

People's Covid Inquiry in the UK merely calls on Johnson government to make amends

Robert Stevens
9 December 2021

The People's Covid Inquiry has issued its report accusing Boris Johnson's Conservative government of "misconduct in public office," leading to "many thousands" of unnecessary deaths.

The inquiry was set up by Keep Our NHS Public (KONP) and began its sessions in February. KONP includes groups such as the NHS Consultants Association, the NHS Support Federation and Health Emergency.

The introduction to the People's Covid Inquiry report, titled, "Misconduct in public office: Why did so many thousands die unnecessarily?", states that it was established because by January 2021, the Conservative government had still not called a public inquiry into the number of deaths in Britain due to COVID, which by then had exceeded 100,000.

The People's Covid Inquiry "set out to investigate the shocking scale of this tragic loss of life with the aim of learning lessons as quickly as possible in order to save lives and to better protect the population."

A panel of four, chaired by Michael Mansfield QC, "heard evidence from over 40 witnesses including bereaved families, frontline NHS and key workers, national and international experts, trade union and council leaders, and representatives from disabled people's and pensioners' organisations."

The testimony of those employed on the frontline of the NHS and other key services provided ample evidence of the heinous crimes committed by the Johnson government. The Inquiry also took important testimony from a number of leading epidemiologists, scientists and figures in the medical profession who have opposed the government's herd immunity policy, including Professor Gabriel Scally, Sir David King, Dr. Deepa Gurdasani and Dr. Helen Salisbury.

Despite this, the political perspective guiding the Inquiry is provided by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Patrons of KONP include former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Labour MP Andrew Gwynne, Labour Party Baroness and Leader of the House of Lords Margaret Jay, Labour Party Baroness Molly Meacher, *Guardian* newspaper journalist Owen Jones, and Green Party MP Caroline Lucas.

KONP is allied with Health Campaigns Together, which boasts "national affiliation from all the main health unions (UNISON, Unite, GMB) plus a number of non-health trade unions and many local trade union bodies and branches, campaigns and political parties committed to fighting for our NHS."

For this reason, the People's Covid Inquiry provides no way forward for the working class. Asserting that the government is guilty only of "misconduct in public office", it ends with a ludicrous call for MPs to adhere to supposed sacred "principles" regarding "behaviour in public life."

For nearly a year, by the time the People's Covid Inquiry was launched, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his government had pursued a herd immunity policy. It had only implemented a March 2020 lockdown after scientists warned that up to 500,000 lives would be lost, and due to growing opposition from workers across all sectors.

Yet the People's Covid Inquiry report states that "The Government was informed of the inquiry on 23 February 2021 and invited to take part." It adds superfluously, "No response was received," then or since.

It should not need stating that an investigation into a crime of this magnitude should never have extended an invitation to the guilty. But it was, in order to reinforce the "impartiality" claims of the inquiry and to blunt the issues at stake.

An amnesty for the Labour Party and the trade unions

For the same reason, the Inquiry has nothing to say about the role of the Labour Party, who were culpable in the crimes of the Johnson government throughout the pandemic under both Corbyn, who left office in April 2020, and his successor Sir Keir Starmer.

Corbyn declared in a March 25, 2020 parliamentary debate on the pandemic, his last as party leader, "Our immediate task as the Opposition is to... support the government's public health efforts while being constructively critical where we feel it is necessary to improve the official response."

This policy of "constructive criticism" was taken on seamlessly by Starmer, who is infamous for his insistence as the pandemic raged in August 2020 that "I don't just want all children back at school next month, I expect them back at school. No ifs, no buts, no equivocation."

The People's Covid Inquiry provides an amnesty for the trade union bureaucracy, which has suppressed every manifestation of workers' opposition to the homicidal policies of Johnson throughout the pandemic. The unions shut down strikes in education and suppressed a developing mass movement of educators against unsafe schools being opened and collaborated with the government and management to keep open unsafe transport networks and non-essential businesses at the cost of thousands of workers' lives.

The Inquiry instead presents the unions as the most ardent fighters against the Johnson government's policies.

It claims for example that, faced with a lack of guidance from central government, "on London Underground the unions eventually took charge of protecting workers when Government guidance was not forthcoming."

Among the crimes concealed here is the issuing of a "tripartite letter" by the bus companies, Transport for London and Unite the union on April 7, 2020. It declared that routine use of PPE, including facemasks, should be reserved for medical personnel and "is not recommended for transport workers". During the pandemic, 69 London bus workers, 54 of whom were drivers, died due to COVID.

Among the most criminal roles played by the unions was their demobilisation of mass opposition by educators to the unsafe opening of schools. The National Education Union (NEU) and other education unions

are, however, given a clean bill of health.

NEU joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney's public appearances today consist of rants against "education disruption" in which he insists that schools be kept open despite the deaths of 115 schoolchildren and hundreds of educators from COVID. But his musings are presented at length in the People's Covid Inquiry findings as good coin, with the section of the report, "Impact of pandemic on pupils, staff and schools," drawn "substantially from his oral and written evidence..."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has exhaustively documented the role of the education unions in ensuring that once schools reopened after the first lockdown, they remained largely open from then on—apart from a few months from January this year.

In his Inquiry evidence, Courtney claims that it was the unions that led the struggle to keep schools closed in January. But this was the result of action by thousands of educators who used Section 44 of the Employment Act, asserting their right not to work in an unsafe workplace. Within weeks, the NEU was insisting that its members no longer use the legislation without the union's sanction, and opposed calls for strike action, as it organised a return to classrooms in collaboration with the government.

"Misconduct in public office" versus "Social murder"

Given the scale of the crimes committed by the government which has overseen and is responsible for approaching 170,000 preventable deaths and mass suffering, the Inquiry could not avoid reference to the public discussion over these issues. Its Executive Summary notes, "One witness felt that the Government's response amounted to 'negligent manslaughter', in fact not even negligent in that the Government was fully informed of the risk to public health, of suffering and mass deaths, but went ahead anyway."

In February, as the People's Covid Inquiry began taking evidence, the BMJ (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) published an editorial by executive editor Kamran Abbasi accusing the British and world's governments of "social murder" in their collective response to the pandemic.

"At the very least," the BMJ wrote, "covid-19 might be classified as 'social murder,'" pointing to the use of the term by the socialist leader Friedrich Engels in "describing the political and social power held by the ruling elite over the working classes in 19th century England."

The Inquiry refers to the BMJ editorial in section nine of its findings, termed, "Postscript: Events since the end of the People's Covid Inquiry". But it does so in order to reject this designation of the government's actions.

It wrote, "The present pandemic management policy in Westminster is indifferent to the loss of life, the long-term complications of COVID-19 in survivors, and the impact on NHS staff and other frontline workers. The question is raised as to whether this amounts to democide ('the killing of members of a country's civilian population, as a result of its government's policy, including by direct action, indifference, and neglect'), 'social murder', gross negligence manslaughter, or misconduct in a public office?"

After noting that such policies have been implemented by governments internationally, it continues, "Campaigners who have raised such possibilities have watched with interest as French police searched the homes and offices of officials including the former prime minister as part of an investigation into that government's handling of the coronavirus crisis. Current and former ministers of the French Government have been targeted by at least 90 formal legal complaints from civic groups and

members of the public over their response to the health emergency. In addition, a Brazilian congressional panel has recommended that President Jair Bolsonaro be charged with 'crimes against humanity', asserting that he intentionally let the coronavirus rip through the country and kill over 600,000 people in a failed bid to achieve herd immunity and revive Latin America's largest economy."

But having considered all this, the Inquiry insists that Johnson et al cannot be charged with social murder or gross negligence manslaughter. Rather, it is merely guilty of "misconduct in a public office."

The Nolan Principles of Public Life

The Inquiry declares that the government has ditched the supposedly pristine means of governance enshrined in a set of "principles" in the 1990s by Lord Nolan after he was commissioned by John Major's Tory government!

The first finding under "Findings and Recommendations", listed under the sub-heading "Conduct in public office and duty of candour", states, "There have been serious governance failures of the Westminster Government, in breach of all of the Nolan Principles: Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership. These contributed to tens of thousands of avoidable deaths and suffering, and they amount to misconduct in public office."

The breaches of the "Nolan Principles" include:

- "Recommendations from previous pandemic planning exercises were ignored.
- The Government failed to conduct risk assessments or act to protect key populations at increased risk.
- An equality impact assessment of all the policies was not carried out and measures not taken to address risks identified, as should have happened.
- The Westminster Government treated bereaved families with disrespect and ignored their questions for over 12 months."

Such "Egregious breaches must have consequences," the Inquiry declares, meaning, "Consideration should be given to charges of Misconduct in Public Office".

The "Nolan Principles of Public Life are accepted as a standard for behaviour in public life" it states, before acknowledging that they "have no statutory basis" and are merely "published and promoted by the Commons Committee for Standards in Public Life." Another of its recommendations is, "For the future, the Nolan principles should have a statutory basis."

Lord Nolan was a High Court judge and his service to the ruling elite was substantial. In 1984, during the yearlong miners' strike, he granted injunctions to the National Coal Board to prevent the National Union of Mineworkers using flying pickets.

When Major's government was engulfed in the "cash-for-questions" scandal, when lobbyists had bribed two Conservative MPs to ask parliamentary questions, the prime minister established the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Lord Nolan chaired the Committee from 1994 to 1997. In 1995, he laid down the august principles that the political establishment have supposedly adhered to ever since if one believes the fairy tale put forward by the People's Covid Inquiry. On his death in 2007, the *Guardian* fawned, "Lord Nolan... made a profound mark on national life by substantially cleansing the Augean stable of corrupt politics..."

The problem with all this nonsense is that the Augean stables remain as filthy as ever, and the political stench has only worsened.

The reason why the first move of the Tories in the pandemic was to rush

to hand out COVID contracts to their mates, enriching them at vast cost to the public purse is because no-one in ruling circles ever cared a jot about Nolan’s “principles”. MPs from all parties continue to stick their nose in the trough of the private sector, racking up fortunes in second jobs.

Mansfield declares in the report’s preface, “From lack of preparation and coherent policy, unconscionable delay, through to preferred and wasteful procurement, to ministers themselves breaking the rules, the misconduct is earth-shattering.” But apparently not so earth shattering that it constitutes social murder and requires the arrest and prosecution of those responsible, starting with Johnson himself.

Government inquiries or the Global Workers’ Inquest

When all is said and done, the People’s Covid Inquiry concludes that the only game in town is that favoured mechanism of the British ruling elite in whitewashing its crimes, the public inquiry. Calling for this future inquiry to be “properly conducted”, it calls for it to “investigate” such apparently pressing issues as “the Cabinet Government’s failure to counter a decision-making model centred on the prime minister and whether the Whitehall model for the civil service is so broken that it needs to be fundamentally changed.”

Public inquiries have repeatedly been used to exonerate the state of responsibility following events that have led to large scale loss of life, such as the Aberfan school disaster, the Hillsborough football stadium disaster, the Iraq war, and the Grenfell Fire, where a toothless inquiry has been ongoing since 2017. The government was only too keen to parade its forthcoming inquiry, with the *Guardian* reporting its cynical response to the People’s Covid Inquiry as, “Every death from this virus is a tragedy and we have always said there are still lessons to be learned from the pandemic, which is why we have committed to a full public inquiry in spring.”

The People’s Covid Inquiry entrusts it to the criminals in Downing Street to clean up their own act. It states, “We ask that the Government accepts and acts on our findings, and implements the recommendations set out in our report.

“It is not too late for some good to emerge from the pandemic. Lessons are clear, and can and should be learned. With political will and public support, social and health inequalities could be tackled.”

It makes the offer, “If and when the judge-led public inquiry calls for evidence, we will make our report and supporting documents available for scrutiny.”

Last month, the WSWS initiated a Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. Diametrically opposed to the political orientation of the People’s Covid Inquiry, the statement launching the inquest declared that it “does not seek nor require the sanction of governments.” It notes, “The *World Socialist Web Site* is well equipped to initiate the Inquest. It recognized from the earliest public reports of SARS-CoV-2 the danger of a global pandemic. Since January 24, 2020, when it first reported on the initial coronavirus outbreak, the WSWS has posted more than 4,000 articles on this subject. It has demanded since early 2020 the implementation of a globally coordinated plan to stop the pandemic. It has denounced government policies responsible for mass death.”

“Drawing upon the research of scientists, the knowledge of public health experts and the real-world experience of working people and students, the Inquest will investigate and document the disastrous response of governments, corporations and the media to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It will seek to expose the political and economic forces and interests that drove the policies that allowed the uncontrolled transmission of the virus and its development

into a catastrophic pandemic that has killed millions worldwide.”

To all those workers who have had loved ones die, who have suffered from COVID and its devastating long-term effects, whose lives were and are being placed in constant danger, and who want justice to be done and the pandemic ended, contact the WSWS/SEP (UK). Make the decision to take part in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact