In the footsteps of Lincoln, Gandhi, Gorbachev
Is this one of those turning points in history?

• This was the week a British prime minister declared a state of emergency and called on a nation to come together to fight a deadly enemy.

• All non-essential shops closed. Gatherings of more than two people banned. “Stay at home, protect the NHS, and save lives.”

• Never in peacetime has a UK prime minister had to make a speech like this one.

• It felt like a decisive moment in the fight against coronavirus, but will history look back at Boris Johnson’s “invisible killer” speech as a turning point when everything changed?
If this sounds overly dramatic….

- ...it is worth remembering that some of the most important speeches in history were overlooked at the time.
- Many years can pass before we realise the significance of an event. In 1942, Mahatma Gandhi called on Indians to resist the British Empire with peaceful civil disobedience.
- He and many others were arrested immediately after his speech and spent the rest of the WW2 in jail.
- But his inspiring words launched the Quit India Movement, which ultimately led to the county’s independence in 1947.
Great speeches also end wars.

• In 1988, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev stunned his audience at the UN when he announced Russian troops would leave Eastern Europe.

• For over 40 years, Europe and the world had been divided by a power struggle between the capitalist West and the communist East.

• Within twelve months of Gorbachev’s speech, the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Cold War was over.
Will history remember Boris Johnson’s speech in the same way?

• Some say this is indeed a historic moment.
• Boris Johnson looked tired and uncomfortable as he warned that “gatherings will be dispersed” – a draconian announcement, unthinkable a few weeks ago.
• He acknowledged the fear and anxiety everyone is feeling and the huge scale of the measures needed. And his words united us in a common objective: “To halt the spread of this disease.”
Will history remember Boris Johnson’s speech in the same way?

• Others say we should wait and see.
• Words only count if they are followed by action.
• Boris Johnson has been slow to respond to the unfolding crisis, his measures lagging behind those in Europe.
• If people continue to ignore his calls to stay at home and the police struggle to enforce the measures, his speech will be forgotten – or remembered for all the wrong reasons.