

# Johnson government hit by massive backbench rebellion opposing minimal COVID measures

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "Plan B" measures to combat the escalating wave of Omicron variant infections were passed yesterday only in the face of a massive rebellion by hard-right Conservative MPs.

Nearly 100 Tory MPs opposed the introduction of proof of vaccination or a negative test being required to enter some large venues. The measure passed by 369 votes to 126, with 96 Tories against.

MPs also voted for mandatory vaccination for National Health Service (NHS) workers from April next year, with 100 against, while 38 Tory MPs voted against the government on face mask requirements in shops and on public transport.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, treasurer of the Tory backbench 1922 Committee, warned that a leadership challenge against Johnson is "on the cards" if he fails to "change his approach"—indicating that even the most minimal anti-COVID measures will not be tolerated by the Tory vultures ready to devour his political corpse.

Johnson's days as party leader look numbered, recalling nothing more than the ebbing authority suffered by his predecessor Theresa May as the Brexiteer wing moved against her. It is now Johnson's turn because his former backers have concluded he does not have the spine to face off popular opposition as the ruling elite deepens its austerity drive and insists that it is now time to "live with the virus," no matter the cost in death and suffering.

Yesterday's grotesque debate was a warning of what is coming.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid led the case for the government's Plan B measures with a chilling admission that Omicron is more transmissible than Delta—cases are doubling every two days. Scientists, he said, estimate that 200,000 people are being infected daily with the new variant, with the NHS at risk of being overwhelmed even

if Omicron turned out to be only half as severe as Delta.

Javid was still underplaying what the government has been told, with Johnson telling his Cabinet that morning that a "huge spike" in Omicron cases is coming. This was confirmed by yesterday's 59,610 recorded COVID cases, the highest daily total since January 9, and up 12.1 percent on the previous week.

It was Dr Susan Hopkins, the government's most senior public health adviser, who told MPs that Omicron cases had likely reached 200,000 a day. She also warned daily infections could reach 1 million by the end of December.

Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, told the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, "All the evidence we have in front of us suggests that there will be a considerable impact [from Omicron] in terms of degree of hospitalisations ... starting I would think in the next week to two weeks. That is a concern because the NHS is already 'beyond full stretch' even before winter has arrived properly."

Professor Stephen Reicher warned that there were in fact only two ways to slow infections down—asking people not to socialise or imposing a lockdown.

As for the severity of Omicron, other scientists and officials testified that the current best estimate is that Omicron is only 29 percent less severe than previous variants, with the reinfection rate three to eight times higher than Delta.

Dr Paul Burton, chief medical officer at Moderna, told the Commons Science and Technology Committee, "I do not think Omicron is a milder, less severe version of the current virus." Moreover, "The idea it will push Delta out of the way and take over may occur in the future, but I think in the coming months these two viruses are going to co-exist, and Omicron, which I would maintain is actually a severe disease, will now infect people on a background

of very, very strong Delta pressure. It will also lead to a situation where individuals will become co-infected ... which gives the opportunity for this virus to further evolve and mutate which is a concerning and worrying situation.”

In South Africa, about 15 percent of people who are hospitalised are in the intensive care unit, about the same as during the Delta surge in August, he said.

Javid made the case for largely ineffectual measures, while stressing to his opponents how limited and temporary they are. The government was not introducing “vaccine passports” and anyone who opposes vaccination need only prove they have had a negative lateral flow test, despite these being notoriously inaccurate. “I would not support a vaccine-only option,” he promised. Mandatory vaccination for frontline NHS staff would not be extended to other professions. He also announced that the travel Red List mandating hotel quarantine for arrivals from 11 countries is ending.

This did not stop the Tory hard-right from posing as champions of freedom to denounce all anti-COVID restrictions as an affront to personal liberty and the market.

Steve Brine complained that many of his constituents had objected to the “frightening nature” of Johnson’s TV broadcast Sunday night, warning that “a tidal wave of Omicron is coming”, when what was needed was a plan to live with COVID. Andrew Bridgen declared that the most dangerous epidemic facing the world today was the epidemic of fear. Andrea Leadsom insisted that “COVID will be with us for many years to come.”

The majority of the Labour Party went further than ever in its policy of “constructive criticism”, with Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting unreservedly supporting the minimal Tory measures. He stressed that Labour’s support for COVID passes in some social venues was because it supports business, while backing Johnson for not making the system more rigorous.

Labour’s “left”, led by former party leader Jeremy Corbyn sitting as an Independent, was worse still. He led eight Labour MPs in backing the Tory hard-right opposition, along with the sole Green MP, Caroline Lucas, by proclaiming mandatory NHS vaccination and a necessity to prove vaccination status an attack on civil liberties, rather than an elementary public health measure during a raging pandemic. He wrote in typical fashion on Twitter that both measures would “create division when we need cooperation and unity.” Such moves were “totally wrong”, he told parliament, oblivious to the

findings of health care professionals and the severe risk being imposed on the NHS staff he claims to care about by an escalating pandemic.

The surreal character of the debate was underscored by the slew of MPs who could not vote because they were self-isolating. They included Labour’s Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves, Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Shadow Environment Secretary Jim McMahon, and Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence Jess Phillips. Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey was also isolating.

Johnson’s measures will do little or nothing to prevent the medical and social disaster now unfolding. And Labour’s MPs, both right and nominally “left”, have once again proved they offer no alternative.

Corbyn and his ilk, along with the trade unions, are reaching out to the vaccine sceptics as an excuse for not waging a principled struggle against the entire mercenary agenda of big business pursued by Johnson and Starmer. He speaks of convincing rather than compulsion, while saying and doing nothing, even as the trade unions allow their members to be forced into unsafe workplaces and children into schools that are breeding grounds for COVID.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to intervene independently to protect their health, safety and lives. We advocate the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighbourhood to organise a fightback against the Johnson government’s ‘herd immunity’ policies.

These committees must take up the fight against big business and its parties for a strategy to eliminate the threat of COVID once and for all. Every means necessary must be deployed, including a scientifically guided test, trace and isolate system, backed by full sick-pay for all workers ill and self-isolating; the closure of unsafe workplaces; installation of air filtration systems in all public buildings; and the closure of non-essential workplaces and all schools until the pandemic is suppressed. Such necessary social protections must be paid for in full by the corporations and the super-rich.



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