

Johnson UK government rejected scientific advisers' call for temporary national lockdown in September

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Within hours of Prime Minister Boris Johnson announcing new limited anti-COVID-19 measures Monday evening, documents published by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) confirmed that every single proposal from Johnson was based on rejecting advice from his own advisers.

In a televised speech from Downing Street, Johnson ruled out a national lockdown, saying it “would do a great deal of extra harm to our economy.”

Earlier on Monday, he announced in Parliament that new “Local COVID Alert Levels”—Medium, High and Very High—will be implemented in different areas of the country depending on infection rates. They came into action Wednesday.

Johnson was forced to announce the rear-guard measures in the face of a massive escalation of COVID-19 infections and deaths over the last weeks—the result of his premature ending of the March national lockdown and reckless opening of the economy from June.

He told MPs, “This morning, the deputy chief medical officer set out the stark reality of the second wave of the virus. The number of cases has quadrupled in the last three weeks. There are now more people in hospital with COVID than when we went into lockdown on 23 March, and deaths are already rising.”

The SAGE documents are a political bombshell, showing that the rises in infections, hospitalisations and deaths Johnson cited were entirely the result of the Tories' refusal to implement even the temporary and limited national lockdown scientists advised nearly a month ago.

On September 17, SAGE said that the government's proposals for curfews in bars, pubs, cafes and restaurants were “likely to have a marginal impact”. A week later the

government introduced a fairly meaningless 10pm curfew on all hospitality venues in England.

On September 21, SAGE warned that “a package of measures is required urgently” or the UK would face a “very large epidemic with catastrophic consequences”. It advised that “single interventions by themselves are unlikely to be able to bring the R [Reproduction value of COVID-19] below one”.

SAGE called for a two-week “circuit-breaker” lockdown across the whole of England. This was one of a list of five measures that “should be considered for immediate introduction”. It was “likely to have similar levels of effectiveness as national lockdown in Spring” and bring the R below 1, albeit only temporarily. SAGE also called for the banning of all contact inside homes with members of other households, closing all bars, restaurants, cafes, indoor gyms, and hairdressers and requiring all university and college teaching to take place online.

It urged rapid interventions that “should not be applied in too specific a geographical area.”

The measures advised by SAGE fell way below a full lockdown, but such was the Tories' determination to enforce their herd immunity agenda that every measure was rejected bar one—which was for advice to be issued to the population that all who can work from home should do so.

Over a month passed before the government finally responded with its ineffectual three-tier localised intervention plan.

Most of the UK will be placed under the Medium tier that maintains current national restrictions, including preventing more than six people gathering in a social setting.

Even the “Very High Risk” tier merely closes pubs and

bars, with “gastropubs” able to remain open if they serve “substantial meals”. Households are banned from mixing indoors but can meet outside in a public space. As it stands, just one area of England—Merseyside—is set to be placed under the third tier, despite infections soaring in every part of the country. Yesterday another 17,234 new infections were recorded and 143 deaths.

Speaking alongside Johnson in Downing Street, even England’s chief medical officer, Professor Chris Whitty, indicated the disagreements among scientists advising the government. Airing concerns that new measures would not stop the spread of coronavirus, he said, “I am not confident, and nor is anyone confident, that the tier 3 proposals for the highest rates, if we did the absolute base case and nothing more, would be enough to get on top of it.”

The tier system is a ruse to give the impression that measures are being put in place to stop the spread of the disease. Statements from government ministers within hours exposed it as a fraud. Yesterday Health Secretary Matt Hancock said, “We do not rule out further restrictions in the hospitality, leisure, entertainment or personal care sectors. But retail, schools and universities will remain open.”

In refusing to implement the necessary measures required to stop the spread of the pandemic, Johnson’s only concern is the profit interests of the corporations. Moreover, he is in thrall to MPs from his own party who for weeks have attacked, to the point of threatening a rebellion, even limited measures that hinder the operation of big business. On Monday, Tory MP Philip Davies responded to Johnson’s announcement by denouncing “a constant blizzard of arbitrary rules which will only serve to collapse the economy and destroy businesses and jobs”.

The previous week had been dominated by talk that Tory MPs were looking at options as to who could replace Johnson as prime minister. Chancellor Rishi Sunak, who has made repeated statements in opposition to lockdown measures, is emerging as the favoured candidate.

At the end of the month, Sunak will end the Jobs Furlough Scheme in which the government paid up to 80 percent of millions of workers’ wages to facilitate national lockdown measures. It will be replaced by a six months Job Support Scheme, under which the government will pay a maximum of 67 percent of the wages of workers employed by firms that must close as the result of any restrictions. When other elements such as National Insurance contributions are taken into account, employers will be asked to pay around 40 percent of employees’

wages. Poverty and mass unemployment is threatened, as the vast majority will refuse to pay up and sack anyone who is not essential to stay afloat.

The Manchester Airport Group (MAG) announced this week that it will lose 900 roles due to the new scheme meaning the state is providing a “much smaller contribution to meeting payroll costs”.

Johnson admitted in parliament that there were voices stating that “we should abandon the fight against COVID, stand aside, let nature take her course”. He responded that “if we were to follow that course and let the virus rip, the bleak mathematics dictate that we would suffer... an intolerable death toll...”

What a fraud. Johnson, his chief adviser Dominic Cummings, and chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance all advocated herd immunity--up to the point when they were forced to change tack and order the March 23 national lockdown--in the face of massive public opposition. Johnson is responsible for a death toll already above 65,000, according to reliable estimates.

The Labour Party has played a critical role in propping up a beleaguered Johnson, backing his every reactionary measure for months under former leader Jeremy Corbyn and then, from April, Sir Keir Starmer. To cover his own badly exposed rear, Starmer yesterday called in the “national interest” for a “circuit breaker” temporary lockdown “in line with Sage’s recommendation”. However, even then Starmer said that “this would not mean schools closing,” with his lockdown proposal timed to coincide with half-term break later this month “to minimise disruption”. Answering a question on how much his proposal would cost business, Starmer replied, “The broad answer is that if we don’t do this the cost to the economy will be much greater in the long run... if the *R* continues out of control it will be the economy that pays in the long run, so this will actually save money in the long run.”



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