

Wellcome Trust director Jeremy Farrar quits science advisory committee over UK government's handling of pandemic

Thomas Scripps
3 November 2021

Sir Jeremy Farrar, director of the multi-billion-pound health research charity, the Wellcome Trust, has resigned from the UK government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

In a statement, he described the “high levels of transmission seen in the UK” as “concerning” and warned, “The COVID-19 crisis is a long way from over, with the global situation deeply troubling.”

He said SAGE had been placed “under huge pressure” throughout the pandemic and that he was stepping down to focus on “our work at Wellcome”, including “the international research effort to end the pandemic” and “ensuring the world is better prepared for inevitable future infectious disease threats”.

Farrar has clashed with the government before. He published a book this July, *Spike: The Virus v The People*, which was critical of many aspects of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's response to the pandemic.

In it, he labels the appointment of Conservative government favourite Dido Harding to lead the dismal test and trace programme as a “grave error”.

Condemning the influence of Oxford University scientist Sunetra Gupta and the anti-lockdown, pro-herd immunity Great Barrington Declaration, he describes it as “ideology parading as science and the science was still nonsense”.

Former Health Secretary Matt Hancock is named as shouldering “a responsibility for the PPE [personal protective equipment] shortages and testing fiasco, among other failings, that contributed to the dreadful epidemics in care homes and hospitals.”

The book decries “The decision on September 21 [2020] not to introduce a circuit-breaker; the wait until November before locking down; the premature lifting of lockdown on December 2. These set the scene for what can only be described as the carnage of January and February 2021.”

Farrar explains that he “seriously considered resigning” from SAGE last September over the government's rollout of

the “Eat Out to Help Out” scheme encouraging people into restaurants, and refusal to implement lockdown-type measures to stem a surge in infections, which he described as a “catastrophe playing out in slow motion”. He writes, “I began to question the point of giving advice to a body that chose not to use it.”

Elsewhere, Farrar has criticised the Tories' making mask-wearing “a party-political issue” by largely refusing to do so in the House of Commons, called for a faster rollout of vaccines among children, and described the delaying of a public inquiry into the pandemic until 2022 as “a disgrace”. He has warned that more resources must be directed to combatting the pandemic, mainly through vaccination, in middle and lower-income countries.

Although Farrar stressed that his departure should not be seen as a new criticism of official policy, it is clear that he and the Wellcome Trust decided they could no longer be associated with the Johnson government. *Sky News* reported that he had been pushing ministers to adopt at least some additional public health measures heading into winter.

Farrar's criticisms of the UK government's pandemic response are correct as far as they go. But they are made by someone who has in more recent months largely endorsed its policy.

That he believes his position as a government advisor is no longer tenable speaks volumes about the dangerous situation, Johnson's intentions and the impossibility of swaying the ruling class to take up any serious scientific policy against the pandemic. The Wellcome director has advocated only minimal mitigation measures, which if adopted would be little more than a cover for the government's programme of letting the virus rip.

He tweeted last month in favour of a “Vaccine Plus” strategy, writing, “Please wear mask[s] public transport now, in shops/indoor spaces, good ventilation, if possible flexible work-times, COVID/Flu vaccine, minor modifications now can prevent rises cases, deaths, new

variants or need for Plan B. It is avoidable.”

Plan B, which the government has no intention of enacting, means such elementary and inadequate measures as mandatory mask-wearing, working from home where possible, and vaccine passports for certain venues.

In a long thread this August, Farrar spelled out his current position on the pandemic, calling for “A public debate on what trade-offs we are willing to accept as a society, in short what amount of illness, hospitalisation & death are we as individuals & as a society willing & may have to accept in the context of available tests, treatments & vaccines & an endemic infection?”

Listing his preferred mitigation measures, he wrote that the public needed to “acknowledge these will not eliminate COVID19. As with many endemic infections we need to use the tools we have some behaviour adaptation, public health, tests, treatments & vaccines to reduce impact & also acknowledge we can’t stop all illness or tragically all COVID deaths.”

Eliminating the disease in the UK, he claimed, was “not possible”.

As the government reopened schools and the economy in summer, Farrar stated, “There is a danger of not opening up and this infection is now a human endemic infection. It’s not going away... and we will have to learn to cope with that.”

This September, he said in an interview with German podcast Pandemia, “I think [in the UK] around a hundred deaths a day, throughout the year, 30,000 deaths a year, in the current situation with the current vaccines, current treatments, current capacity within the system, I think is a level that would have to in the end be acceptable.”

Speaking with the *Guardian* newspaper about his book in July, Farrar declared his “massive respect” for Johnson’s advisers, Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty and Chief Scientific Officer Sir Patrick Vallance, and said of the government’s initial open admission of a herd immunity programme, “I just don’t know how this came about.”

In his resignation statement, Farrar thanked “Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty for outstanding leadership”.

If a friendly critic so thoroughly adapted to the priorities of the Johnson government now feels he no longer has a place among its advisers, then there is not a chance of scientists fighting for the elimination, or even serious suppression, of the virus getting a hearing. Those who remain in the government’s inner circle of advisers are carefully curated to accept and put an expert face on whatever policy Johnson’s cabinet decides is necessary to secure the financial interests of the super-rich.

As the morning news of Farrar’s resignation broke, a special Q&A was organised jointly by BBC *Breakfast* and Radio 4 with Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, Britain’s deputy

chief medical officer. Hosts Sally Nugent and Rachel Burden were clearly taken aback by the deluge of questions from people concerned about the course of the pandemic.

In response, Van-Tam would not even straightforwardly encourage the wearing of masks, for fear of cutting across the government’s “back to normal” narrative. Asked if they would become mandatory in any setting, he responded that this was a matter for ministers, not scientists. Asked about masks in schools he replied, “I think it’s difficult for children in schools with face masks.” Asked whether MPs, on his own definition of where masks were most useful, should be wearing them in the House of Commons, he answered, “I don’t think I’m in a position to judge every type of interaction that happens in every workplace—including the House of Commons.”

Johnson’s claim throughout the pandemic that the government is “following the science” has always been a lie. It is following class interests, above all the pursuit of private profit, and selecting only that scientific advice which is compatible with this single-minded pursuit.

Strong scientific cases have been made, and in the case of China, practically demonstrated, that it is possible to suppress and ultimately eliminate COVID-19. This approach was rejected out of hand by Johnson and most of the world’s governments as posing an unacceptable risk to finance capital. Increasingly this concern stands in the way of even the most basic measures for controlling the virus.

No argument will change their position. The implementation of a scientific policy to end the pandemic and save health and lives depends on its being carried forward by a struggle of the working class, whose interests lie in the protection of lives, not profits.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact