time, whether it be for coronavirus or anything else,” she says.

## “She’s emerged from the widespread bureaucratic and professional wreckage of the pandemic very much on top”

In public, Harries has a certain calmness about her, something she puts down to a “Jemima Puddle-Duck” approach: “paddle frantically beneath the surface but remain serene on top”. It’s helped her deal with all sorts of nasties over the years, including the Salisbury Novichok poisonings of 2018 – one of a series of events that first brought her to the attention of Whitehall.

The same cool confidence was evident when Harries appeared in June at the first part of the Covid inquiry, the part dealing with pandemic preparedness. While many were monstered under cross-examination (see David Cameron, George Osborne, Jeremy Hunt and virtually anyone who was anybody at the Department of Health and Social Care), Harries sailed through unscathed.

Austerity measures before the pandemic had left local directors of public health “under significant pressure” and their teams “denuded”, she told the inquiry. It was a lack of capacity across the health and social care system, and not the UK’s pandemic plan itself, that had been the main problem. “I don’t hold with the groupthink agenda,” she said of the idea, floated by the former chief medical officer Dame Sally Davies among others, that Britain’s experts had been blinded by exceptionalism and failed to learn the lessons of the earlier Sars and Mers outbreaks in south-east Asia.

When we meet, Harries sticks to her guns on this. The UK’s pandemic plan was not perfect but it was “pretty advanced” comparatively speaking given that “many parts of the world had no plans at all”.

What about South Korea, I ask. They escaped lockdowns and overstretched ICU wards by closing their borders and rolling out mass testing almost immediately.

“I think this is where we need to be really careful because the culture in South Korea was very different,” says Harries. She is not ruling out that we may be more like them in future but does not think Britain would have bought into more interventionist plans ahead of the pandemic, even if they had been proposed.

“In South Korea, they have had a different experience... communities, individuals and governments build on the experience and the culture that they have,” she says.