

Scottish National Party oversaw COVID-19 disaster

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According to the latest YouGov/*Times* opinion polls, 79 percent of respondents in Scotland believe First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is doing “well” or “fairly well” in her handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

By contrast, the same percentage think Prime Minister Boris Johnson is doing “badly” or “fairly badly.” Approval ratings for the pair’s respective governments are similar—79 percent approval for the Scottish government, 73 percent disapproval for the UK government.

From the beginning of the pandemic, Sturgeon’s media presentation was more effective than Johnson’s. She fronted daily press conferences on the progress of the virus, coming across as relatively serious, while portraying herself—with the assistance of a pliant media—as relatively down to earth and possessing a grasp of factual issues. Johnson, by contrast, shut down his government’s daily briefings in June, rarely appeared on them anyway and cannot open his mouth without proving himself a dangerous liar and fool.

Yet the governments formed by Johnson’s Conservatives and Sturgeon’s Scottish National Party (SNP) have rolled out, and continue to pursue, near identical policies with regard to the pandemic. These have resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, mainly of a generation of the elderly and most vulnerable. This has even led to Scottish police already investigating care homes, which suffered especially large numbers of deaths. By late June, a special Scottish Crown Office unit had begun inquiries into 238 coronavirus fatalities, including 177 in care homes.

It should be noted that Sturgeon attended several meetings of the Tory government’s Emergency COBRA committee held in the Cabinet Office at Downing Street, to discuss the ruling elite’s response as the pandemic took hold. Sturgeon attended her first COBRA on March 2, with the Johnson government committed to its herd immunity strategy of the mass infection of the population.

Comparing death rates between UK regions is problematic since England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all use somewhat different techniques; there are differing delays in records emerging and so on. There is also powerful political

pressure to continually reduce the death toll and massage the figures. But the picture that repeatedly emerges is of a generally disastrous and murderous response to the pandemic.

To take one measure, as of August 26, according the Public Health England (PHE), there were 41,465 deaths within 28 days of a positive COVID-19 test across the UK. Of these, 36,818, (89 percent of the total) occurred in England, 2,494 (six percent) in Scotland, 1,594 (four percent) in Wales and 559 (one percent) in Northern Ireland.

England accounts for 84.3 percent of the UK population, while Scotland’s is around one tenth of that at about 8.4 percent, Wales represents 4.7 percent, and Northern Ireland 2.8 percent, so the Scottish death rate is somewhat lower but disastrous nonetheless. If Scotland had the same population as England, COVID-19 deaths would be at least 24,000.

A tally of excess deaths to the middle of June, released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on August 5, produced a revealing set of figures. According to the ONS, the UK as a whole has registered the highest increase in its death rate this year of all European countries at 6.9 percent—compared with the next highest Spain (6.7 percent), Belgium (3.9 percent) and Sweden (2.3 percent).

Within the UK, England showed a 7.5 percent increase, compared with Scotland’s 5.1 percent, Wales’s 2.8 percent and Northern Ireland’s two percent. The Scottish figure was therefore the third worst in Europe, behind England and the UK, despite Scotland’s relatively dispersed population, outside of the main populated central belt between Glasgow and Dundee.

Putting numbers on the percentages, PHE recorded 53,238 excess deaths in England since late March, of which 49,201 (92.4 percent) referred to COVID-19 on the death certificate. The National Records of Scotland registered 4,813 excess deaths since March, of which 86 percent were attributed by the death certificate to COVID-19.

By these measures, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Scotland has been utterly devastating and of a piece, giving due regard to geography and population, to its

impact in England and throughout the UK.

The impact on the elderly in Scottish care homes underscores the point. Repeated counts have concluded that 46 percent of all coronavirus-linked deaths in Scotland took place in care homes. To the end of July, a total of 2,335 excess deaths occurred in these settings.

This mirrors events in England. Precise comparable figures are not available, but by July the BBC was reporting a vast figure of around 30,000 excess deaths in care homes in England and Wales in comparison with 2019. Of these, according to the ONS, 19,394 mentioned COVID-19 on the death certificate—around 50 percent of coronavirus-related deaths in Scotland and England.

As the pandemic crisis developed, both governments followed a policy of releasing elderly hospital patients from hospitals into care homes in a manner which can only be described as homicidal. To the extent there are differences between Scotland and England, the level of government culpability is, thus far, even more fully exposed in Scotland.

Earlier this month, it emerged that at least five Scottish health boards transferred patients who had already tested positive for COVID-19 into care homes. The Scottish government had previously admitted that 1,431 *untested* hospital patients were moved to care homes between March and April this year, as the pandemic crisis deepened.

According to the *Sunday Post*, at least 300 elderly hospital patients were in fact tested prior to being moved to care homes. Of these, it has now been confirmed that 37 had tested positive, from figures released by Ayrshire and Arran, Grampian, Tayside, Fife and Lanarkshire health boards.

NHS Lothian and NHS Highland failed to respond to the *Post*'s freedom of information requests. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said it released 752 patients into care homes but provided no further details. The health board mandarins overseeing Scotland's largest population centre—and including Inverclyde, with the highest concentration of deaths—claimed it would be too expensive to check records to see which patients had tested positive.

Allyson Pollock, a professor of public health at Newcastle University, likened the move to “putting a lit match to dry tinder and starting a forest fire because we know that infection control measures weren't good in care homes, we know care homes were understaffed and we know that older people are very vulnerable to COVID-19.”

The Scottish government was directly responsible for these criminal actions. Scottish Health Secretary Jeane Freeman wrote to the health boards in April praising them for exceeding the “challenging targets” set by the government for clearing hospital beds. Asked to move 900 “delayed discharge” patients—people in hospital and requiring care but not necessarily at the level provided in a hospital—the health

boards had moved 920.

Nick Kempe, a former head of Glasgow City Council's older people's service, told the *Post*, “The Health Secretary's letter shows the Scottish Government put enormous pressure on hospitals to discharge patients. The letter also said it remains of paramount importance to free up hospital beds. There is no mention of risk here at all and it appears clear that any consideration of risk was secondary to the paramount importance of getting people out of hospitals. That explains how infected people were sent into care homes, and this is where responsibility lies for a large proportion of deaths.”

Sturgeon has now resorted to desperate parliamentary evasions. Speaking during First Minister's Questions this week, she claimed the Scottish Government was still “awaiting analysis” from Public Health Scotland on the number of people who were discharged from hospitals into care homes who “may have had the virus.” Sturgeon has refused to commission an interim report into the coronavirus deaths, seeking instead to delay launching a full public inquiry until after the next Scottish parliamentary elections, due in May 2021.

Sturgeon has also refused to explain when she found out about transfers of COVID-19 positive patients. The Scottish government refused a Freedom of Information request from the Scottish Tenants Federation for February and March minutes of SNP government's top level so-called “Resilience Room” meetings, which were attended by ministers, doctors, scientists, local government representatives and logistics experts. According to the *Herald*, “There were nine such meetings led by officials and eight of ministers.”

What response the SNP government did give reveals the extraordinary nervousness in ruling circles of the implications of these decisions becoming apparent to working people. A statement conceded, “Disclosure of these internal discussions between Ministers would be likely to have the effect of undermining the Government's position and thus the effectiveness of the decision, which would not be in the public interest.”



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