

# British Medical Journal says UK government's COVID-19 response created “maelstrom of avoidable harm”

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On Tuesday, the *BMJ* (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) accused the British government of having unleashed “a maelstrom of avoidable harm,” including the deaths of up to 150,000 people “who died earlier than they might have” as a result of its disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive editor Kamran Abbasi made this damning indictment in a comment on the testimony given last week by Dominic Cummings, former adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson. His account, Abbasi writes, leads to “the inescapable conclusion... that the disastrous manner in which the government is run is a major contributor to excess deaths in the UK, although Johnson persists with his denials.”

Cummings' evidence confirmed that the Johnson government “slept on the job,” “relied on flawed pandemic modelling,” “sought a narrow caucus of expert views and kept them confidential,” “prioritised the economy over health,” “failed to protect vulnerable people in care homes and lied about it,” “ignored the potential of airborne spread,” “delayed mass testing,” “left international borders uncontrolled” and “oversaw a calamitous and costly procurement strategy for personal protective equipment.”

Britain “was ill prepared and had no pandemic plan, and even if it did it was a misguided plan that pursued herd immunity and was accepting of a large number of deaths. Johnson was dragged into each lockdown, particularly the first in late March 2020, and he delayed the key one in September by ignoring his own scientists and colleagues and backing cherry picked supporters of herd immunity.”

The *BMJ* is identifying a record of staggering criminality, as confirmed by Cummings. Johnson and his collaborators, according to Cummings' account, were actively considering the deaths of 500,000 people, and up to 800,000 in one scenario, in pursuit of herd immunity through infection. He confirmed that the prime minister shouted he would rather “let the bodies pile high in their thousands” than implement another lockdown at the end of October, precisely because he “prioritised the economy over health.” While he was still

writing COVID-19 off as a “scare story,” Johnson even suggested in Trumpian fashion that he be injected “live on TV with coronavirus so everyone realises it's nothing to be frightened of.”

Cummings' testimony painted a picture of a truly monstrous ruling class—stupid, vicious, greedy, utterly unmoved by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and living in “surreal isolation,” to use Abbasi's phrase. Yet the *BMJ* is almost alone in even acknowledging the significance of such an extraordinary event. This is the first piece of serious commentary on Cummings' appearance outside of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

It is also the second time the *BMJ*—a prestigious medical journal of over 150 years' standing—has published a major attack on the government for its pandemic policy. The journal's editorial of February 4 this year argued that “At the very least, covid-19 might be classified as ‘social murder.’”

This devastating verdict—referring to a concept first elaborated by Friedrich Engels—was entirely ignored by the media, the Labour Party and the trade unions. And it is likely that the same fate will befall this latest editorial. How could it be otherwise? All of these organisations collectively did everything they could to blunt the impact of Cummings' revelations.

For their part, the nominally left and liberal outlets, with the *Guardian* in pole position, used Cummings' own reactionary politics and break with Johnson as an excuse to dismiss his statements as inconsequential and embittered ravings. Neither the trade unions nor the Labour Party made a single significant statement, such that John Rentoul in the *Independent* described Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's performance against Johnson thus: “It wasn't exactly like being savaged by a dead sheep; more like being asked trick questions by a sheep that was only barely alive.”

None of them can acknowledge the crimes admitted by Cummings without indicting themselves. As the *BMJ*

correctly notes of the essentials in Cummings' revelations, "None of this is news, at least to close observers."

The UK's murderous programme of herd immunity was a conspiracy carried out in plain sight. It relied less on secrecy than on the complicity of every supposed oppositional or independent force in the country. The Labour Party, first under Jeremy Corbyn and now under Sir Keir Starmer, has operated as a de facto coalition partner of the Conservatives in the name of providing only "constructive criticism" in pursuit of the "national interest." The trade unions participate in more tripartite meetings with the government and the employers than there are days in the week. The national newspapers of every political stripe have for the most part loyally parroted government propaganda, keeping all criticism within safe limits.

These organisations now have more reason than ever to bury this history along with the dead. Once again, they are lining up behind Johnson's latest efforts to end the last vestiges of public health restrictions, in the teeth of a third wave of the pandemic.

A week after Cummings' appearance before parliament's health and science committees, with cases of the highly infectious (Indian) Delta variant doubling every week, Johnson felt free to announce, "I can see nothing in the data at the moment that means we can't go ahead with Step 4 [ending all restrictions on June 21]."

Labour and the unions have so thoroughly suppressed opposition to Johnson that the most significant inconvenience the prime minister now faces in enforcing his agenda comes from Cummings' pursuit of his own right-wing authoritarian fantasies. The former adviser told MPs, "In a well-run entity what would have happened here is essentially, in my opinion, you would have had a kind of dictator in charge of this." This dictator would have "as close to kingly authority as the state has legally to do stuff... pushing the barriers of legality."

The *BMJ* concludes its editorial by posing the question, "How much of this maelstrom of harm was avoidable with the right leadership?" Railing against the "unpractised Brexit loyalists" brought to prominence by Johnson and Cummings, it calls for "public accountability" to be established through convening a public inquiry immediately, rather than in a year's time according to Johnson's timetable.

But within the existing political set-up, there is no such thing as a "right leadership" and no possibility of public accountability. Every element of the British political establishment, from the Remain and Leave factions of the Tories to the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy has had a hand in this crime and its cover-up. An inquiry organised by Johnson and the judiciary, whenever it is held,

offers no remedy for this essential problem. The British ruling class, veterans of the Hillsborough, Hutton, Chilcot and Grenfell inquiries, leads the world in the use of this mechanism to protect the guilty.

The same is true internationally. Not a single government anywhere has produced leaders who fought for a scientific, humane, globally coordinated response to the pandemic. The opposite is the case: the common policy has been one of nationalism and social murder in defence of private profits and fortunes, leading to the deaths of at least 3.6 million people officially and more realistically in the region of 7 to 10 million.

Far from changing course, governments the world over are intent on ending containment measures so that the exploitation of the working class can be resumed at full throttle. Meanwhile the lie of a Wuhan lab origin of the pandemic is amplified to conceal the responsibility of the world's ruling elites for the pandemic's spread, while paving the way for military aggression against China.

The *BMJ*'s call for "the right leadership" to deal with the ongoing pandemic is in reality a revolutionary question. The universally brutal and incompetent response to the pandemic reflects a world capitalist system in a state of advanced decay, which serves the interests of an infinitesimally small, super-rich oligarchy and threatens the livelihoods and lives of millions. What is required to finally bring an end to the suffering wrought by COVID-19 is for the working class to secure its leadership of society. By taking power the working class will create the conditions to ensure that public health is given priority over private profit and bring to justice Johnson and other political and corporate criminals.



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