

Britain: Pandemic Catastrophe

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As infections soar and the NHS buckles, a Zero Covid strategy is the only answer, argues Phil Hearse.

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The predicted Covid-19 catastrophe [1] has occurred. In Britain and other countries where neoliberal governments have tried to prioritise keeping business open, the figures are disastrous. In Britain, the latest (31 December) daily death toll is 941, back to the levels of the first wave in May, and new infections are at 56,000.

The immediate cause of the dire situation in Britain is that the 'tier' system has failed. Ministers briefed informally that the economy could not stand a second lockdown, and the tier system was its replacement.

Except that it didn't work. It gave out mixed and confusing messages that were often ignored, especially when the rich and famous were seen doing so. Adjoining towns with different rules was a situation not understood by most of the population because it was not understandable. The current frightening level of infections and the hospital crisis is the result.

In the United States, there have been nearly 20 million cases and 346,000 deaths - against an official figure of 74,000 deaths in the UK. New infection rates in the United States are running at about 200,000 per day. Around 80,000 US deaths are expected this January. Given the population difference, Britain and the United States are in the same league.

Significantly, the Swedish strategy of 'herd immunity' has collapsed as infections have skyrocketed.

As everyone now knows, the new British strain of the virus is spreading faster than the original. But as Richard Brenner - co-founder with Roy Wilkes of the Zero Covid campaign - put it when the new strain was announced by Matt Hancock on 16 December, 'The virus is not out of control because we have a new strain; we have a new strain because the virus is out of control.'

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Exactly. All viruses develop new strains. The more they are allowed to spread, the more new strains will develop. Now dozens of countries have reported infections of the British variant.

The roll-out of the vaccine is, of course, welcome, but it coincides with a new peak in infections and deaths, and - as clearly explained by the independent SAGE committee member Stephen Reicher [2] - it is now obvious that the vaccine on its own will not be enough to suppress the virus.

A Tory pandemic

The current lethal chaos is the consequence of the late and inadequate measures taken by the Johnson government, which, because the virus doesn't respect national borders, has negatively impacted attempts in Scotland and Wales to suppress the virus. The malign incompetence of the Westminster government includes:

1. Waiting too long before imposing the first lockdown on 23 March, weeks after it became obvious that infections were skyrocketing.
2. Closing schools just one day earlier, again far too late.
3. The failure of successive Tory government to sustain the stock of PPE, so there was not enough and much of it had gone out of date.
4. Turning track-and-trace into an embarrassing fiasco. Despite the £14 billion handed out to companies like Serco and Sitel, the system has systematically failed to trace contacts. In August it was estimated that tracking each contact had cost £900 [3]. This incompetence is a product of giving contracts to private operators, especially those with strong links to the Tory Party.
5. Relaxing the lockdown too quickly. And in August the government encouraged people to go into pubs and restaurants through the 'eat out to help out' scheme, which, [according to one study drove](#), up infection rates between 8 and 10%.
6. Dragooning university students onto the campuses in late September and early October, causing thousands of infections, despite clear warnings from the British Medical Journal [4].

On top of all this, the situation has been made much worse by structural weaknesses - lack of beds and staff - due to ten years of Tory cuts and the impact of Brexit (which has lost the NHS tens of thousands of nurses and other staff).

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These failures have at root the same cause - the desire to open up the economy as soon as possible in the interests of big business, premised on the false idea that the virus could be contained until the arrival of a vaccine. Allowing people to visit pubs, restaurants, and beaches, and indeed to take foreign holidays, all added to the infection rates.

Idiocy starts at the top

An idiotic government empowers and encourages idiots. For example, on 5 December, hundreds of young people, none wearing masks, descended on the famous London department store Harrods [5], in an event organised on social media. Big joke!

People not obeying basic social distancing and masking rules are visible everywhere. The fiasco over Christmas rules undoubtedly led to some defiance of the final instructions and unsafe social mixing that will have caused thousands of infections.

There have been repeated anti-lockdown and anti-mask-wearing protests in London and elsewhere, addressed by conspiracy theorists like David Icke and Piers Corbyn, supported by fascist groups and

anti-vax campaigners. Anti-vax campaigners have especially targeted BAME communities [6], which surveys show is less likely to take up the vaccine. Anti-lockdown sentiment has had a significant effect on people ignoring the rules for mask-wearing and social distancing.

Although secondary schools in England are going to stay closed for the first two weeks of the year, teaching unions are right to claim that schools are unsafe. It is reckoned that 3% of secondary and 2% of primary students have the virus – an average of almost one per class.

In many schools, social distancing is impossible, and to allow them to reopen without safe conditions will be a major addition to infections. At the time of writing, it seems that the NEU is preparing to take industrial action if there is an attempt to fully reopen schools. It should.

A complete inventory of Westminster government failures over Covid-19 would take a book. But they all point to the same conclusion. After some initial toying with the idea of 'herd immunity' – i.e. doing nothing – the Johnson government had to accept the result would be a disaster and overwhelm the NHS. They have therefore tried to 'balance' restrictions with the needs of business. No such balance could be achieved.

In the absence of a radical lockdown policy, combined with aggressive track-and-trace and massive financial support to individuals and businesses, the virus has been allowed to flourish. Unsuppressed, the virus surged back as the economy started to reopen more generally and late summer failures were followed by social mixing around Christmas and New Year.

While both the Oxford/Zeneca and Pfizer vaccines are welcome, their roll-out has been marred by political considerations. The Johnson government now wants to give as many people as possible a first dose, when the effectiveness of this, without a rapid second dose after about 10 days, has not been proven. We shall see whether this results in some older and more vulnerable people eventually getting the disease. Some reports say the effectiveness of the Pfizer vaccine was only 52% after just one dose [7].

England, Scotland, and Wales are all suffering from the irresponsibility of the Johnson government. Now we face a chaotic future, with a race between the spread of the new mutation and the roll-out of vaccines, with the latter's effectiveness against the new strain not properly measured.

The situation for hospitals and GP surgeries is dire, with Covid cases and the vaccination programme leading to widespread cancellations of consultations and operations. Thousands of cancer patients will die as a result – though few of those unnecessary deaths are likely to occur in well-resourced private hospitals.

To fight our way out of this situation, we need action on the four key demands of the Zero Covid campaign [8].

To fight our way out of this situation, we need action on the four key demands of the Zero Covid campaign:

1. A full UK-wide lockdown until new cases in the community has been reduced close to zero.
2. An effective find, test, trace, isolate, and support (FTTIS) system, run locally in the public sector, to quickly squash any further outbreaks.
3. Covid screening, and where necessary quarantine, at all ports of entry to the UK.
4. A guaranteed livelihood for everyone who loses money because of the pandemic.

To this, we should add the need for unions to inspect and take action over unsafe workplaces, as explained by the Hazards campaign [9].

There is still a significant minority in the Conservative Party that want a 'live with the virus' strategy. This means, in effect, accepting many more tens of thousands of deaths in exchange for keeping most businesses open. They are being supported by the lunatic right in the national press – the Daily Mail's deranged Richard Littleton says 'close the hospitals and open the pubs'.

There are multiple dangers in the present UK government strategy. It's not just the fact that the NHS is being overwhelmed. There are longer-term dangers in the possible emergence of strains of the virus against which vaccines are ineffective; in other words, a danger of endless Covid-19, with the virus endemic, like flu, developing new strains every year. Or there could be a whole new global pandemic even worse than the present one.

The first step towards dealing with these multiple dangers is to suppress the virus here and now. Without that, not only will more tens of thousands die unnecessarily, but the damage to the economy will be worse, and a full opening up may be put off to the indefinite future.

That way lies economic and social collapse, with many millions out of work and unable to cope. That way, too, lies an inevitable declaration by the government of a new round of austerity and social spending cuts, with catastrophic impact on the poorest.

The British virus is going global. New strains are emerging in many countries. Without massive help to poorer countries in the Global South, new strains will come back to the Global North. Zero Covid has to be an international call.

Everything said by the Zero Covid campaign about the virus and how to fight it has been proved correct. Now a new push is needed to boost the campaign, and that should start with the campaign's January 16 conference on organising for Zero Covid [10]. Speakers include Diane Abbott MP, Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the NEU, and Professor Susan Michie of the Independent SAGE group. Be there!

Phil Hearse

P.S.

- Anticapitalist Resistance. 2 January 2020:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/pandemic-catastrophe>
 - Phil Hearse is a joint author of *System Crash*.
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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 52431), [Government 'herd immunity' strategy tipping Britain towards huge death toll](#).

[2] Available on ESSF (article 56361), [Britain: With the new Covid variant everywhere, it's not enough to just wait for the vaccine](#).

- [3] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ournhs/serco-and-sitel-get-more-public-money-despite-track-and-trace-fiasco/>
- [4] <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3365>
- [5] <https://metro.co.uk/2020/12/06/hundreds-of-maskless-young-people-try-to-storm-harrods-13708172/>
- [6] <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/rfk-jrs-york-city-vaccine-forum-highlights-concerns/story?id=66158336>
- [7] <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4826>
- [8] <https://zerocovid.uk/join-the-campaign/>
- [9] <https://www.hazardscampaign.org.uk/blog/hazards-campaign-calls-for-zero-covid-strategy-by-all-the-governments-in-the-uk>
- [10] <https://zerocovid.uk/2020/12/19/conference-16-jan-2021/>