

UK: Johnson moves to Plan B measures over Omicron variant amid escalating government crisis

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8 December 2021

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced a move to the government's pandemic "Plan B" in order to deal with the rapidly escalating spread of the Omicron variant.

He made the announcement after Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Parliament that "Omicron is significantly more transmissible than Delta." Delta cases had doubled every seven days but for Omicron "it's between 2.5 and three days."

He warned, "The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) estimates that the number of infections are approximately 20 times higher than the number of confirmed cases, and so the current number of [Omicron] infections is probably closer to 10,000.

"UKHSA also estimate that at the current observed doubling rate of between two and a half and three days, by the end of this month, infections could exceed 1 million."

Having ruled out any more lockdowns months ago in order to protect the profits of the corporations, the Plan B measures are extremely limited, inadequate, and, as always, way behind the times.

Insisting "It is not a lockdown", with everything to remain open, Johnson declared masks will become mandatory in most indoor venues, including theatres and cinemas but not pubs, clubs and restaurants, from Friday. A vaccine pass or proof of a negative test will be required to enter nightclubs and other venues where large groups of people can continue to gather, including at outside venues with more than 10,000 people.

Johnson said that those who can will be encouraged to work from home from next week, but insisted that schools, the main vectors of COVID spread, must remain open until the Christmas break and that face-to-face learning continue in the universities.

"We don't want children to be taken out of school before the end of term, not that there is long to go now, we don't want nativity plays to be cancelled," he said.

Johnson had no choice but to impose a few more

restrictions given that he has been warned, according to leaked minutes of a meeting of the government's scientific advisers held on Tuesday, that hospital admissions from the Omicron variant could reach 1,000 a day in England by the end of the year without extra restrictions put in place, possibly peaking above 2,000 a day.

But he also announced the measures under conditions in which he and his government are reeling due to a series of explosive leaks.

For nearly a week the government has been fending off criticisms that a Christmas Party was held in Downing Street on December 18 last year, attended by 40-50 people in contravention of COVID safety restrictions.

The month before, London had been part of a national four-week lockdown with indoor socialising prohibited. The capital was then placed under Tier 2 restrictions which prohibited households from mixing indoors. By December 16, two days before the party, London was recording the highest COVID case rates in the country and was moved to Tier 3, meaning all indoor mixing was prohibited except in household bubbles.

The government attempted to ride out the scandal, denying that a party had taken place or insisting that no rules were broken. On Tuesday, these claims fell apart when ITV News published a video leaked to one of its journalists showing Downing Street officials, including Johnson's then Press Secretary Allegra Stratton and No10's head of digital Ed Oldfield, joking about the Christmas party as they rehearsed a televised briefing in the press room.

As part of the Q&A session, Oldfield asked Stratton, "I've just seen reports on Twitter that there was a Downing Street Christmas party on Friday night, do you recognise those reports?"

She replied, giggling, "I went home... hold on, hold on, erm, err ... What's the answer?"

"This fictional party was a business meeting," she continued, laughing.

The leaks provoked widespread public disgust, with the video already viewed around 10 million times. The government was brazenly flouting its own COVID laws, even as the country was about to enter the deadliest phase of the pandemic. The Downing Street party took place on a day when 514 people died from COVID and the Downing Street press video was shot four days later as another 641 were reported killed by the disease. At least 167,000 are now dead from COVID.

Yesterday, during Prime Minister's Questions, Johnson was forced to apologise "for the offence it [the video] has caused up and down the country and the impression it gives..." Stratton, who had already stepped down as his press secretary last April, resigned as a government adviser.

The event took place less than two months after Johnson blurted out in Downing Street, after being forced to agree to a second truncated lockdown late last year: "No more fucking lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands!"

The leaks to the media are widely believed to have come from the prime minister's far-right former chief adviser, Dominic Cummings. Indeed, every major embarrassing leak aimed at destabilising Johnson over the last year, including the "let the bodies pile high" statement, came from him.

Cummings was forced to resign last November after it was revealed he drove hundreds of miles from London to Barnard Castle in the north of England, flouting national lockdown restrictions. His exposure and exit was part of a power struggle in Downing Street in which Johnson's partner Carrie Symonds played a significant role.

After Cummings was forced out, Stratton, a close friend of Symonds, was among those brought into the government's inner circle. Before he left government, Cummings was instrumental in setting up the £2.6 million Downing Street media briefing room in which Stratton mocked COVID regulations.

In June this year another leak, of images taken from CCTV footage showing then Health Minister Matt Hancock kissing an aide in his Whitehall office, quickly led to Hancock's resignation. The previous month, Cummings had told a parliamentary committee that Hancock should have been fired for "at least 15 to 20 things—including lying to everybody on multiple occasions" during the pandemic.

On Monday, Cummings warned that it would be "very unwise for No 10 to lie" about social events that occurred in Downing Street during last year's Christmas lockdown. On Wednesday, he tweeted, after Johnson authorised an investigation into the December 18 party, "Will the [Cabinet Secretary] also be asked to investigate the *flat* party on Fri 13 Nov, the other flat parties, and the flat's 'bubble' policy." Cummings should know what happened in

Downing Street that day, as it was the day he was sacked as chief adviser.

Another Cummings tweet yesterday, "Fish rots from the head. #Regimechange", made his agenda clear.

The implications of these machinations in the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite must be understood by the working class.

Johnson was only able to take office because he was handed a massive parliamentary majority in a betrayal of a mass movement for social change by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn took the Labour leadership in 2015 after winning a landslide against his Blairite opponents fuelled by hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters who wanted an end to Tory rule based on a socialist agenda.

Having lost to Johnson in the 2019 General Election, Corbyn then handed the party back to the Blairites when Sir Keir Starmer took the reins of the party in April 2020, operating in a de facto coalition with the Tories ever since.

The damaging leaks undermining Johnson are evidence that the most right-wing sections of the Tories are planning ahead. Large sections of the parliamentary party and their business backers were content with using Johnson as their figurehead against Corbyn, but do not consider him capable of steering British imperialism through the stormy waters ahead as Omicron threatens to spread out of control and with multiple indications of an upsurge in the class struggle.

As difficult as it will be for many workers to believe, the moves afoot to replace Johnson would see a sharp lurch to the right. Cummings is a fascist who has made clear his wish for a "strong man" to run the country.

Among those being touted for taking over as prime minister are the multi-hundred millionaire Chancellor Rishi Sunak or multi-millionaire health minister Javid. Both oppose any further COVID restrictions as an intolerable threat to big business.

Johnson must be removed, along with his government, but this must be the result of the independent struggle of the working class fighting on a socialist programme. This demands a break by workers from the stranglehold of the Labour Party and trade unions, whose only role is to sabotage the struggles of workers on behalf of the capitalist class.



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