

Johnson announces next stage in reopening economy as Covid variants spread in UK

Robert Stevens
11 May 2021

Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave the go-ahead for the reopening of virtually the entire economy from May 17 in a Downing Street press conference Monday.

Johnson authorised moving to Stage 3, as part of his “irreversible” roadmap to end lockdown. In what he described as “the single biggest step on our roadmap,” he said that from next Monday, indoor mixing of households will be allowed, with people able to meet in groups of six or from two different households. Thirty people will be permitted to meet outside. Cinemas, theatres, concert halls, museums, galleries, bingo halls, casinos, bowling alleys amusement arcades and snooker halls will all open. In secondary schools and colleges, not wearing a face coverings in classrooms or communal areas will be sanctioned. University students who are not studying on practical courses—those have already returned to face-to-face learning—are to return to their term-time accommodation and receive in-person teaching.

The hospitality industry can reopen, with eating and drinking inside pubs and restaurants allowed. Hotels, hostels and B&Bs will be free to have guests stay from anywhere in the UK. Oversea holidays are allowed, with a “green list” of countries that can be visited, including Portugal—a major summer destination for British holidaymakers.

Care home residents can have five named visitors and make visits out of the home.

People will be able to attend sports matches and outdoor concerts, with restricted attendance, while indoor events will be permitted at 50 percent capacity up to 1,000 people. Soccer’s Premier League are permitted up to 10,000 home support spectators in attendance for the last two rounds of fixtures.

The official Covid-19 threat level is being downgraded from four to three—meaning the virus is

still in circulation but is under control.

Johnson declared, “[W]e are taking a step towards that moment when we learn to live responsibly with Covid—when we cease eventually to rely on detailed government edicts, and make our own decisions—based on the best scientific advice—about how to protect our families and those around us.”

None of what is taking place is based on “scientific advice”. This is a government whose “herd immunity” agenda resulted in the social murder of over 150,000 people.

Johnson stood next to England’s chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, who warned that there was “reason to be very careful about” the B. 1.617.2 variant, which originated in India.

Research published by Public Health England this week found B.1.617.2 was present in at least 520 people, double the amount detected in the previous seven days. Another 200 suspected cases of the virus are being investigated. As with all such research based on testing and lab work, these findings were already at least a week out of date.

The B. 1.617.2 variant is much more transmissible than even the B.1.1.7 variant, which originated in Kent, south east England, is more infectious than its predecessor and is now the dominant strain nationally and in much of the world. The B. 1.617.2 variant also spreads much faster than those strains originating in Brazil and South Africa and faster than two other Indian variants—B.1.617 and B.1.617.3.

Whitty said of the B. 1.617.2 variant, “This is actually spreading from very small amounts but it is beginning to spread in certain parts of the country and we need to keep quite a close eye on this.”

He warned, “What we know with all the variants is that things can come out of a blue sky—you’re not

expecting it and then something happens... That is what happened with B.1.1.7 and that has happened to India with this variant as well... I think our view is that this is a highly transmissible variant, at least as transmissible as the B.1.1.7 variant.”

Whitty’s comments came just hours before the World Health Organization (WHO) classified B.1.617—which has already spread to more than 30 countries—as a ‘variant of global concern’. The mutation had to be elevated to this level from its previous ‘variant of interest’ due to its ability to spread more easily than other variants.

Underscoring that the global pandemic is nowhere near its end, with the vast majority of the world’s population unvaccinated, the WHO also gave three other variants from the UK, South Africa and Brazil the same designation.

Over the last seven days the UK, despite a vaccination rollout that has seen nearly 18 million people receiving a second dose, saw 15,367 new cases. This was a 3 percent rise on the 14,904 cases during the previous seven days.

The UK is home to a substantial Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani population.

The dangers of the reckless reopening was underscored as scientists estimated that B.1.617.2 is the cause of over 40 percent of all new coronavirus cases in the capital, London. On the day Johnson and Whitty gave the all-clear to Stage 3 and abandoning all restrictions, surge Covid testing was taking place in a fourth council area in London. Testing went ahead in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea after cases of the South African variant were found in the Notting Hill district.

Epidemiologist Dr Deepti Gurdasani from Queen Mary University, London told the *GMB* programme Monday, “Cases of this new [Indian] variant are doubling every week within the UK while other variants are dropping. Overall cases have been dropping, which shows that even with current restrictions in place, this variant is growing very, very quickly. In London, 50 percent of cases now are no longer the so-called Kent variant.”

There is mounting evidence that B.1.617.2 is present all over the UK, as among the cases identified in London only a fifth resulted from travel to India. Fifteen percent of new cases in the North West of

England and over 10 percent in the East of England and South East England are attributed to the Indian variant. Surge testing is due to start in Nottingham—but not for two weeks—after a rise in Indian variant cases.

The corporate media were jubilant at the announcement that lockdown is being ditched before May is out. The *Daily Express* summed their attitude up with a headline, “Free at Last”.

Johnson strongly hinted that all remaining social distancing could be done away with from June 21, saying, “It looks to me as though we may be able to dispense with the one metre plus rule...”

Even this is not enough for the rapacious appetites of big business, which stepped up demands that restrictions must be ditched sooner. John Foster, director of policy at the Confederation of British Industry, said, “It’s encouraging to see the roadmap remains on track... Meanwhile, the Government can inject further momentum into the recovery by providing companies with clarity on outstanding issues, including social distancing, covid status certificates and the future of workplace testing beyond June 21. Getting answers will help business cement the gains so far, laying strong foundations for the recovery, and support the planned full reopening of the economy without delay.”

Pressure is being applied incessantly by the most right-wing sections of the Tory Party, including around 70 MPs in the Tory’s Covid Recovery Group (CRG) faction. Leading CRG figure Mark Harper wrote in the *Telegraph* ahead of Johnson’s announcement, “There needs to be early confirmation that social distancing will be completely scrapped from 21 June so that businesses can plan to fully reopen and ensure that we are truly on the ‘one way road to freedom’ that the Prime Minister promised.”



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact