

Corbyn was “lectured” by Johnson government on “herd immunity” and said nothing

Chris Marsden
24 August 2020

Jeremy Corbyn gave an interview with the *Tribune* podcast, “A World to Win,” last week, describing events at some point in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic before his removal as Labour leader on April 4.

He explained, “We were involved in meetings with the government throughout the spring of this year and Jon Ashworth and I remember distinctly going to a meeting at the Cabinet Office, where we got a lecture about herd immunity.

“The last time I discussed herd immunity was when I worked on a pig farm 40 years ago. It was absurd that actually [you] would build up herd immunity by allowing people to die. And so, while the government was going into eugenic formulas and discussing all this stuff, they were not making adequate preparations.”

Corbyn and his Shadow Secretary for Health were involved in discussions with the Tories who told him explicitly that theirs was a murderous policy of allowing the coronavirus to develop unchecked in the population with the supposed aim of eventually arriving at herd immunity. He describes this as “eugenic”; that is, a fascist policy for the deliberate elimination of a supposedly undesirable section of the population for the supposed betterment of the species, in this case a vast swathe of the working class, especially the elderly, infirm, and otherwise vulnerable.

When this “herd immunity” policy was made public it provoked widespread outrage that threatened the stability and possibly even the survival of Boris Johnson’s Conservative government.

On March 5, Johnson appeared on ITV’s *This Morning* to explain that “one of the theories is, that perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures.”

This “theory” provided the rationale for the government’s refusal to take any measures to contain the virus. On March 11, Dr. David Halpern, a member of Whitehall’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), told the BBC that at some undefined “point” the government would want to isolate “at-risk groups so that they basically don’t catch the disease

and by the time they come out of their cocooning, herd immunity’s been achieved in the rest of the population.”

On March 12, at a Downing Street press conference, Johnson declared, “I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.” Sir Patrick Vallance, the government’s chief scientific adviser, declared, “It’s not possible to stop everyone getting it and it’s also not desirable because you want some immunity in the population to protect ourselves in the future.”

A Sky News journalist noted that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had suggested a possible infection rate of 70 percent and asked Sir Chris Whitty, the government’s chief medical advisor, what percentage of the UK population the government estimated will be infected and how many you “think will actually die.” Whitty replied, “Actually, our top number for our reasonable worst-case scenario is higher than the chancellor’s. In fact, our top planning assumption would be up to 80 percent of the population being infected... the overall mortality rate in our view is 1 percent or less overall, although higher in older and vulnerable groups and lower in other groups.”

As the WSWS reported at the time, “Based on 60 percent of the UK’s 66.5 million population, acquiring ‘herd immunity’ would mean around 40 million people catching COVID-19, with around 8 million becoming severe or critical cases and needing treatment in hospital. If Whitty’s ‘reasonable worst-case scenario’ of 80 percent infection comes true, and with just a 1 percent death rate, 500,000 people would die.”

The outrage among scientists and, more significant still, in the working class, was so explosive that within three days Health Secretary Matt Hancock was lying through his teeth promising that “herd immunity” was not the government’s goal: “Our goal is to protect life.”

Just one day later, a leaked document from Public Health England (PHE) meant for senior National Health Service doctors and officials again exposed this lie. It revealed that PHE expected the UK’s coronavirus epidemic to last one year and require the hospitalisation of up to 7.9 million people.

It took another week of mounting public anger to force the government to belatedly impose a national lockdown March 23,

a delay that cost tens of thousands of lives. Those deaths are the criminal responsibility of the Johnson government. What is now clear is that Corbyn, due to his silence, was their partner in crime.

Corbyn doesn't even bother to say when the government "lectured" him on "herd immunity," or to explain why we only hear of this months after the event. He is not asked to do so by his interlocutor, *Tribune*'s Grace Blakeley, a title bought in 2018 by the Democratic Socialist of America publication, *Jacobin*.

Blakeley was intent on making a desperate effort to fashion Corbyn as a modern-day "King across the water" —a noble fighter for socialism deposed by enemies too foul, numerous, and powerful to overcome. And Corbyn played to this narrative. Speaking of his first appearance in parliament as party leader in 2015, he told Blakeley, "I looked around and there weren't too many people that I'd call close political friends. In fact, there were about 15 of them out of the 650 MPs there... There are people in the Labour Party that don't want change, that didn't want that change. I was faced by a great deal of hostility from the very beginning."

This should not have been a surprise to him. Corbyn did not proceed on the basis that Labour MPs would ruthlessly oppose any move away from a pro-business agenda of austerity, militarism, and war because he had no genuine intention of fighting for such a shift. If he did, then he would have based himself on the hundreds of thousands of workers and youth that flooded into the party, and on broader forces in the working class, in a fight against his MPs. Instead he protected the Blairites at every turn, insisting that his overarching goal was to preserve "party unity." The result was Corbyn's resounding defeat in the December 2019 general election and handing over leadership of the party to Sir Keir Starmer.

The specific intention of Blakeley was to plead with those who are deserting Labour in disgust not to give up on the party, after the disastrous failure of Corbyn's efforts to push it to the left. She closes an accompanying piece, "What I learned from Jeremy Corbyn": "In 2017, the socialist movement in Britain came so close to power—perhaps closer than at any other point in history. We may be disappointed, discouraged and disillusioned after the election defeat and Starmer's ascent. But figures like Jeremy Corbyn and Tony Benn spent their entire lives fighting for socialism—inside and outside the Labour Party. Now is not the time to give up."

Corbyn shares this aim of maintaining Labour's control of the working class: "When asked about the one request he would like to make of [new Labour leader Sir] Keir Starmer, Jeremy responded 'to always be proud of the fact that Labour is a socialist party'."

Blakeley knows how stupid such an appeal to Starmer sounds, so provides an instant apologia: "On the face of it, this assertion is open to challenge. The Parliamentary Labour Party contains just as many ardent anti-socialists as socialists. But it

is more of a call to action than a statement of fact."

It most certainly is not a call to action. Corbyn's entire record in office was dedicated to opposing any action by the working class, not just against the Blairites, but also against the Tories. To this end Corbyn agreed to weeks of Brexit talks with then Prime Minister Theresa May in April 2019 to achieve "national unity to deliver the national interest." His latest admission on his secret talks on "herd immunity" prove that he extended the same political service to Johnson during a yet more dangerous crisis.

In his last parliamentary appearance as party leader, March 25, Corbyn said of Labour's approach to the pandemic, "Our immediate task as the Opposition is to help arrest the spread of the coronavirus, support the government's public health efforts while being constructively critical where we feel it is necessary to improve the official response."

Support for the Johnson government combined with only the most "constructive criticism" has become Starmer's mantra—one drawn up for him by Mr Corbyn.

The Corbynites have no intention of changing their spots. Speaking to Rupert Murdoch's *Times Radio*, Corbyn's main ally, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, was asked by John Pienaar about Starmer's leadership "style" during the pandemic.

"I think Keir's got this exactly right," McDonnell replied. "He's approached the government in a constructive way—and we've got to get through this crisis together..." By occasionally pointing to the government's "failures," "Keir's offering that alternative... He's taking this government on."

Even this ringing endorsement was not enough for McDonnell. Asked whether Starmer is a "proud socialist", he replied, "Keir has made it clear he's a socialist... The issue is, what does socialism mean in the 21st century? And the ten-point plan he put forward to be elected as leader was 21st-century socialism... We're on the same page."

Anyone who still maintains a lingering belief that Corbyn, McDonnell, and the rest ever offered an alternative to the Blairites and the Tories, should survey the political wreckage of the Labour left. It is time for the working class to strike out on a new road of genuinely socialist struggle, and to recognise that the few remaining Corbynites are just as much their opponents as Starmer, Johnson, and their ilk.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)