

# British government forced to partially backtrack on ending lockdown

Robert Stevens  
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Boris Johnson's Conservative government is facing a mounting political crisis over its plans to impose a mass return to work.

Last week, the government finalised plans for an end to the lockdown following months of talks with business leaders and the trade unions. So determined was the government to press forward with its return to work strategy, that it jettisoned proposals from the Trades Union Congress advising it to implement a few token protective measures—to be overseen by the unions—to give the impression it was concerned about public safety.

By the middle of the week, the right-wing media were cock-a-hoop, trumpeting the plans by the government to drop its “stay home” slogan, with the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* celebrating on its front page Thursday, “‘Stay home’ advice to be scrapped.”

Directing the population to this Sunday evening's statement on the crisis by Johnson, they confidently forecast that he would present a “roadmap,” meaning that the following day would effectively represent the end of the lockdown and “unlock the UK economy.”

The *Sun*'s Thursday front page declared “Happy Monday” would mean the “easing of lockdown restrictions.” The *Daily Star* proclaimed “Magic Monday” next to the date May 11. The *Daily Mail* read, “Hurrah! Lockdown freedom beckons,” and the *Daily Express*, “First steps to freedom.” The Labour Party supporting *Daily Mirror* led its front page with, “Five steps to end the lockdown—staggered easing plan revealed ... from Monday to October.”

The ruling elite's plan to end the lockdown as soon as possible ran up against widespread opposition among workers to such a criminally dangerous policy. Under conditions in which opinion poll after poll has registered overwhelming support for maintaining the

lockdown, the government ended up politically overexposed by the triumphalism of the media.

Despite Johnson's claim that the UK is “past the peak” of the pandemic “and on the downward slope,” millions know these are barefaced lies. Every day, hundreds of new deaths and thousands of new coronavirus cases are announced. Yesterday saw another 626 deaths, to bring the UK's total to 31,241. The 4,649 new cases brought the total infected to 211,364. Just in the days since May 1, there have been 40,111 new cases of coronavirus announced and 4,470 deaths. In the last three days, as the back to work offensive was stepped up, there were 16,374 cases and 1,814 deaths.

The UK's death toll, even according to the manipulated figures put out by the government, is now more than 1,000 higher than Italy. The 243 deaths announced by Rome yesterday brought its death toll to 30,201—the third country in the world, after the United States and the UK, to surpass 30,000 deaths.

The opposition among millions of workers and throughout the population was expressed in Thursday's top trending hashtags #KeepTheLockdown and #extendthelockdown.

One post read, “The British tabloids have massively misjudged the public mood. We are hurt, we are grieving, we are struggling, we are angry, we are tired & we are sick of being told everything is alright by a useless government & a few tax avoiding billionaire media moguls. #KeepTheLockdown.”

The rush to enforce a back-to-work movement has no scientific basis, with a number of prominent scientists establishing an independent committee this week challenging the government's COVID-19 response. On Thursday, John Drury, professor of social psychology at the University of Sussex, told the *Guardian*, “The

right wing media's language and premature celebration of the supposed end of lockdown is dangerous and irresponsible framing of what might be about to happen." He warned that the messaging was at odds with the continued "need to maintain the handwashing and physical distancing that will still be needed."

Forced to adapt in the face of public anger, Johnson told Thursday morning's Cabinet meeting that the lockdown would have to remain in place, with only minor alterations to be considered. The damage limitation exercise saw Johnson's official spokesman tell the media, "The prime minister said that in considering whether there could be any easement to the existing guidelines, we are not going to do anything that risks a second peak. We will advance with maximum caution in order to protect the NHS and to save lives."

Speaking at the Downing Street press conference later Thursday, Dominic Raab formally extended the lockdown by a further three weeks and said that any changes to the lockdown to be announced by Johnson Sunday would be "modest, small, incremental and carefully monitored."

By Thursday evening, nothing remained of the headlines celebrating next Monday as a day of liberation. The *Mail*'s headline declared, "Sit tight and wait for Boris," writing, "A poll for MailOnline has highlighted the challenge 'coronaphobia' is likely to pose to the government as it tries to get the country up and running again." The poll found that "62 percent of Britons are more worried about the effects of the draconian curbs ending too early..." It noted with concern, "Around seven in 10 believe bus and train drivers, teachers, and medical staff should have the right to refuse to go back to work, even if the government says it is safe. Some 60 percent say the state should keep covering a proportion of people's wages even if in theory they should be able to resume their jobs."

The retreat by Johnson prompted an intervention by Sajid Javid, chancellor until his resignation in February. In his first major interview since resigning, he insisted that the needs of the banks and big business had to win out. With the *Financial Times* pointing to the Bank of England's prediction that the UK has entered its deepest recession in 300 years, Javid said he was "worried about the health of our banks." He advised

"some kind of support for banks with some of the worst-performing loans and try to help the banks in that way, so that they can in turn help the economy and lend."

Doffing his cap to the views of scientists, his main message was to "think carefully about the impact on the rest of society and the economy and jobs and wider social impacts and that does mean, I think, that when it comes to opening up you want to go as far and as quick as you can."

Indicating the necessity to step up the exploitation of the working class, he added, "Many things will change as a result of this crisis. ... one thing that shouldn't change is our understanding of the economic model that leads to the highest growth rate possible which is still going to be a free-enterprise, low tax, competitive economy."

This week's events reveal the extent to which Johnson's is a government of acute crisis. It was put in office by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and remains in office only due to being propped up by the trade union bureaucracy and Labour party under Sir Keir Starmer.

For five years Corbyn, in alliance with the trade unions, suppressed every struggle of the working class against the Tories and kept the Blairites firmly ensconced in the party. Starmer, who was assured of Corbyn's loyalty, is pledged to working constructively with the Tories throughout the pandemic in a de facto government of national unity.



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