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Johnson authorises neutered Covid-19 inquiry as Indian mutation surge takes first lives in Britain

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced to call a public inquiry into his government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, a murderous herd immunity programme that has claimed more than 150,000 lives.



Boris Johnson announcing the Covid-19 public inquiry (credit: screen capture Parliament TV)

The government's system underestimates COVID deaths but even its toll of 127,668 is the fifth highest of all countries. With 1,872 fatalities per one million of the population, the UK has the third highest rate among countries with a population of over 60 million, with only Italy (2,049) and Brazil (2,013) listing higher rates.

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Johnson announced the inquiry in parliament Wednesday, declaring, “Amid such tragedy, the state has an obligation to examine its actions as rigorously and as candidly as possible and to learn every lesson for the future which is why I have always said that, when the time is right, there should be a full and independent inquiry.”

Johnson’s real aim was to continue the cover-up of his criminality. The many thousands of relatives seeking justice for the preventable deaths of their loved ones will be denied, as Britain’s ruling elite again turns to its favourite means of escaping responsibility for social murder—the “independent” public inquiry.

Johnson said the inquiry would not even start for at least another year, in spring 2022. He cynically utilised the situation facing the National Health Service (NHS), saying that preparation for the inquiry “will place a significant burden on our NHS... and on many others. We must not inadvertently divert or distract the very people on whom we all depend in the heat of our struggle against this disease.”

It will then likely last for years to come, with Downing Street refusing to rule out that it will not conclude until after the next general election—scheduled for May 2, 2024. The *Times* noted that “the average public inquiry takes two and a half years,” but others inquiries have taken much longer. The Saville Inquiry into the events leading to the fatal shooting of 13 unarmed citizens in Londonderry in 1972 took 12 years to complete and the Chilcot Inquiry into Britain’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 took seven years.

The families of the 96 people killed in the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster were denied justice after a succession of hearings, inquests and inquiries, with not a single person among those responsible being brought to justice after more than 30 years.

The Grenfell Inquiry into the June 2017 deaths of 72 people in a residential tower block in London has already lasted nearly four years and is nowhere near finished. The police’s own study of the Inquiry’s final report, before which it will not even consider any prosecutions, may not take place until 2025— eight years after the fire .

Just as with Grenfell, the COVID inquiry is to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005. Johnson trumpeted how the 2005 Act has “full powers... including the ability to compel the production of all relevant materials and take oral evidence in public under oath.”

This is a smokescreen. No matter what evidence is uncovered or what oral evidence is presented, the Inquiries Act specifically prohibits ruling on or determining anyone's civil or criminal liability.

On top of that guarantee, all bases have already been covered to ensure that Johnson is exonerated. The *Times* reported Wednesday, "Aides are understood to have been gathering emails and documents for more than six months to support the Prime Minister's case."

Johnson has contemptuously refused to meet with the COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK who have long demanded an inquiry. The group, who started what became the National Covid Memorial Wall in London, said in response to Johnson's announcement, "It sounds like common sense when the Prime Minister says that an inquiry can wait until the pandemic is over, but lives are at stake with health experts and scientists warning of a third wave later this year."

Johnson announced the inquiry in the run up to his fully reopening the economy by June 21, with most of it opened from next Monday. He does so despite telling parliament, "Our own scientific advisers judge that, although more positive data is coming in and the outlook is improving, there could still be another resurgence in hospitalisations and deaths."

He pointed to the "persistent threat of new variants, and should those prove highly transmissible and elude the protection of our vaccines they would have the potential to cause even greater suffering than we endured in January."

The last weeks have seen a rapid spread throughout Britain of B.1.617.2, one of the Indian mutations of the virus, which has already contributed to mass death and suffering in India after being detected earlier this year. On Thursday, it was announced that the Indian mutation had caused its first deaths in Britain, with four people dying between May 5 and May 12. The virus was only detected recently in Britain, but has already resulted in at least 1,313 infections by May 12, nearly triple the 520 recorded the previous week and a massive increase from just 77 four weeks earlier. Public Health England data this week found that B.1.617.2 was responsible for between 40 percent and half of all cases detected in London.

Coronavirus cases are on the increase nationally, according to a PA news agency analysis of Public Health England data published May 13. It found that of the 315 local areas in England, 159 (50 percent) have seen a rate increase, 140 (44 percent) have seen a fall and 16 areas are unchanged.

As a result of the surge of Indian mutation infections, Bolton—a town in Greater Manchester in North West England, recorded the most coronavirus cases nationally for the seven days to May 9. It saw 553 new cases, the equivalent of 192.3 cases per 100,000 people, a more than a doubling from the 84.9 per 100,000 people the previous week.

Bolton's surge is a clear indictment of the reopening of the economy that has been underway for months, as Johnson laid out his “irreversible” roadmap to end the “last lockdown” in February. Bolton has a large population hailing from the Indian sub-continent, as do many urban areas in the north of England.

Around half of the cases found in Bolton are located in just three districts south of the city centre—Rumworth, Deane and Great Lever. Speaking to the BBC, Bolton Labour MP Yasmin Qureshi noted of the three areas, “It's an incredibly busy part of the town... It's very urbanised with major bus and train routes. There is a university, a sixth form college and a community college. There are some deprivation issues with a lot of people in social housing; some people not working or in low-paid jobs.”

Scientists, including among the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, have warned that up to 20,000 people could be hospitalised daily by the summer in a worst-case scenario if the virus turns out to be more transmissible than other COVID variants. This would lead to the NHS being unable to cope, as it struggled to treat 3,800 covid cases a day at the height of January's surge.

According to SAGE modelling, if there is a 40 percent increase in COVID-19 transmission in coming months, there could be up to 6,000 admissions daily. But if transmission increases by 50 percent from current levels there could be 10,000 admissions a day and up to 20,000. SAGE found that if the government just carried out Stage 3 of reopening next Monday and not the full reopening in June, a 50 percent transmission rate could still see between 6,000 and 14,000 daily hospitalisations.

The Tories only response to such great dangers has been to order surge testing in Bolton and a few other areas, allowing the virus to spread unchecked in the meantime. Their only consideration is to protect the corporations in a profits before lives policy. Interviewed by *Sky News* Thursday, Vaccines Minister Nadhim Zahawi said that Monday's reopening "remains in place because the vaccines are delivering". He declared, ignoring the fact that the Indian variants and four other "variants of concern" are in circulation and still being investigated, that "At the moment we have no evidence that it escapes the vaccines or is more severe in its impact on people."

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