

“Just let people die” said “Dr Death the chancellor,” now UK prime minister, Rishi Sunak

Robert Stevens
24 November 2023

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in October 2020, while chancellor and seeking to ensure there were no more public health lockdowns in Britain, that the government should “just let people die and that’s OK”.

The revelation emerged this week in testimony at the UK COVID Inquiry given by former chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance. Vallance was giving evidence along with Sir Chris Whitty, the government’s most senior medical adviser during the first years of the pandemic.

Vallance and Whitty became household names as the pandemic surged through the population—eventually taking over 230,000 lives—holding regular press conferences alongside Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other ministers.

Much of the narrative around the government’s response to the pandemic has centred on the role of Johnson, who was forced into lockdowns and sought to end them as soon as possible in order to “protect the economy”—the cash flow and profits of the corporations and banks.

Johnson infamously said in October 2020, “No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands.” He was eventually forced to stand down in July 2022 as a result of the “Partygate” crisis when it was revealed that he and other top government officials partied in Downing Street, breaking their own COVID safety guidelines.

What the hearings of the second module of the COVID Inquiry—dealing with the government’s response—reveal beyond any doubt is that Johnson’s positions were widely shared throughout the government.

An extract from Vallance’s diary was read to the Inquiry on Monday. During what is described as a heated exchange between Johnson and his chief adviser Dominic Cummings over whether to impose stricter lockdown measures in October 2020, Johnson refused, telling Cummings he was for “letting it all rip” and that those who would die from contracting COVID were already elderly and had “had a good innings.”

Vallance wrote in the same entry, “DC [Dominic Cummings] says ‘Rishi [Sunak] thinks just let people die and that’s OK’.”

Interviewed this week by Susanna Reid on ITV’s *This Morning* show, chief secretary to the Treasury Laura Trott repeatedly refused to deny that Sunak had used these words. Reid pointed out that it was “astonishing that you’re not denying it ... Boris Johnson lost his job partly because of what happened during Partygate during the pandemic. Now we have a prime minister who apparently was as callous; he didn’t say ‘let the bodies pile high’, he said ‘let them die,’ and you not saying it didn’t happen.”

In the summer months of 2020, Sunak had championed the “Eat Out to Help Out” scheme discounting food and drink to encourage people into cafes, pubs, bars, restaurants and town centres and boost the economy. The virus was still raging and no vaccines were yet available. The inquiry has previously heard that Whitty privately referred to Sunak’s scheme as “eat out to help out the virus.”

In a WhatsApp exchange seen by the Inquiry, this led government scientific adviser Professor Dame Angela McLean to refer to Sunak as “Dr Death the chancellor.”

Vallance and Whitty confirmed that Sunak, backed by Johnson and his cabinet, pushed through the

scheme—leading to many thousands more infections and deaths—without seeking any scientific advice. Vallance said it was generally understood among scientific advisers that the policy could only lead to the spread of COVID and he would be “very surprised” if Sunak had not known this.

That ending lockdowns and any other public health measures was the overriding policy of the main government players is clear in Johnson’s continued reliance on Dr. Death.

Earlier this month, before Vallance gave his evidence, Dermot Keating, counsel to the inquiry, read from his diaries a January 2021 entry dealing with the government’s attempts to do away with a tier system of restrictions, and to end lockdown entirely. Keating said, “There is an entry... at a meeting on 25 January 2021, the PM [prime minister] is recorded saying he wants Tier 3 [by] 1 March, Tier 2 [by] 1 April, Tier 1 [by] 1 May and nothing by September.”

“And he [Johnson] ends it by saying the team must bring in the pro-death squad from [HM Treasury].”

In his evidence, Whitty criticised, albeit pulling all punches, the decision not to go into lockdown earlier, stating, “we were definitely slower than we should have been for a variety of reasons.” He also questioned the decision by the government to allow mass gathering “super-spreader” events to go ahead in the days leading to the first lockdown—including the four-day Cheltenham Festival attended by hundreds of thousands and a Champions League football match between Liverpool and Atletico Madrid attended by more than 50,000. These were “logically incoherent” and gave the public the false impression of “normality,” said Whitty.

Vallance told the Inquiry he regretted comments he made on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme on March 13—ten days before the first lockdown—which appeared to suggest he supported the mass infection of the population through “herd immunity”. Vallance explained, “I referred to the concept of herd or population immunity. I regret having done so and in particular not taking sufficient time to explain the concept fully. I was not suggesting or advocating that the country should ‘go for herd immunity’ in the sense of loosening non-pharmaceutical interventions to increase the spread of the virus.”

But at the time of these events, Vallance and Whitty

refused to make public criticisms of the government, with both at various stages backing the policy of mass infection. Vallance even claimed that there was a scientific “consensus” underpinning the government’s policies. For this statement they were criticized in July 2021 by 1,200 scientists and doctors who signed the open letter to *The Lancet* medical journal of July 7 opposing the government’s plan as a “dangerous and unethical experiment.”

Referring to Whitty and Vallance at the time, Dr. Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, wrote, “The faux deference that you saw from both of them to the prime minister in trying to shore up his decision making, I thought, was an abdication of their independent role as government advisers.” He commented, “I’m afraid you have to conclude that the chief medical officer is wilfully misrepresenting scientific opinion across the country, and that is extraordinary to observe.”

Whatever concerns Vallance and Whitty raised in private, they were overwhelmingly ignored by the government. The only conclusion that can be drawn from the Inquiry’s already voluminous body of evidence is that the pandemic revealed a grotesque and criminal indifference within ruling circles to the mass loss of life. The same attitude is taken to the human cost of austerity—which has resulted in over a million excess deaths of working-class people in Britain over the last 15 years—and of the NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)