

UK parliament's pandemic report: The first draft of a political whitewash

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The joint report of the House of Commons health and social care and science and technology select committees on the UK government's pandemic response is a contemptible fraud.

Media reporters and editorial boards breathlessly proclaiming the document “damning”, “devastating” and the start of a “reckoning” are participants in an insidious lie.

The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest catastrophe inflicted on the global population by capitalist governments since the Second World War. Britain, a leading proponent of the policy of herd immunity and the location of over 160,000 deaths so far, is home to some of its chief architects. Today, they are presiding over a policy of mass infection, claiming thousands more lives, including those of children, and threatening the world with the development of dangerous new variants.

Every line in the joint report is crafted to minimise and obscure this reality. A partial admission of some “mistakes” is used to conceal what were deliberate crimes of staggering proportion and consequence. Its docile agenda is summed up in the chin-stroking title, “Coronavirus: lessons learned to date”.

The myth of “groupthink” and false “flu” modelling

The authors' central claim is that the disaster in the UK was the result of “groupthink” between government ministers and scientific advisers, who were all thinking in terms of a flu pandemic rather than SARS-CoV-2. They write, “The UK's pandemic planning was too narrowly and inflexibly based on a flu model which failed to learn the lessons from SARS, MERS and Ebola.”

Falsehood is piled on distortion, is piled on omission.

Previous exercises for a flu pandemic were not cause for comfort or complacency. Exercise Cygnus, carried out in 2016 and referenced in the report, warned of 200,000 to 400,000 excess deaths. Exercise Winter Willow in 2007, and the 2011 UK Influenza Preparedness Strategy it informed, warned of anything from 210,000 to multiple millions of deaths.

As to the claim that a different type of viral pandemic was unforeseen, the report omits any reference to Exercise Alice, carried out in 2016, which envisaged a response to an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV). The 23-page report warned of the rapid development of a “large scale outbreak” and recommended increased stockpiles of PPE, an extensive contact tracing system and the screening of travellers from abroad.

Not only were the warnings of all these modelling exercises ignored, but the National Health Service, social care sector and public health infrastructure were dismantled to the point they could not possibly respond. The report makes only one passing reference to “limited latent capacity” in the NHS. This is unsurprising, given that the health and

social care committee's chair is former Tory health secretary Jeremy Hunt, who oversaw savage cuts and sweeping privatisations to the NHS over six years under then prime minister David Cameron.

The “following the science” lie

The second line of defence offered to the government is that its strategy “reflected official scientific advice”. The policy of seeking to “moderate the speed of infection through the population—flattening the curve... was pursued until March 23 [the first lockdown] because of scientific advice the government received, not in spite of it.”

This is a libel on serious, conscientious scientists, who warned from an early stage that far reaching public health measures were needed to avert a catastrophe. These warnings informed the writings of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which published a statement on the *World Socialist Web Site* on February 28 calling for a “globally coordinated response” and sounding the alarm that “the danger cannot be overstated.”

The joint report refers repeatedly to the “more emphatic and rigorous approach to stopping the spread of the virus as adopted by many East and South East Asian countries”, carefully avoiding any direct reference to China's successes in containing the disease through a lockdown that was anathema to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government.

The government listened only to the scientists it wanted to hear, including its foremost advisers Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Scientific Officer Sir Patrick Valance and members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

Their actions were so disgraceful that an “Independent SAGE” group was established in May 2020 to offer an alternative to the government's life-threatening agenda.

Refusing to lock down was not a universally accepted policy, but the only policy acceptable to a government determined to keep profits flowing, even at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. On March 2, three weeks before the eventual lockdown, SAGE told the government COVID-19 was circulating widely and gave an estimate of 250,000 to 500,000 deaths without interventions.

The denial of a “herd immunity” policy

Aware of its inflammatory political implications, the report's authors try to deny that there was ever a consciously pursued herd immunity strategy. The evidence, however, is so overwhelming that they are forced to put

forward a risible narrative best described as “herd immunity by mistake.”

The government’s strategy is described as a “serious error” inspired by a “fatalistic approach,” one which “amounted in practice to accepting that herd immunity by infection was the inevitable outcome.” But the report claims that it would be an “overstatement to say that the Government and its advisers were promoting the acquisition of COVID-19 to accelerate herd immunity in the population.”

No one will be convinced by this. The report even has the nerve to cite Vallance, who said directly on March 12, 2020, “it’s not possible to stop everybody getting it and it’s also actually not desirable because you want some immunity in the population,” only to justify this as him “merely stating what were thought to be the facts of the time.” His political master, Johnson, told reporters days earlier 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.”

The “facts,” as listed by the report, catalogue the woeful results of the government’s own failures—“no firm prospect of a vaccine, limited testing capacity”—and a restatement of its own slanderous rationale for opposing a lockdown, the “widespread view that the public would not accept a lockdown for a significant period.”

The only “fact” which mattered to the Conservative government was the impact of a lockdown on the stock markets. A calculated policy of social murder was implemented to prevent this. It was only abandoned in the face of mass popular anger at the impending collapse of the health service—a delay the report says ranks as “one of the most important public health failures the United Kingdom has ever experienced.”

It also admits, “The discharge of elderly people from NHS hospitals into care homes without having been tested at the beginning of the pandemic—while understandable as the NHS prepared to accept a surge of covid patients—had the unintended consequence of contributing to the spread of infection in care homes.”

What do such anodyne phrases conceal? The report notes, “The former SAGE participant Professor Neil Ferguson told the Science and Technology Committee that if the national lockdown had been instituted even a week earlier “we would have reduced the final death toll by at least a half.” That means a conservative estimate of 26,000 additional deaths. Between 20-30,000 people died in care homes.

Little wonder that the report states pathetically, “It is important to record that all decisions taken during those initial weeks were taken in a fog of uncertainty.”

The apologia for herd immunity during the second wave

By the time of the UK’s second, winter, wave, the report can no longer claim the government was following any scientific advice. These months, which saw 32,000 more deaths than the first wave, are hurriedly passed over. Johnson and his co-conspirators are excused as having been “over-optimistic in their assumption that the worst was behind us during the summer months of 2020.”

In reality, at this stage herd immunity was being so fiercely pursued that Johnson was screaming in October, even as cases rose inexorably thanks to the Delta variant, “No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!” The phrase, still ringing in the ears of every worker in the UK, is not mentioned.

The closing sections of the report are shameless propaganda for the government’s vaccination campaign and an endorsement of the reopening of schools and the economy, the third stage in Johnson’s herd immunity policy of mass infection and death.

Its authors write sickeningly of how “The success of the vaccine

programme has redeemed many of the persistent failings of other parts of the national response” and boast that “The Government presciently identified that a vaccine would be the long-term route out of the pandemic.”

The truth is that the government decided vaccines could be used as a pretext for the scientifically unjustifiable abandonment of public health measures to control and suppress the pandemic, justifying the full reopening of the economy. As the report boasts, “In the UK alone, the successful deployment of effective vaccines has allowed... a resumption of much of normal life”.

In fact, vaccines have not been successfully deployed among the country’s three million children aged 12-15, hundreds of thousands of whom are now infected. The vaccination programme for this age group only began after the full reopening of schools and has so far reached just 10 percent of pupils. A return to “normal life,” with no public health measures, has led to infection rates of at least 40,000 a day, deaths still in the hundreds of every week and a daily average of over 700 COVID hospitalisations, threatening the development of new variants and jeopardising vaccinations worldwide.

The complicity of Labour, the trade unions and the SNP

The joint report is a continuation of the political conspiracy which has kept the Johnson government in the saddle throughout the pandemic. The health and social care and science and technology select committees are led by Tories but are treated as if they are impartial because they include Labour and Scottish National Party MPs.

None of these have spoken out against the document’s conclusions. And nor can they. The Labour Party, together with the trade unions, have been in a de facto alliance with Johnson from the beginning, from then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s secret participation in government discussions on herd immunity to Starmer’s push for school reopenings and support for every significant pandemic-related decision in the name of “constructive criticism.”

The joint report, moreover, reminds the SNP, who try to strike a more independent pose, that the policy of slowing rather than stopping the spread of infection was “adopted by the Governments of all of the nations of the United Kingdom.”

For these wretched organisations, the “lessons learned to date” from the pandemic are that they can get away with murder.

Tuesday’s report is a trailer of the political whitewash that will inevitably be produced by Johnson’s promised public inquiry next year, should it even take place.

For workers, the lessons which must be learned is that ending the pandemic demands a political struggle against the parties of capital, no matter what their formal colouration, and against trade unions dedicated to suppressing such a struggle, by the one social force that can take such a fight forward, the British and international working class.

On October 24, the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the *World Socialist Web Site* are hosting a global online meeting bringing together leading scientists and epidemiologists who will outline the only effective strategy to stamp out COVID-19—eradication, entailing the deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat COVID, coordinated on a global scale. It will make this vital weapon of scientific knowledge the property of workers the world over, represented at the meeting by those involved with rank-and-file committees internationally, who will speak on their experiences during the pandemic, the struggles they have waged, and raise questions for the panel of scientists. The SEP urges workers and young people everywhere to

register for and attend this critical event.



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