

All COVID restrictions ended in UK amid deepening government crisis

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27 January 2022

The delayed inquiry report by senior civil servant Sue Gray into drinks parties held by the Conservative government at Downing Street and other venues during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 remained stalled Thursday, with its publication date still unclear.

Gray's findings had been scheduled for publication this week. However, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson left London yesterday morning for a scheduled trip to North Wales. With no government business scheduled in Parliament Friday, and most MPs having left for their constituencies, it appears likely that the report will not be made public until next week.

The report has been delayed after the intervention of the Metropolitan Police Tuesday, who said they were opening a criminal investigation. Reports attest to concerns in Downing Street and by the Met over how much of the report can even be published.

Politico reported, "Government lawyers, police officers and human resources officials are poring over the document line by line because there are legal concerns that publishing some of her findings on the eight alleged events being looked at by the police could prejudice their investigation." One issue is those who have given statements to Gray will have done so without a lawyer present, and those statements could result in criminal prosecutions.

The crisis wracking the Johnson government is only spurring on its reactionary agenda at home and abroad. MPs left the capital amid discussions on the UK possibly sending hundreds of troops to Eastern Europe to confront Russia and on the day that, from 7am, all COVID "Plan B" restrictions in England were lifted. England is by far the most populous area of the UK, with 56.2 million people of a total 68 million population. Restrictions are also being rapidly withdrawn in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Masks are no longer legally required anywhere except

on public transport in London, where they remain mandatory. Mask wearing has been prohibited in schools, even in communal areas. The government's determination to consign mitigations to history is clear in the stipulation that if any local authority reintroduces mask wearing at any point, these orders must be routinely reviewed and "removed at the earliest possibility."

From next Monday, care home residents will be permitted to receive unlimited visitors. Self-isolation periods being undertaken by residents will be cut from 14 days to 10 for those who do test positive for the virus; and care homes will have to follow outbreak management rules for just 14, rather than 28 days.

Restrictions were ditched as Johnson declared that the "the pandemic is not over" and the most accurate tracker of the spread of COVID cases recorded a surge of Omicron, directly linked to the decision to abandon all restrictions in schools. This came amid predictions that the more transmissible sub-lineage of Omicron, BA.2, was predicted to be the dominant variant in the UK within a month, as cases caused by it are doubling every few days.

The *Financial Times* reported, "In the UK, the subvariant accounted for 1 percent of genomically sequenced cases uploaded to the global repository GISAID in the week to January 23, up from just 0.5 percent the week before. In Denmark and India, BA.2 already makes up about half of all sequenced cases, according to GISAID."

Around 100,000 cases of COVID are still being reported in Britain every day, along with hundreds of deaths. Thursday's 96,871 cases and 338 deaths brought the total in just the first four days this week to 380,662 cases and 1,180 deaths. More than 16,500 people are ill in hospital with COVID.

A staggering 16.2 million people have been infected in Britain, almost a quarter of the population—23.7 percent.

In total cases, the UK is behind only four other countries—the United States, India, Brazil and France.

The number of those dead within 28 days of testing positive stands at over 155,000. More than 176,000 people have died when measured by those who perished with COVID mentioned on the death certificate.

The *Financial Times* noted that “coronavirus cases in the UK are rebounding, driven by a jump in infections among schoolchildren.”

It was citing the latest result of the Zoe Covid surveillance study run by Kings College London researchers, which found that cases jumped 10 percent in the week to January 26. The results, from an app on which tens of thousands of users record their symptoms, found that around one in 30 Britons had COVID symptoms in the week to January 26.

It confirms yet again the central role played by schools as vectors for the community-wide spread of COVID. The *Mail* reported, “The latest report states the uptick in cases among under-18s since [sic] was triggered by pupils returning to the classroom at the start of the month and has now accelerated to the highest level ever recorded by the study. One in 11 children aged under nine have the virus (8.8 percent), while one in 21 people aged 30 to 39 are infected (4.6 percent). Meanwhile, 4.4 percent of 10 to 19-year-olds have symptomatic Covid, compared to 3 percent of adults in their 20s and 40s.”

Professor Tim Spector commented, “The bounce back in case numbers just as we lift restrictions has come sooner than many expected. But it's not surprising given that, throughout the pandemic, we've seen the end of school holidays repeatedly usher in a rapid rise in cases among children, which then cross over into parents and school staff.”

This is in fact the desired outcome of the government's herd immunity policy, which has kept schools open for virtually the entire pandemic bar a few months during the first lockdown in early 2020 and a few weeks early last year. This January, with the collaboration of the education unions, schoolchildren were sent into classes without masks; the last mitigation that had been in place, albeit only among secondary school children.

Hundreds of thousands more children have been infected as a result. Department of Education figures released Tuesday found that 415,000 children (5.1 percent) of pupils in state schools in England were off for reasons linked to coronavirus on January 20. This was significantly up from 3.9 percent a fortnight earlier. A staggering 322,000 pupils had a confirmed case of

coronavirus on January 20. This was almost double the 159,000 who had a positive case on January 6, during the first week that children returned to class for the spring term.

The number of staff absent from school is rising at a similar rate. The *Financial Times* reported, “Nearly one quarter of all state schools had more than 15 percent of teachers and school leaders off work, up from 8 percent in September at the start of the academic year.”

The head of Burnt Mill Academy Trust in London revealed that almost 50 percent of staff were currently absent at one of his schools.

The only priority of the ruling class, with or without Johnson in charge, is fully restoring the flow of profits into the pockets of the corporations and super-rich and to ensure every penny in public spending paid out during the pandemic is brutally torn out of the hides of the working class. This was the meaning of Johnson's statement in North Wales, as the Tories announced a raft of attacks on the working class, complaining, “We had to spend over £400 billion keeping the British economy going during the lockdowns...”

Commenting with satisfaction on the ending of restrictions, the *Telegraph* demanded one more policy be implemented. “The one remaining imposition is mass testing, which is becoming increasingly pointless and harmful given the large numbers with omicron,” it editorialised yesterday.

There is utter unanimity among the parliamentary parties of the ruling elite in backing this murderous offensive. After Sir Keir Starmer declared last week that Labour “does not want to see restrictions in place any longer than necessary,” the party did not even note the ending of restrictions Thursday as cases and deaths continue to mount.



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