

All COVID public health measures to end in England

# Tory leadership crisis used to engineer savage rightward lurch

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The Conservative Party government has announced the end of all public health measures combatting the COVID-19 pandemic in England.

Pledging to “restore the ancient liberties of this country”, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told Parliament yesterday that compulsory mask-wearing in shops and on public transport and test-to-enter schemes for nightclubs and large events would end on January 27, next week.

With over 16,000 people in hospital with COVID-19 in England alone and 438 recorded killed by the virus the day before, Johnson added that the requirement to self-isolate after a positive test was due to end forever on March 24 and that he’d “like to seek a vote in this House to bring that date forward.”

As a down payment on his criminality, the prime minister ended work-from-home guidance immediately and promised, “From tomorrow we will no longer require face masks in classrooms and the Department for Education will shortly remove national guidance on their use in communal areas.” The news was greeted by wild cheers from his backbenchers, some of whom took off their own masks and waved them in the air in celebration.

There was a frenzied atmosphere in the Commons throughout, with the old Tory warhorse David Davis responding to the smell of blood in the water from Johnson’s ailing premiership with the borrowed injunction, “In the name of God, go!”

Davis was quoting Conservative MP Leo Amery denouncing Neville Chamberlain in 1940 after a failed military campaign against Nazi Germany in Norway (though the phrase goes back to Oliver Cromwell’s dismissal of the Rump Parliament).

The scandal over parties held in Whitehall on Johnson’s watch during lockdown, at least one of which he attended, will have no automatically progressive outcome. Rather

the crisis is being used to engineer a major shift to the right by what is already the most right-wing government in post-war British history.

With Johnson having set out a domestic policy for mass death yesterday, his Foreign Secretary Liz Truss is travelling to Berlin today to meet with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and her French and German counterparts to discuss a programme of war with Russia.

Meanwhile Home Secretary Priti Patel is continuing to push through parliament sweeping attacks on the rights of citizenship and to protest and vote.

The knife fight underway in the Tory Party is fundamentally over who can be best trusted to enforce class war measures on the working class. Johnson is proving he will do whatever is required of him, but there are substantial numbers in his party who want to see the back of him.

Seven Tory MPs have publicly called for Johnson to resign. On Wednesday morning, another 12 were reported to have submitted letters of no confidence to the backbench 1922 Committee. If 54 letters are submitted, a vote of confidence in Johnson’s leadership among Tory MPs is automatically triggered. Over half, 180, would have to vote against Johnson to automatically begin a leadership contest, although totals short of that can force a resignation. The current assumption is that enough letters will be submitted after the report of an ongoing inquiry into the Downing Street parties is released next week.

Whether Johnson survives or not, the already crowded field of possible replacements makes clear the vicious character of the government he or his successor will lead.

The current leader of the pack is Chancellor Rishi Sunak, himself a multi-millionaire and husband to multi-hundred-millionaire Akshata Murthy, the daughter of a multi-billionaire Indian businessman. Sunak has made

clear his ideological commitment to low taxes and lower public spending, and determination to recoup from the working class the debts incurred by the government through his repeated handouts to the corporations and the super-rich.

Close behind is Liz Truss, the self-styled reincarnation of Margaret Thatcher. A leading opponent of public health restrictions, she has made herself the darling of the most ardent Brexiteers, promising to use the opportunities it creates to slash taxes and labour and social protections. In 2012, she co-authored the neo-Thatcherite screed “Britannia Unchained” labelling British workers “among the worst idlers in the world.”

Other leading candidates include the thuggish Priti Patel, a favourite of far-right anti-migrant gangs and the architect of some of the most repressive legislation in British history; and former health secretary under David Cameron, Jeremy Hunt. Considered the “moderate” choice in this field of frothing-at-the-mouth reactionaries, Hunt played a critical role in the privatisation and decimation of the National Health Service prior to the pandemic.

Those unlikely to win but who might stand to shift the terms of the debate in their direction include Steve Baker, Mark Harper, Tobias Ellwood and Tom Tugendhat. Baker and Harper are leading members of the Coronavirus Recovery Group of backbench Tory MPs which has been relentless in its criticism of all COVID-19 public health measures.

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Ellwood and Tugendhat, both former soldiers, and chairmen of the Commons defence committee and foreign affairs committee respectively, are tireless advocates for stepped up military spending and aggression against Russia and China.

Labour's response is to officiate this grisly succession. The party refuses to call a vote of no confidence in the government, with leading cabinet members claiming that to do so would only unite the Tories. This risible excuse is exposed by the fact that Labour MPs makes no criticisms whatsoever of the government's right-wing agenda, limiting themselves to the demand that Johnson resign or that his party remove him.

Responding to Johnson's announcement yesterday, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer promised to “support the relaxation of Plan B, so long as the science says that it is safe.” He rendered his face-saving caveat pointless with

the insistence a few seconds later, “We must have a robust plan to live well with COVID.”

Starmer's unanimity with the government was summed up by the defection of Tory MP Christian Wakeford to the Labour benches during yesterday's debate, with a Union Flag face mask plastered across his face. Wakeford is the fourth Tory in history to defect to Labour. The other three were all in the 1990s, in recognition of Tony Blair's successful transformation of Labour into a Tory Party mark two.

Starmer could barely contain himself. He “warmly welcomed” Wakeford, whose Commons record includes votes for the £20-a-week cut to social welfare, the Police Bill and the Nationality and Borders Bill; in favour of a stricter asylum system; and against measures to combat climate change and tax avoidance. His defection was proof, said Starmer, that “Labour stands ready to provide an alternative government that the country can be proud of.”

An “alternative government,” pursuing the same policies as the Tory Party but with fewer recent scandals and an MI5-vetted former head of the Department of Public Prosecutions at its head, is precisely what Labour are offering the ruling class.

The Labour “left” toe the same line. None of its representatives have gone beyond former shadow chancellor John McDonnell's appeal to his “Conservative colleagues” last week to remove Johnson, lest he damage “not just the Tory Party” but “politics in general” and “trust in the whole political process.” Former leader Jeremy Corbyn has been virtually silent.

Whoever is left standing at the end, the palace coup being prepared against Johnson with Labour's assistance can have only one outcome—a deepened assault on the health, lives and living standards of the working class. Bringing down the government and ending its policies of mass infection, war and austerity requires a programme of class struggle waged equally against the Labour and the trade union bureaucracy, by millions of workers across the country and internationally.



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