

UK COVID inquiry in crisis as Conservative government tries to conceal pandemic crimes

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So vast are the crimes committed by Britain's ruling elite during the COVID-19 pandemic that the Conservative government is all but refusing to co-operate with the official inquiry it authorised.

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry was announced by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson in May 2021. To date over 226,000 people have died due to COVID in Britain. Over a million are estimated to be suffering from the debilitating impact of Long Covid.

The first inquiry hearings, examining the UK's resilience and preparedness (Module 1), is set to take place June 13. The first oral hearings of Module 2, dealing with the main decision-making and political governance around the pandemic, are scheduled to start in the weeks to come. The oral hearings are expected to last at least three years, until the summer of 2026.

The inquiry is chaired by former High Court judge, Baroness Heather Hallett, who in 2009 acted as coroner in the inquest of the 52 people killed in London's 7/7 terrorist bombings.

But before oral sessions are even underway, Hallett's inquiry was plunged into crisis by the refusal of Johnson, and then the Cabinet Office, to hand over diaries, notebooks and WhatsApp messages from his period in office. The inquiry requested that Johnson hand over unredacted WhatsApp messages sent and received by Johnson from January 1, 2020, to February 24, 2022; unredacted diaries; copies of 24 unredacted notebooks; and unredacted WhatsApp messages sent and received by Johnson's adviser Henry Cook.

All Johnson initially provided to the Cabinet Office was WhatsApp messages from May 2021, the month he announced the COVID Inquiry and a period well over a year after his initial response to the pandemic during which he advocated the mass infection of the population with COVID through a murderous "herd immunity" policy. This was at the time when Downing Street were working out scenarios that up to 800,000 people could die if such a policy was enacted.

Johnson's successor, Rishi Sunak, following the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss, is also implicated in COVID crimes, which accounts for the extraordinary refusal of the Cabinet Office to cooperate with its own inquiry. The Cabinet Office gave the inquiry only redacted versions of the limited messages Johnson handed over, leading to Hallett being forced to request the unredacted material using a Section 21 notice under the 2005 Inquiries Act that "provides inquiries with statutory powers to compel evidence."

In response Sunak's Cabinet Office took the extraordinary decision June 1 to launch legal action against the Inquiry—via a judicial review—claiming that making the material available would compromise ministers' and other individuals' right to privacy. The legal case argues that Hallett should not have "the power to compel production of documents and messages" that the Cabinet Office claimed are "unambiguously irrelevant to the inquiry's work."

Following the government's taking legal action, Johnson—who was removed from office in a palace coup in which Sunak played a central role—moved into damage limitation mode. Last Friday, Johnson wrote to Hallett saying he was prepared to hand over his unredacted WhatsApp messages shared with the Cabinet Office and would also hand over "relevant" material, including correspondence from his old mobile phone, but only if he could obtain access to it. However, it is not clear what is even available any longer from that crucial period in the form of his phone messages.

According to the *i* newspaper, "The ex-prime minister kept his personal phone number that he had had for more than a decade when he entered No 10 and it was on this number and device that crucial messages were sent as the Covid pandemic unfolded in 2020." It added, "Johnson was told by security officials to turn off the device and never turn it on again in case it could be hacked by hostile actors, *i* understands. This means historic messages from 2020 and early 2021 are no longer available to search and the phone is not active."

Regarding his 25 notebooks, Johnson wrote Hallett that they had been removed by the Cabinet Office and “If the government chooses not to [hand them over to the Inquiry], I will ask for these to be returned to my office so that I can provide them to you directly”.

Johnson’s action prompted the government to threaten that he could lose legal funding for his participation in the Inquiry “if you knowingly seek to frustrate or undermine, either through your own actions or the actions of others, the government’s position in relation to the inquiry unless there is a clear and irreconcilable conflict of interest on a particular point at issue”.

Hallett, the COVID Inquiry chair, was obliged to ask a series of extraordinary questions of Johnson. These include:

- “Please confirm whether in March 2020 (or around that period), you suggested to senior civil servants and advisors that you be injected with Covid-19 on television to demonstrate to the public that it did not pose a threat?”
- “Did you inform the then Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, during a phone call on or around 13 March 2020 that you ‘wanted herd immunity’, or words to that effect?”
- “Did the then Cabinet Secretary, Lord Sedwill, on 12 March 2020 (or around that period), advise you to inform the public to hold ‘chickenpox parties’ in order to spread infections of Covid-19? What was your response to any such advice?”
- “In or around Autumn 2020, did you state that you would rather ‘let the bodies pile high’ than order another lockdown, or words to that effect?”

As Johnson’s chancellor, Sunak was just as opposed to lockdowns. In his campaign for the leadership of the Tory party in 2022, Sunak stated, “My view is we did go too far, particularly on keeping schools closed... and I would not have a lockdown again. I was very clear in cabinet, I was one of the key voices in favour of opening up [schools].”

Sunak even launched at the height of the pandemic in August 2020, the Eat Out to Help Out scheme at a cost of £850 million to the taxpayer. Denouncing the scheme, which led to COVID infections shooting up by between 8 and 17 percent as people mingled in restaurants, Professor John Edmunds of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and a member of the SAGE committee of government advisors, told the *Observer*, “it was a spectacularly stupid idea and an obscene way to spend public money.”

The crisis escalated Monday when Elkan Abrahamson, a lawyer who represents one of the inquiry’s key “core participants”, the Bereaved Families for Justice group, said that if Hallett did not receive the evidence she is demanding, “the only logical response of the chair is to resign because

she can’t properly do her job”.

The ruling class will do everything it can to ensure that no-one of any significance in political and corporate circles is ever brought to account for the social murder of over 200,000 people and the debilitating, possibly lifelong suffering inflicted on those with Long COVID.

Step forward the nominally liberal *Guardian*, and its sister *Observer* title, to promote the bona fides of that essential tool of the British ruling elite, the “independent” Public Inquiry.

An op-ed published Sunday by the *Observer’s* chief political commentator Andrew Rawnsley, declared, “This inquiry cannot bring anyone back to life. The service it can perform for victims has been illustrated by earlier inquiries such as those into the Hillsborough disaster, the Bloody Sunday killings and the contaminated blood scandal. One of the vital functions of this public inquiry is to give a voice to the bereaved and supply a form of justice by forcing decision-makers to give account and take responsibility for what they did.”

The fact that the Tories are seeking to neuter an inquiry they established and set extremely limited terms of reference for should blind no-one to the fact that it will do nothing to establish justice, even if it proceeds. After more than three decades *no-one* was held accountable for the Hillsborough deaths. 51 years have elapsed since the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre without any justice.

To these cover-ups must be added the inquiry into the June 2017 Grenfell Tower fire deaths which is still underway with the sixth anniversary of the fire later this month. No-one responsible has ever been charged, or even arrested for the 72 deaths at Grenfell, with that inquiry conducted, as is the COVID inquiry, under the 2005 Inquiries Act, which “has no power to determine, any person’s civil or criminal liability.”



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