

UK: Prime Minister Johnson announces requirement to self-isolate with COVID will end in days

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson has opened a second front, after anti-Russian warmongering, in the campaign to save his premiership by announcing that all COVID rules, including the requirement to self-isolate after testing positive, will be withdrawn in England from the end of February.

Originally scheduled to take place on March 23, the move will be given the go ahead on February 23 when Parliament returns in 11 days' time following its half-term recess. This comes as tens of thousands continue to be infected daily and hundreds die. Another 68,000 infections were announced Wednesday, bringing numbers in the last week to 485,074 cases and 1,526 deaths.

The criminality of Johnson's actions was underscored by the comments made Wednesday to *BBC Radio's Today* by Dr Bruce Aylward, a senior advisor to the World Health Organisation director-general. He warned, "If we look at the situation today—there's still two million reported cases alone, over 5,000 deaths every single day right now.

"The numbers are absolutely staggering, and what we're learning to live with is not just this virus, but what should be an unacceptable burden of disease, an unacceptable number of deaths every single day, especially when there are the tools to stop or at least slow this thing, manage it, control it."

Johnson made his announcement during Prime Minister's Questions. The previous week's PMQs were dominated by his attack on Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, while Director of Public Prosecutions, for allowing the serial rapist and paedophile, Jimmy Savile, to escape prosecution prior to his death in 2011.

The prime minister's calculated Trumpian dog-whistle led to a right-wing, anti-vax mob surrounding and barracking Starmer Monday evening. A media furore and

flurry of denunciations by Labour demanded Johnson's apology, which never came.

Yesterday Labour determined that the attack on Starmer did not feature in PMQs. Of far greater significance, as Johnson announced that the government was effectively ending all recognition of the pandemic in a matter of days, Starmer said nothing about the more than 180,000 people killed by COVID as a result of putting profits ahead of lives. Labour's pose as the party of the "moral high ground" means above all doing nothing that would impact the "national interest."

Johnson spent the last few days organising a cabinet reshuffle, engineering a further shift to the right. According to the *Sunday Express*, he finalised his new cabinet after agreeing a deal with Tory backbenchers which a government source said is based on policies "to warm the cockles of Tory hearts". Johnson would now be "listening 'to the right people' who will be brought in as replacements."

Among them are Jacob Rees-Mogg, who becomes the new minister for "Brexit opportunities" and "government efficiency". Rees-Mogg is the Eton-educated son of former *Times* editor Baron William Rees-Mogg and is known as the "Honourable Member for the 18th century" for his reactionary views. Johnson has spent weeks assuring the party's extreme right layers that he will govern henceforth as a "true Thatcherite" with no more "retreats" on lockdowns, jobs furloughs and the like, with the *Times* commenting that Rees-Mogg's being "given free rein over post-Brexit turf is... surely a piece of red meat for the right wing of the Conservative Party."

Steve Barclay, former Brexit Secretary under Johnson's predecessor Theresa May was appointed the prime minister's chief of staff. Barclay's voting record, as the pro-Tory *Express* pointed out, includes

“consistently” voting “against raising welfare benefits ‘at least in line with prices’,” and voting “for a reduction in spending on benefits as well as for reducing housing benefit.” He has also voted “against increasing the tax rate applied to income over £150,000.”

Chris Heaton-Harris, a long-standing Brexiteer becomes chief whip.

The reshuffle came following the resignation of several of Johnson’s key advisers, in response to the “partygate crisis” and his attack on Starmer over Savile. These included his longstanding policy chief Munira Mirza who denounced Johnson for his “scurrilous” attack on Starmer. This elicited an outpouring of support from Britain’s nominally liberal media, who attempted to transform this right-wing libertarian and former member of the misnamed Revolutionary Communist Party into a paragon of principle and virtue.

Other resignations included chief of staff Dan Rosenfield, Johnson’s principal private secretary Martin Reynolds and his director of communications Jack Doyle.

At this stage, it is not possible to calculate how effective Johnson’s counter-offensive in defence of his premiership will be. He has said it will take a “panzer division” to remove him from Downing Street.

Johnson opponents are still some distance from being able to remove him, requiring letters of no confidence from 54 MPs, triggering a no confidence vote in his position as party leader. If over half of Tory MPs (180) then voted to remove Johnson, he would resign as prime minister. So far just 13 letters have been submitted according to the tally of the pro-Tory *Spectator*. Around another 30 MPs have openly criticised him over partygate but have not gone as far as submitting letters. It is unlikely Tory MPs will send letters during Parliament’s recess, or that the no confidence vote would be held before MPs return on February 21.

Everything that has happened since the partygate scandal erupted in November confirms that this a fight between the most right-wing political representatives of the bourgeoisie. There are no differences over the policies of herd immunity and endemic COVID-19, attacks on the working class to claw back £400 billion spent during the pandemic—most of which ended as bailouts for the corporations—or ramping up military conflict with Russia.

In alliance with the US, Britain is doing everything it can to inflame tensions with Russia, with Johnson laying out immediate plans to send 350 marines to Poland, with Typhoon fighter jets and warships ready for mobilisation to south eastern Europe.

The government’s reckless policy is the product of its desperate kowtowing to Washington, which has also insisted that Britain ready massive sanctions against Moscow. So rapidly have events escalated that the government was not, despite its sabre rattling, able to get the necessary legislation through parliament.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss had promised that by February 10, the “toughest sanctions regime against Russia” in UK history would be on the statute book. According to Politico, Truss will tell her counterpart Sergei Lavrov today, without any sanctions legislation in place, that Russia “risks creating a drawn-out quagmire should it invade Ukraine, incurring a high human and economic cost.”

Workers must study the statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government!” It explains, “What is unfolding in parliament over ‘partygate’ is the modern-day equivalent of a palace coup—a change at the top to preserve the existing order. Left at this level, whether Johnson survives or not, the Tory government—as it did under David Cameron and Theresa May, each one more right-wing than the last—will continue as the most ruthless representative of the major corporations and the super-rich.”

The statement warns, “The crisis is being seized on by powerful sections of the Tory Party to engineer the most right-wing policy lurch ever carried out by a British government, with the Labour opposition marching in lockstep.”

It concludes with the necessity for workers to fight for the programme of socialist internationalism and the building of a new leadership, the SEP. “The fight of the working class against the Johnson government will raise ever more urgently the necessity of a political mass movement, independent of and opposed to both the Tories and Labour, and against the capitalist system and its state.”



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