

Johnson unrepentant on second day of UK COVID Inquiry questioning

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7 December 2023

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson attended his second and final day of questioning at the UK COVID Inquiry on Thursday. Questions were put to him by Counsel to the Inquiry Hugo Keith KC and several other lawyers representing the various national Bereaved Families groups; disabled, children's, women's and minority rights groups, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the British Medical Association.

Keith's questions focussed on Johnson's actions from the summer of 2020 through to January 2022. As on Wednesday, attention was drawn repeatedly, though in the designedly tame fashion of an official Inquiry, to the influence of "economic" concerns on Johnson's decision making.

Summarising Johnson's attitude to relaxing the two-metre rule on physical distancing in June 2020, considering the scientific advice he was receiving at the time, Keith explained, "There was no doubt that the existing two-metre rule was the best way to proceed epidemiologically, but you were under intense economic pressure to try to take a different path in order to be able to alleviate the economic burden."

Johnson hardly challenged such statements, consistently setting himself up as a fighter for the interests of the "least well off" who would be "hit hardest" by restrictions. Of course, that was the case only because the government refused to provide adequate financial and social support during public health restrictions, and they were also the "hardest hit" by the virus it allowed to spread.

Asked about the "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme, which evidence to the Inquiry has already shown was lambasted even by scientists close to the government, Johnson described it as "within the budget of risk" scientifically.

Keith countered, "But it wasn't being presented to you by the scientists, was it? It was being presented to you by the Treasury, the Chancellor of the Exchequer [Rishi

Sunak]... At the same time, your CMO [Chief Medical Officer]... was saying that, in general terms, the proposed easing of restrictions with relation to hospitality was at the top end of the risk boundary."

He went on, "You knew that the treasury and HMRC had not, in fact, sought scientific advice on the epidemiological consequences."

By September 2020, scientific advice was stacking up urging Johnson to implement a two-week "circuit breaker" to cut off the spread of the virus, expressed in terms, Keith relayed, of "more interventions are necessary, go fast, go early, do more." He concluded with the question, "Why didn't you apply what you knew to be the lesson learned from March which was, go early, take a precautionary approach and go the extra mile epidemiologically?"

Johnson answered, "It's not as though we didn't do anything," explaining that he thought the regional tier system that was implemented was "worth a try".

Keith insisted, "You didn't accept the advice... which was, go for a two-week circuit breaker." Instead, the government implemented a 10pm curfew for the hospitality sector and advice to work from home. Johnson repeated, "It's not as though nothing is happening."

In fact, Johnson had sought, in Keith's words, "Advice beyond the advice you were receiving but which you were not inclined to accept," in the form of a September 20, 2020 meeting with authors and supporters of the Great Barrington Declaration calling for a herd immunity approach, Sunetra Gupta and Carl Heneghan.

The former prime minister responded with a strategy used throughout the two days of questioning, presenting himself as a devil's advocate acting on behalf of a population supposedly sceptical of the science and desperate to mix freely amid a raging pandemic with no vaccines available.

"I needed to have the arguments—a lot of people were

talking about the great Swedish success and how they had managed to do it without lockdowns—and if I’m going to enforce another lockdown... I need to know what the counterarguments are.”

He said later, “I had to speak for everybody who... wanted these points put to the scientists... I had to get their version of why this wasn’t the case, why wasn’t it true, as people were continuously saying in the media and elsewhere, that the answer was to shield the elderly and to let it rip otherwise.”

This is a gross distortion of the truth. Sweden was not a “success” but suffered far worse rates of death than local countries and would have suffered still more if the population had not carried out its own safeguarding measures and the country not had so many (40 percent) single households without children. It was not the bulk of the British population clamouring for answers about why the government wasn’t allowing them to be infected en masse, but, as Johnson says, the media, on behalf of their big business funders.

Referring to the many already widely publicised instances of Johnson reportedly voicing support for “letting it rip” and dismissing the deaths of older people who had “had a good innings,” Keith asked in his sharpest question of the day, “Was your position, Mr Johnson, that in light of your views, secretly held, about people dying having reached their time anyway, that you were obliged to reject the advice of your advisers about a circuit breaker, that there be no national lockdown until the last possible moment?”

Visibly unsettled, Johnson repeated, “No, no, no,” then claimed, “My position was that we had to save human life at all ages ... that is what we did.” He described the “let it rip” sentiment as a “view that was, sadly, quite widespread,” adding, “There were plenty of people who used that phrase.”

Returning to the question of the economy, Keith noted ongoing private bilateral meetings between Johnson and the Treasury at this time to discuss public health matters. “You and your chancellor meet privately ... and you discuss plans for NPI [non pharmaceutical intervention] easements.”

Johnson claimed he could not remember the meetings, but that they were the sort “you’d expect me to have.”

Finally for the year 2020, Keith asked, “to what extent your decision making in the middle of December was influenced by the press or your backbenchers because there are references in Patrick Vallance [the Chief Scientific Officer]’s diaries to you saying that the view of

your backbenchers was to take a particular path [to let the virus spread freely], that you were minded to agree with them. You appeared instinctively to resist the reintroduction of the ultimate lockdown measures.”

Johnson explained that he was “rightly” expressing “the general view not just of backbenchers but of other cabinet ministers.”

The surge of cases underway at that time led to the worst peak of the disease in the UK, with over 1,800 people reported killed by the virus in a single day come late January 2021. A lockdown was only belatedly declared on January 6.

Subsequent questioning by a range of lawyers representing other parties to the Inquiry brought out Johnson and the government’s callous disregard for these costs to human life.

Challenged by Pete Weatherby KC, representing Covid Bereaved Families for Justice, over his assertions that the UK had “defied most of the gloomier predictions” about excess deaths—when in fact age-adjusted studies of excess deaths show it has fared worse than all Western European countries bar Italy—Johnson said dismissively, “I don’t believe that your evidence stacks up”, earning audible outrage from the members of the public attending.

Asked by Samuel Jacobs for the TUC about his reported references in July 2021 to “all the malingering workshy people” concerned about returning to crowded workplaces, Johnson said he “didn’t want to see was a drag anchor put on people getting back into the workplace.” His “worry” was that an “inertia, and a desire to stay with the working from home pattern” was “Not in my view going to be beneficial for a strong economic recovery.”



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