

UK COVID Inquiry finds Westminster and devolved governments responsible for tens of thousands of deaths

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The second stage of the three-part official UK COVID Inquiry—dealing with the response of the four governments of the UK (covering England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) to the pandemic—has issued damning findings, including that they were responsible for tens of thousands of avoidable deaths.

Chaired by a former High Court judge, Baroness Heather Hallett, the findings are contained in 750 pages across two volumes. The hearings covering “Core UK decision-making and political governance” lasted seven months between October 2023 and May 2024.

In findings published Thursday, the inquiry found that the response of the UK governments to the pandemic was “too little, too late”. The first lockdown imposed by Boris Johnson’s government was not authorised until March 23, 2020, and began March 26. This was despite 116 confirmed cases of COVID across the UK having already been recorded—and the first death on March 5.

The Inquiry accepted evidence “that the mandatory lockdown should have been imposed one week earlier. Had a mandatory lockdown been imposed on or immediately after 16 March 2020, modelling has established that the number of deaths in England in the first wave up until 1 July 2020 would have been reduced by 48% – equating to approximately 23,000 fewer deaths.”

Hallett’s introduction notes, “The number of deaths across the UK for which the virus was responsible—calculated by whether Covid-19 is mentioned on the death certificate—is now over 230,000. This appalling loss of life resulted from the virus spreading across the UK in three successive waves. The devastating socio-economic consequences resulted both from the virus and from the decisions taken to respond to it.”

Statistics compiled and displayed Friday at the National COVID Memorial Wall in London show that the more accurate fatality figure is 251,227. Accepting Hallett’s figure, at least 10 percent of deaths suffered in the pandemic were caused by government refusal to impose a timely lockdown.

The report explains, “The spread of the virus globally and, in particular, the escalating crisis in Italy were clear warning signs, which should have prompted urgent planning across the four nations. Instead, the governments did not take the pandemic seriously enough until it was too late.”

It continues, “On 8 March 2020, the Department of Health and

Social Care reported that there had been more than 80,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths in China and almost 6,000 cases and more than 200 deaths in Italy. That same day, a number of northern provinces in Italy were placed into an effective lockdown – this was extended to the whole of the country on 9 March. In the UK, the total number of Covid-19 cases had increased to 273, including 244 cases in England, 18 in Scotland, 4 in Wales and 7 in Northern Ireland. There had been two deaths.”

By the time the Johnson government finally authorised the first lockdown, “SAGE [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] estimated that the number of cases was doubling every three to four days and intensive care units in London were on track to reach capacity within ten days. Almost 300 people had died, with more than 100 of those deaths occurring in the previous two days.”

The onset of mass deaths in Italy “should have prompted urgent planning across the four nations”, the report concludes, adding, “Instead, the governments did not take the pandemic seriously enough until it was too late. February 2020 was a lost month.”

For Johnson et al it was business as usual. The Inquiry states, “The UK Cabinet was not convened between 14 and 25 February 2020. There was also no COBR [Downing Street emergency meeting] between 19 and 26 February 2020. It was during the school half-term holidays and parliamentary recess.. Johnson was at this point staying at Chevening House (a country residence used by Foreign Secretaries)... It does not appear that he was briefed, at all or to any significant extent, on Covid-19 and he received no daily updates.”

This was despite, as noted by the Inquiry, the fact that the World Health Organization published guidance on February 14, 2020, declaring, “There is ample evidence that mass gatherings can amplify the spread of infectious diseases ... Such infections can be transmitted during a mass gathering, during transit to and from the event, and in participants’ home communities upon their return.”

In the first stage of the Inquiry—which published its findings in July last year—Hallett largely accepted evidence from key government figures and advisers that everyone was hamstrung because they were all victims of “groupthink”.

This week’s findings argue the pandemic response was conditioned by a “toxic and chaotic culture” The report states, “By failing to tackle this chaotic culture—and, at times, actively

encouraging it—Mr Johnson reinforced a culture in which the loudest voices prevailed and the views of other colleagues, particularly women, often went ignored, to the detriment of good decision-making.”

Such explanations say nothing of the ferocity with which the Johnson government pursued its policy of reopening or keeping open the economy, and circulation of the virus with it. While it notes the interventions made by Rishi Sunak (the then chancellor, and later prime minister) to open the economy from the summer of 2020, there is not even a reference to the infamous statement Johnson made in Downing Street in October that year, as attested by several witnesses: “No more fucking lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands”.

Despite acknowledging that senior government figures, including Johnson, and key advisers advocated—to varying degrees—a policy of mass infection and “herd immunity”, there is no explanation anywhere in the report that this politically criminal response was governed by the same economic objectives pursued by capitalist governments internationally. The bottom lines of the corporations and the super-rich were prioritised above the safety and lives of the population.

While the remit of the Inquiry was to deal with the response of the four governments of the UK, it would not have been possible for such a murderous policy to be implemented except with the backing of the opposition Labour Party in Westminster. Yet Labour is mentioned nowhere in 750 pages.

Labour’s nominally left leader Jeremy Corbyn never called for a lockdown prior to Johnson finally authorising the first, instead offering to be “constructively critical” of his government. This was the same policy pursued by Corbyn’s successor as Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer.

While opposing the stance of right-wing forces—who maintain that the initial lockdown itself was a mistake—the Inquiry gives ground to such reactionary positions in stating that had a timely lockdown and other mitigations been put in place earlier, there would have been no necessity for later lockdowns. There is no scientific validity for this, given that the first COVID vaccine was not available in the UK for deployment until December 2020—almost a full year after COVID was first detected in the UK.

The Executive Summary states, “While the nationwide lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 undoubtedly saved lives, they also left lasting scars on society and the economy, brought ordinary childhood to a halt, delayed the diagnosis and treatment of other health issues and exacerbated societal inequalities.”

It concludes, “The Covid-19 lockdowns only became inevitable because of the acts and omissions of the four governments. They must now learn the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic if they are to avoid lockdowns in future pandemics.”

And with that the Inquiry report—despite its damning conclusions, which point the finger at politicians responsible for social murder on a vast scale—will be placed in the House of Commons Library to collect dust.

There are further reports to come from the Inquiry before it finally concludes in the summer of 2027, but for the ruling elite it has achieved what it set out to do—make a few critical remarks, issue the necessary tut-tuts, but essentially put it down to

experience and move on.

Most importantly, everyone in ruling circles knows that no-one responsible for mass death will face the slightest sanction, let alone prosecution. This is due to Hallett’s Inquiry being held under the Inquiries Act 2005, meaning it is specifically prohibited from ruling on or determining anyone’s civil or criminal liability.

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In response to Thursday’s publication of the findings of the UK COVID Inquiry, the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) was contacted by Christopher Donaghy, a resident of Northern Ireland whose mother passed away from a COVID-19 infection in October 2021. Christopher wrote the following.

When I saw the final findings on the TV from the Covid Inquiry, it angered me, disgusted me, as I am sure all the families involved that lost a loved one to the Covid pandemic. That the four governments in the UK just let the virus spread like wildfire, and their herd immunity plan that the then Conservative Party government had was a death sentence for the already sick people, and elderly.

My family was a victim of corporate greed. They only cared about enriching themselves and the millionaire/billionaire pals. This was evident for all to see when the criminal buffoon that was the PM at the time, Boris Johnson, said, “Let the bodies pile up”. They kept putting off closing everything and delaying lockdowns despite medical professionals telling him to do a lockdown, but when he eventually did a lockdown it was all too little, too late.

My mum passed from Covid in October 2021, here in Northern Ireland, Belfast. We had at the time a DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] First Minister, and they were disrupting Stormont [the Northern Ireland Assembly] because they couldn’t get their own way. They were refusing to go back to work.

Again, they didn’t listen to medical professionals. They didn’t want to do a lockdown either. They wanted the virus to spread, so their rich pals could keep on making money, making money, while everyone got sick with the virus. Here, where I live, the shops in my area didn’t have any guidelines. No one was wearing masks, no social distancing, it’s like the pandemic wasn’t taken seriously, until too late.

The pain of what happened to my family, with my beloved mum passing, my brother has been left with Long COVID—he used to be fitter, quicker and very athletic; he did a lot of walking and lifted dumbbells—now, he’s like a different person. He can’t walk far, he has to get public transport everywhere, he falls asleep and can’t remember if he did; his lungs will never be the same.

It disgusts me, and I’m sure it does a lot of victims’ families that these evil bloodsucking parasites that put profits over lives don’t get prosecuted and thrown into a jail cell. I will never get over the way I lost my mum; her, and thousands of other victims’ lives could have been saved.



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