Living with the virus: UK government confirms aim of endemic COVID-19

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"Ultimately our plan, we will, I hope be the first major economy to transition from pandemic to endemic and have an annual vaccination programme."

With these words, former vaccines minister and current education secretary Nadhim Zahawi summarised the criminal COVID policy of the UK government. The British ruling class is racing the world to normalise the unnecessary death and debilitation of tens of thousands of people a year in service to its own economic interests.

The drumbeat from the government and its associates is that public health restrictions, above all lockdowns, are a thing of the past. Last asked about the subject ahead of the COP26 climate summit, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Chancellor Rishi Sunak insisted there was "no evidence whatever to think that any kind of lockdown is on the cards."

Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, representing hospital trusts, told *Times Radio* Sunday, "I think all of us in the NHS [National Health Service] recognise that we are moving from a situation of a pandemic towards an endemic where we need to live with COVID."

He insisted supposedly on behalf of an exhausted workforce whose daily efforts he plays no part in, "the bit I'm really keen for people to understand is that everybody in the NHS absolutely recognises that it's our job to cope as best we can with COVID pressures, without resorting to the very draconian lockdowns that we've had to go through before.'

On Monday, government scientific advisor Dr Mike Tildesley told *Sky News*, "I would hope that, with a very successful vaccination campaign, the idea of a winter lockdown is a long way away."

The government's refusal to implement measures to cut the circulation of the virus comes as tens of thousands (over 70,000 on the estimate of King's College London's ZOE COVID study) are infected every day, and over 7,000 hospitalised and 1,000 killed by the disease every week.

The policy of wilfully endangering lives was given consummate expression by Johnson on Monday, as he paraded through Hexham General Hospital in Northumberland, England without a mask.

Thousands responded with outrage on social media. Rachel Clarke, a palliative care doctor who has published books on end-of-life care, working as a junior doctor and the effect of the first COVID-19 wave on the National Health Service, received over 17,000 likes and nearly 5,000 retweets for a tweet reading, "There are so many people dying of Covid in my trust right now. It makes the sight of Boris Johnson—casually strolling without a mask through Hexham General Hospital today—absolutely sickening."

There is no question that Johnson's provocative appearance was discussed at the highest levels of the Conservative Party, especially given his infamous hospital visit in March 2020 where, he later boasted, he "shook hands with everybody" and where he may have caught the Covid virus that almost claimed his own life. A deliberate decision was made to repeat this spectacle to give the signal to big business that no popular opposition or scientific evidence will move the government from its homicidal policy.

The working class must heed this warning. Johnson's last hospital performance was followed by a devastating wave of infections and death, topped by a second surge last winter after the prime minister declared, "Let the bodies pile high in their thousands."

Vaccination has since significantly reduced the number of hospitalisations and deaths per infection, but the dangers remain extremely severe.

Since the last lockdown began to be lifted with the opening of schools on March 8, over 17,400 people have been killed by COVID-19, according to official

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government figures. Over 13,200 of those deaths came after “Freedom Day” on July 19, at a rate of roughly 118 people per day or over 43,000 a year.

Included in these figures are dozens of children. The government sent all pupils aged 12-15 back to school without vaccinations this September. The vaccination rate for this age group in England is still only 25 percent. As he wished fondly for an endemic virus, Zahawi suggested the UK would not vaccinate under-11s, saying “the evidence says we don’t need to move away from where we are” with the current vaccination policy.

On Monday, newspapers reported that a nine-day-old baby died on October 13 after being born by emergency caesarean section 14 weeks prematurely when her 22-year-old mother become ill with COVID. The child also tested positive for the disease.

The number of people suffering symptoms of Long COVID has increased from 970,000 people on August 1 to 1.2 million people on October 2, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Government ministers and a supportive media have seized on a two-and-a-half week fall in recorded infections to sweep this grisly record under the carpet and promise calmer waters ahead.

This decline should be looked at with scepticism. The number of tests conducted per day fell significantly from mid-September as the test positivity rate rose from 3 to over 5 percent.

Data from the ZOE COVID study suggests a fall, from much higher numbers than the official totals, but the ONS Coronavirus Survey has cases plateauing to October 30. Both show falling rates among children obscuring increases in adult age groups and both place the reproduction (*R*) rate for the virus in the UK very close to 1, as does Imperial College London’s REACT survey.

Official daily case numbers are still well over 30,000. This leaves the UK poised at an extremely high level of infection (roughly one in 50 people) with winter coming and vaccine immunity waning in older sections of society.

Dr Susan Hopkins, chief medical adviser at the UK Health Security Agency, warned Sunday, “We’re still seeing deaths in mainly the unvaccinated population, but increasingly, because of immune waning effects, there are deaths in the vaccinated group as well.”

Last Thursday, the government’s vaccine surveillance report found that more than 3,000 double-jabbed people aged over 70 were hospitalised by COVID-19 in October, and 2,032 were killed. So far, 30 percent of over-80s and 40 percent of over-50s in England have yet to receive a third, “booster” vaccination.

Pressure from COVID is already having a disastrous effect on a broken NHS.

In the same breath as he proclaimed his determination to avoid a lockdown, Hopson admitted that hospital trust executives had “never been so worried… we’re seeing bed occupancy levels, it’s sort of 94, 95, 96 percent at this point, before we’re into peak winter. We’ve not seen that before. That’s unprecedented.”

Hopson pointed to the “accident and emergency pathway.” According to an investigation by the *Independent* newspaper, patients are waiting close to twice as long for an ambulance as they were at the peak of the pandemic. Deaths as a result of ambulance safety incidents are already up 13 percent on 2019.

Government adviser Professor Peter Openshaw warned Monday on Times Radio, “I just don’t think people realise the serious situation that there is out there in the National Health Service hospitals, with so many people on ventilators and over 9,000 people actually in the hospital currently with COVID-19. COVID isn’t done. It’s not over.”

Europe is at the epicentre of a global resurgence of the virus, with the World Health Organisation warning of another half a million deaths on the continent within the next three months. The UK is part of this still raging pandemic and its consequences, including the development of new variants.

Already, the untrammelled spread of the virus in Britain has given rise to the “Delta Plus”, or AY.4.2, variant, thought to be some 10 percent more transmissible than the original Delta. From roughly 6 percent of UK cases in September, the variant had grown to 11.3 percent by the end of October.

Declaring the virus endemic is an acceptance of countless more deaths and years of serious illness to come. This is not inevitable, but the conscious choice of the government, supported by the Labour Party and the trade unions, acting on behalf of the corporations and the super-rich. An opposed policy of elimination can only be implemented through a struggle against these forces by the international working class.

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