# UK: Prime Minister's Questions reveals Labour's complicity in Tory back-to-school campaign

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During Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) on Wednesday, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer drew back the curtain on the extent of his party's collusion with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government.

Starmer's intervention was heavily promoted by the media as proof of Labour taking a more critical attitude to Johnson's criminal handling of the pandemic. "Starmer's patience has finally run out," wrote the *Guardian.* The Labour leader "took the gloves of in his battle against Boris Johnson," according to the *Daily Mail*, and took a "tougher approach," according to the *Financial Times*.

Not really. PMQ's was an exposure of Labour's intimate collaboration with the Tory government in seeking to manage an escalating political crisis for British capitalism. Starmer's "criticisms" were centred not on the murderous nature of the government's back-to-school and return-to-work agenda, but were a warning from an ally that too many more political "blunders" could finally destroy the political authority necessary to push it through.

Starmer stated, "This is a critical week in our response to COVID-19. Whereas 'lockdown' and 'stay at home' were relatively easy messages, easing restrictions involves very difficult judgment calls. This is the week, of all weeks, where public trust and confidence in the government needed to be at its highest."

Noting that polls show a collapse in confidence in the Tories, he asked, "How worried is the prime minister about this loss of trust?"

The Labour leader concluded another mildly phrased question on the non-functional test-and-trace system with the same humble appeal, "Can the prime minister see how damaging this is to public trust and confidence in his government?"

Starmer's carefully calibrated criticisms, still shrouded in assurances of goodwill, were made necessary by the fact that Labour's pursuit of a "constructive" relationship with the government—declared by the Labour leader at the outbreak of the pandemic—has created a dangerous political vacuum that risks events undermining Labour just as thoroughly as the Tory party.

Starmer's constant declarations of support for Johnson have become untenable in light of growing popular hostility to the government's actions. This has been brought to a head by the scandal over Johnson's adviser Dominic Cummings and the failure of its latest "test and tracing" initiative, which have led to a dramatic collapse in the Tories' poll numbers.

As Starmer himself complained, "I have supported the government openly and I have taken criticism for it—but, boy, he has made it difficult to support this government over the last two weeks."

Sir Keir has therefore decided to strike a mildly critical pose in a belated effort to maintain some shred of political credibility, aptly summed up by the BBC's political correspondent Iain Watson as "Labour leader Starmer's political distancing."

But even as he made this minor course correction, Starmer revealed just how intimately he has been working with the government and affirmed that, polite criticisms notwithstanding, this relationship will continue.

Responding to Johnson's request for "more signs of cooperation" from Labour, Starmer struck an outraged pose: "The prime minister asks for a sign of co-operation—a fair challenge. I wrote to him, as he knows, in confidence two weeks ago, to ask if I could help build a consensus for getting children back into our schools. I did it confidentially and privately, because I did not want to make a lot of it."

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Starmer was clearly outraged that Johnson publicly questioned Labour's political loyalties and responded by revealing the extent of the collusion taking place behind the scenes. He continued in aggrieved tones to explain that he had tried his best to neutralise the overwhelming opposition of workers to the return-to-work drive and especially the reopening of schools.

"I have supported the government in the gradual easing of restrictions," he said. "That is why I wrote to the prime minister two weeks ago, because I could see the problem with schools and I thought it needed leadership and consensus. I privately offered to do what I could to build that consensus. That is the offer that was not taken up."

Starmer's letter, now published, was sent to Johnson and Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, with Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey copied in. Long-Bailey was the so-called "Corbyn continuity" candidate of the "left" during the recent Labour leadership election.

The letter begins by declaring of a recent statement by Williamson on the reopening of schools, "It was an important statement and I fully endorse it."

The rest of the message stresses that Labour "fully support[s] the wider opening of schools as soon as is feasibly possible," but adds, "I am sure that as Prime Minister you will share my concern that without a stronger consensus of professionals and parents behind the wider opening of schools, some parents will choose not to comply and the issue will become even more socially divisive."

To smother any such social divisions, Starmer offered a meeting between himself, Long-Bailey, Williamson and Johnson to "explore how that consensus can be achieved in the shortest possible timeframe."

At the end of his letter, he defines his aim of establishing a "national consensus" through a coming together of "business, employers [and] trade unions", i.e., all those who have already been collaborating with the government.

He reiterates the mission statement of the Labour Party under his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn, as well as himself: "[W]e will continue to play our part in acting in the national interest at a very challenging time for the country."

Johnson responded by echoing Starmer's outraged tone at any suggestion he was not committed to collaboration with Labour—in the "national interest," of course. He replied, "I am surprised that [the Labour leader] should take that tone, since I took the trouble to ring him up, and we had a long conversation in which I briefed him about all the steps that we were taking. He did not offer any dissent at that stage—he thoroughly endorsed our approach, and I believe that he should continue to endorse it today."

The phone call in question was held on May 28 with all the leaders of the opposition, with Johnson outlining his plans for sending infants back to school. Labour dutifully allowed these plans to proceed, despite a huge groundswell of opposition amongst parents and teachers.

The PMQs exchange was testimony both to the weakness of the Tory government and to the complicity of the Labour Party—with Johnson repeatedly pleading with the opposition to "back," "support" and "endorse" him.

By citing their "confidential" letters and closed-door discussions, Johnson and Starmer lifted the lid on their filthy conspiracy against the working class. Whatever pantomime conflict is staged in Parliament, a Labour official stressed after PMQs, "We maintain our commitment to work together and there has been some success. We asked for a 24-hour target on testing and the PM accepted that today, for example. The same was true when we demanded an exit strategy from the lockdown."

Every capitalist party the world over is working together on behalf of the corporations to impose a reckless return to "the new normal" on a hostile population. This must be opposed through the building of a new, socialist party—irreconcilably opposed to the betrayals of Labour and their co-conspirators in the trade unions.

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