

Boris Johnson appears at UK COVID Inquiry to justify his crimes

Thomas Scripps
6 December 2023

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson skulked into the UK COVID Inquiry three hours before it was to begin to avoid a protest by relatives of those killed due to his government's criminal actions.

The first of his two days of questioning by Counsel to the Inquiry Hugo Keith KC focussed on decision making during the early part of 2020, when the pandemic began. Johnson's account of his role throughout was that he had "got the big calls right", but there had been insufficient evidence and scientific urging to take the more proactive public health measures that would have saved thousands of lives.

In fact, there were more than enough data and important voices in the international scientific community pointing to the need for urgent measures to control the spread of the virus. The best proof of this is in the record of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which carefully reported the warnings of doctors and scientists and events in China and Italy, where the first major outbreaks occurred.

But Johnson is right in one respect: Virtually none of this concern for the health of lives of millions of people animated his cabinet, the wider government, or the layer of scientific advisers close to them. The atmosphere was so toxic that, in May 2020, many former government advisers joined in the formation of an Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Independent SAGE) as a counterweight to the official body.

When Johnson voiced his indifference to mass death, declaring "Let the bodies pile high in their thousands!", he spoke as the authentic representative of the ruling class and its political and scientific flunkys.

Among the documents revealed by the Inquiry and shown to Johnson were the minutes of a Cabinet meeting on January 31, 2020, which made plain the

dangers confronting the world's population, with Health Secretary Matt Hancock reporting a COVID virus reproduction rate of 2-3 and a mortality rate of two percent.

Keith observed, "Despite the reference to the mortality rate, the reproduction figure and the knowledge which was already in the possession of government that there were confirmed cases outside China, sustained human-human transmission, nobody stopped to say this means, inevitably, a huge number of deaths, a wall of death, and this country, if it escapes China, will be overwhelmed by the virus."

Johnson claimed he and his ministers were simply unable "to comprehend the implications of what we were actually looking at." He described himself as "agnostic" towards the threat, which he likened to "a cloud on the horizon no bigger than a man's hand."

Minutes of a Cabinet meeting on February 6 include Johnson's concluding remarks warning of a "potential for the virus to have a large impact on the UK's economy", which it was "important to be ready for".

When Keith asked why Johnson "didn't say 'There is potential for this virus, indeed a probability, now, that it will kill large numbers of people,' rather than focussing on the economy," the former prime minister responded, "That's not what I thought."

By the end of February, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat was producing documents warning that "up to 520,000 could die as a direct result of COVID-19". Johnson's notes from the time stress the "biggest danger [is] due to overreaction."

Summarising the situation by the beginning of March, based on the written evidence and Johnson's testimony, Keith said, "That realisation on your part that there is no effective border control, that PPE may be deficient, that there is no effective, scaled up, test, trace and

isolate contacts system is absent from all this material. That debate simply didn't take place."

Shown a WhatsApp message from his former chief adviser Dominic Cummings sent on the March 3, describing Johnson's feeling at the time that the "main danger" was "talking the economy into a slump," the former prime minister admitted, "If at that point you had asked me, 'What is going to be the lasting damage of this,' I still would have said it's what we do to fight it rather than the actual impact of the disease."

Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty was meanwhile warning, Johnson claimed, against "behavioural fatigue" should public health measures be implemented too early and the population, in Johnson's words, get "fed up" with the restrictions. Johnson described this as the "prevailing view for a long time." Asked if he pushed back "against this notion", Johnson replied, "No". It was only on March 13 that the point was made in SAGE that any difficulty in maintaining public health measures "should not be taken as a reason to delay."

The attitude in government is summed up by a document prepared for a March 12 meeting presenting options for public health interventions and their consequences for the healthcare system. Only two scenarios are considered: doing nothing and implementing both 7-day isolation and household isolation. The "with interventions" scenario still shows a shortage of nearly 400,000 hospital beds for the expected numbers of patients. Nothing further was suggested.

Johnson blustered that he had been "bewildered... looking at that graph," but thought, "well, there must be a reason why we're not being told to go early [with public health measures]."

Keith challenged, "You didn't yourself ask, firstly, what can be done [to reduce the number of hospitalised people], why are we talking in terms of these modest measures which may or may not even be imposed this week... Why didn't you ask, 'Why are you presenting me with this and at the same time telling me we mustn't go too early with interventions?'"

Johnson put this down to a collective failure of the imagination. It was another ten days before the first national lockdown was imposed.

Addressing that intervening period, Keith raised a text sent by Cummings describing Johnson as "back to

Jaws mode"—a reference to Johnson's belief the hero of the *Jaws* movie was the mayor who kept the beaches open despite the threat of shark attacks, i.e., an anti-lockdown position—after a meeting with then Chancellor now Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (described in documents seen by the Inquiry as "Dr Death").

In his most animated and angry response of the day, Johnson retorted that it would have been "negligent" not to have had such a conversation with the Treasury "about the economic ramifications of what I was going to do... I've got the chancellor of the exchequer with me saying that there's a risk to the UK bond markets and our ability to raise sovereign debt."

Johnson's private secretary's notes recall him expressing the view the same day, "We're killing the patient to tackle the tumour, large number who will die, why are we destroying everything for people who will die anyway soon."

Having been forced into the lockdown, Johnson was determined to undo it as fully and quickly as possible. Chief Scientific Officer Patrick Valance noted across various occasions that Johnson was "very bullish and wanted everything to be released sooner and more extremely than we do", had held a discussion about "let[ting] it rip" and wanted "to push opening up too fast."

Johnson's disdain for the impact on the millions who would fall sick is evident in notes scribbled on a submission he received in October 2020 on Long COVID. "Bollocks," he wrote. "Gulf War syndrome stuff."

Keith noted that these "disparaging references" were made "repeatedly" up to at least June 2021, "notwithstanding the repeated" presentation of reports on the subject.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact