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Covid inquiry: What did Johnson say about underestimated risks, excess deaths, and his missing WhatsApps?

This week it was the turn of the UK's former prime minister to give evidence to the inquiry. **Gareth Iacobucci** reports

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Whether it was his alleged reluctance to impose lockdowns, his oversight of a supposedly “toxic” atmosphere in Downing Street, or being bamboozled by science,^{1,2} Boris Johnson has already been discussed at length during the UK's covid inquiry. This week the former UK prime minister had his say as he faced questions on 6 and 7 December.

What was Johnson's message to bereaved families?

“I understand the feelings of these victims and their families, and I am deeply sorry for the pain and the loss and suffering of those victims and their families,” Johnson said as he began his verbal testimony.

The former PM was briefly interrupted by protesters from bereaved families at the start of his evidence session. In a statement issued in response to Johnson's evidence, Aamer Anwar, lead solicitor for the Scottish Covid Bereaved group, said that the apology was “not accepted by many of the bereaved because he also claimed [in his witness statement] his government saved thousands of lives, and that for many is a grotesque distortion of the truth.”

Johnson also began by thanking the “hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers and many other public servants and people in all walks of life who helped to protect our country throughout a dreadful pandemic.”

Did ministers initially underestimate the risks of covid?

In his 233 page witness statement³ Johnson said, “Looking back, it is clear that [in January 2020] we vastly underestimated the risks in those early weeks. If we had properly understood how fast covid was spreading and the fact that it was spreading asymptotically, there are many things we would have done differently.”

Asked why information received by the UK government on 29 January 2020 about covid-19 spreading outside China hadn't provided a “light bulb moment” for him and Whitehall, he said, “If we had collectively stopped to think about the mathematical implications of some of the forecasts that were being made and we believed them, we might have operated differently. The problem was that I don't think we attached enough credence to those forecasts, and because of the experience that we'd had with other zoonotic diseases, I think collectively in Whitehall there was not a sufficiently loud enough klaxon of alarm.”

When reminded of evidential documentation disclosed to the inquiry showing that he had warned against “an over-reaction” to covid, Johnson described himself as “agnostic” at that point.

Did government decisions lead to more excess deaths?

Johnson said that he couldn't answer that question, replying, “I'm not sure.” When it was put to him that almost all other western European countries besides Italy had had lower excess deaths than the UK, Johnson claimed that “the statistics vary” and argued that “every country struggled.”

He said that “irrespective of government action” there were some factors that made the UK particularly vulnerable to excess deaths, including an elderly population, the rate of comorbidities, and being very densely populated. Pressed on whether he accepted that decisions about lockdowns had contributed to the number of excess deaths, Johnson replied, “I don't know,” adding, “What I would say respectfully to people is that they were very, very difficult decisions. The issue of the timeliness of lockdowns was clearly one that we considered very hard at the time.”

He said that the arguments that were made against early action, namely the risk of “behavioural fatigue” and then the risk of a bounce-back, “were made powerfully, and they certainly had a big effect on me.”

Why were 5000 WhatsApp messages missing from his old phone?

Johnson said that he couldn't explain why some WhatsApp messages went missing from his old phone and couldn't be handed over to the inquiry. He said that he couldn't give a technical explanation but thought that the problem was something to do with the app being reset.

He was asked about a technical report supplied by his solicitors showing that there may have been a factory reset of the phone at the end of January 2020 and then an attempt to reinstall the contents later, in June 2020. Asked if he was the one who had performed the factory reset, he said, “I don't remember any such thing. Can I, for the avoidance of doubt, make it absolutely clear I haven't removed any WhatsApps from my phone.”

What discussions took place about closing the borders?

Johnson's former chief aide Dominic Cummings previously told the inquiry that in February 2020 Johnson had asked rhetorically, "Aren't people going to think we're mad for not closing the borders?" In his evidence Johnson acknowledged that he had been worried about this.

He said, "When it came to borders, there was an overwhelming scientific consensus as far as I understood it, that trying to interrupt the virus with tougher border controls bought you really very little, or you might delay [it] by a matter of days or perhaps weeks, but you would not stop the virus from entering the UK. I think a lot of people in the country found it very hard to understand."

Johnson said he believed that this point was worth discussing with scientists. "I wanted to understand the reason why border controls didn't work," he said. "But, in retrospect, you can see that they were right. Countries that did try to use borders as a way of containing covid really didn't succeed in that."

To what extent did Johnson want to "let the virus rip"?

On his second day of giving evidence on 7 December,⁴ Johnson was asked to comment on several diary entries from the then chief scientific officer, Patrick Vallance, that alluded to the PM wanting to relax restrictions and let older people accept their fate.

In August 2020 Vallance had said that Johnson was "obsessed with older people accepting their fate and letting the young get on in life and the economy going." And in October 2020 Vallance said that Johnson argued for "letting it all rip" and that he said, "There will be more casualties but so be it—they've had a good innings."

Johnson commented, "The implication that you're trying to draw from those conversations is completely wrong, and my position was that we had to save human life at all ages." He said that his actions, rather than what he had said, demonstrated that he had acted to curb covid rather than allowing it to spread through the population.

Was he obstructive towards devolved administrations?

Bethan Harris, legal representative on behalf of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice Cymru, put it to Johnson that he had failed to engage and cooperate with representatives from the four UK nations during the pandemic. Johnson denied this. He was referred to his words in his own witness statement, in which he said that it was "optically wrong for the UK prime minister to hold regular meetings with other devolved administration ministers."

When pushed again by Harris, Johnson said, "My considerations were—to be absolutely frank with the inquiry—the risk of pointless political friction and grandstanding because of the well known opposition of some of the [devolved administrations] to the government—and also to avoid unnecessary leaks." He argued that his decision to devolve responsibility for dealing with the leaders of the devolved administrations to the Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove had been "by and large extremely effective" in minimising "divergence and tensions."

1 Iacobucci G. Covid inquiry: What we learnt this week. *BMJ* 2023;383. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p2652 pmid: 37949463

2 Iacobucci G. Covid inquiry: The week that science became both bamboozling and a millstone. *BMJ* 2023;383. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p2788 pmid: 38011918

3 UK Covid-19 Inquiry. INQ000255836—Witness statement of the Rt Hon Boris Johnson, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, dated 31/08/2023, 7 Dec 2023. <https://covid19-public-inquiry.uk/documents/inq000255836-witness-statement-of-the-rt-hon-boris-johnson-former-prime-minister-of-the-united-kingdom-dated-31-08-2023/>

4 UK Covid-19 Inquiry. Transcript of module 2 public hearing on 07 December 2023, 7 Dec 2023. <https://covid19-public-inquiry.uk/documents/transcript-of-module-2-public-hearing-on-07-december-2023/>