

## Could Rishi Sunak Find His 'Goose' is 'Cooked' By Hallett

**Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Birmingham City University**

In the last week we've seen the Cabinet Office seek a judicial review of the request by the Covid Inquiry Chaired by Baroness Hallett to hand over former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's WhatsApp messages.

The inquiry was set up by Johnson to, as stated on the Cabinet Office website, "play a key role in learning the lessons from the pandemic and informing the government's preparations for the future" which primarily will focus on the health aspects of the worst crisis we've faced for a century (Gov, 2023).

Hallett's terms of reference, as well as analysing the responsiveness of the country's public health and care system, will consider our preparedness for the economic shock caused by disruptions (lockdowns), and the effectiveness of initiatives implemented by the Treasury to alleviate the impact experienced by individuals and businesses.

It's relevant to recall that though the pandemic was not as dreadful as some speculated at the outset, according to the data published last week by the government, the number of deaths due to Covid19 (as shown on the death certificate) is 226,989 (Gov, 2023a).

There's little doubt this figure is an underestimation, many dying in the early stages of the pandemic before a test for Covid was available (Duncan and Barr, 2023).

Critically, the number suffering long-term illness because of Covid is considerable affecting their quality of life and with consequential impact for the economy.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), "an estimated 2.0 million people living in private households in the UK (3.1% of the population) were experiencing self-reported long COVID (symptoms continuing for more than four weeks after the first confirmed or suspected coronavirus (COVID-19) infection that were not explained by something else) as of 2 January 2023" (ONS, 2023).

Tom Carver in an excellent *Times* article 'What is the UK's true Covid death toll?' examines the statistics and points out excess deaths provide a better effective measure of ongoing mortality (2022).

However, as the Covid Inquiry will undoubtedly attempt to fully explore, lockdown, which has always had its critics, is now being cited as a major cause of death due to illnesses and serious health issues, such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease, not being detected sufficiently early to allow treatment.

As the ONS reported last August, the rate of excess deaths was 14.4% higher than the five-year average with 1,350 more people dying than usual in the week ending 5<sup>th</sup> August (Newkey-Burden, 2022).

This led *The Telegraph*, most definitely not a supporter of lockdown, to conclude the country is facing a "new silent health crisis linked to the pandemic response" which is causing more deaths than the pandemic was meant to avoid (Knapton, 2022).

All of this will be carefully examined by Hallett's Inquiry which needs to examine every decision taken by government, their basis (logic) and the internal discussion by those involved.

This is the presumed reason for the demand for all WhatsApp messages within government, including those involving former PM Johnson. However, as many commentators speculate, the reason for the current government seeking legal clarification of whether it must release texts belonging to Johnson, who resigned last year, is reticence in exposing innermost thinking of those intimately involved in decision-making during the pandemic.

Even though all members of the cabinet under Johnson in early 2020 were collectively engaged in dealing with an unprecedented crisis, three were especially influential.

Boris Johnson's role as Prime Minister Johnson is obvious.

In any health crisis which involves dealing with a virus as potentially dangerous as Covid was, it's equally obvious that communication involving the PM and his health secretary, then Matt Hancock, will be of interest to the inquiry being held.

Hancock's decisions will be especially important in the considerations of the Hallett Inquiry.

Nonetheless, regardless of how Hancock's reputation fares in the inquiry, he will be remembered as having been forced to resign because he was caught on camera breaching Covid social distancing restrictions by kissing a member of staff, Gina Coladangelo, in his office,

Hancock's political career appears over as he's standing down as an MP at the next general election.

Dealing with any crisis entails a government dedicating additional resources.

This inevitably means vast amounts of finance being allocated at short notice.

According to the latest National Audit Office data last year, the cost to the country in dealing with the pandemic was £376 billion (Lizarraga, 2022).

Unless there are huge contingencies set aside to cope with a crisis which had no precedent in modern times, which there weren't, how the minister with responsibility for the nation's finances responded and their influence on key decisions, will be of great interest to the Hallett Inquiry.

That minister is, of course, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

During the pandemic the chancellor was Rishi Sunak whose resignation in early July last year is seen as instrumental in having brought down his former boss.

Sunak became so exasperated with Johnson's erratic and inconsistent behaviour at PM, particularly his attempt to defend the actions of the likes of Owen Patterson and, more especially, Chris Pincher who was accused of groping, believed he had now other option but to resign. His letter included the line "the public rightly expect government to be conducted properly, competently and seriously" (PA Media, 2022).

Though Sunak stood for leadership of his party, he was initially thwarted by Liz Truss whose message of 'trickle-down' economics proved more popular among Tory members.

However, because her premiership was so utterly economically calamitous, she was forced to resign allowing Sunak to become PM on 24<sup>th</sup> October when his only other challenger, Penny Mordaunt withdrew (Diver, 2022).

What 'textgate' appears to suggest is we've reached a state of affairs whereby the current PM is trying to limit the extent of information the Covid Inquiry has about communications involving his former boss and about which he'd surely have had intimate knowledge.

Indeed, there was the even more peculiar turn of events last week when Johnson deliberately bypassed Whitehall and passed on some of the Whatsapp messages on a phone to the Hallett Inquiry.

This has led some to suggest that Johnson has done this so he can portray himself as open to scrutiny in a way which the man who resigned from his cabinet and eventually replaced him is not.

The irony of this situation is not lost on some.

For supporters of Johnson, being able to undermine the man instrumental in removing him from leadership of the Conservative Party and therefore PM, has its attractions regardless of it seeming distasteful and unseemly.

It's speculated a reason for the Government being so reluctant in releasing all WhatsApp messages germane to the Covid Inquiry is the belief that information embarrassing to current PM Sunak could emerge (Munro, 2023).

The *Mail* reported one unnamed ally of the former as asking, "What is Rishi hiding?" and includes the assertion from Johnson "supporters" that Sunak wants to block the release of all WhatsApp messages because his manoeuvring in undermining his then boss will surface (Owen, 2023).

No one would happily agree to private communications being made public.

Nonetheless, being in government brings with it a level of responsibility.

All forms of communication, even WhatsApp messages, are considered to be valuable in building up as full a picture of the way in which decisions are taken, especially in the heat of the moment when, regardless of the pandemic emerging with alarming speed, we need to know all that happened as accurately as possible.

One of the key questions is how much information was provided to government by the likes of the BMA (British Medical Association) and SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) and whether any advice and guidance was acted upon with sufficient urgency.

Lack of alacrity in implementing expert advice during the pandemic is a criticism frequently made of Johnson's government.

If mistakes were made, and there are many who question whether the pandemic was dealt with in a way which demonstrated either, initially, seriousness of its potential threat or, subsequently, consistency in approach, it's essential we know exactly what they were and by whom.

As other countries which have already completed public enquiries have concluded, such information will be essential when, sadly it increasingly appears, they might be avoided if there's another pandemic.

Take, for example, South Korea which had faced previous health crises such as MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) in 2015 infecting 186 and killing 38.

With a population of 52 million, slightly smaller than the UK, but older, South Korea suffered 34,000 deaths, a rate of 61.2 people per 100,000 which is four times lower than the UK's, at 244.1 per 100,000. Notably, while the UK was subject to lockdown for 164 days, with variation between the home nations, South Korea did not need to require its citizens to stay at home.

This was achieved through a combination of rigorous testing, surveillance and, critically, acceptance by the public that the government were acting in their interests.

It has to be said that were another pandemic to occur in the next few years, it's essential we do similar to South Korea by learning any lessons and that findings from the Hallett Inquiry are widely accepted as credible.

Obfuscation and avoidance by government in releasing all of the information required by the Covid Inquiry is not helpful to this objective.

Moreover, the behaviour of some within Johnson's government, most notably resulting in fixed penalty fines for the then PM Johnson and his chancellor Sunak, for breaking of rules explicitly intended to protect everyone, has undermined public confidence in government. In the short-term this would potentially make the task of achieving widespread compliance far more difficult than proved possible in 2020-21.

Perhaps one of the reasons Sunak is so concerned about what might be discovered by the Hallett Inquiry in receiving all internal communications is, because of the implications for public finance, evidence of his reported reluctance in supporting continued imposition of restrictions on movement of citizens and closure of business.

In the midst of his first (and failed) campaign to become leader of the Conservative party, Sunak was forced to react to allegations in *The Spectator* in which he claimed scientists were allowed too much influence during the pandemic that and concerns by him and many others of the damage to the economy as well as the social impact of lockdown were not sufficiently considered (Nelson, 2022).

In *The Spectator* article Sunak suggested lockdowns were imposed after "ministers were shown gloomy scientific analysis pointing to horrifying "scenarios"", and it was not easy to make decisions in the absence of "how these all-important scenarios had been calculated" (Brown, 2022). Additionally, she states, Sunak also claimed SAGE "edited its minutes to hide dissenting opinions and accused them of "fear-messaging"" (*ibid*).

As Brown also states, Sunak when questioned about comments attributed to him on BBC Radio 4's *World At One* programme, and in stressing he was not against lockdown, explained it's important "we learned the lessons" (*ibid*).

Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Lee Cain -Johnson's former communications chief regarded Sunak's assessment of what went on as "simply wrong". Dominic Cummings, Johnson's former chief political adviser, an advocate of following scientific advice, was more caustic in calling Sunak's comments "dangerous rubbish" (*ibid*).

In his resignation letter Sunak stated that he will always be "proud of how during the pandemic we protected people's jobs and businesses through actions such as furlough" as well as support for businesses through what were known as 'bounceback loan scheme' (BLS). There has been much scrutiny of the latter on the basis of what's believed to be widespread abuse and fraud which, it's

estimated, may result in “losing £4.5bn of taxpayers’ money through the £47bn” provided as part of BLS (Pickard, 20123).

Another scheme Sunak will be remembered for is ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ was available on “every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday between 3 and 31 August” (Gov.2023b)

Intended to protect the two million jobs in hospitality businesses forced to close during the first lockdown, and costing at least £850 million, ‘Eat Out to Help Out’, enabled customers to a 50% discount on more than 160 million meals.

However, as pointed out at the time, given that Covid was still extremely virulent, Sunak’s scheme was regarded as being a catalyst to increased Covid-19 infections.

According to a study by Thimo Fetzer, an economist at the University of Warwick, shortly after ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ concluded, he was able to identify an increase of between 8 and 17% in infections and that it had “a large causal impact in accelerating the subsequent second COVID19 wave” (2020).

McKie and Helm, writing in the *Guardian* over the weekend, state that Sunak is likely to be subject to intense questioning as to the wisdom of ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ (2023). As they explain, many experts agree with Fetzer’s analysis and one, a “leading scientist”, contends that it was “spectacularly stupid” (*ibid*).

In ‘Did ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ Result in the Country ‘Getting Stuffed’?’ I conclude that any short-term advantages that resulted from ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ “must be balanced against any long-term economic damage it caused” (McCabe, 2020).

‘Eat Out to Help Out’ , like all challenges and decisions taken by the Government during the pandemic will, assuming all the necessary information is made available to the Hallett Inquiry, be carefully examined.

As to how rapidly the inquiry is able to complete its work remains uncertain but the judicial review Sunak’s government has launched won’t expedite the process.

Rishi Sunak, on his first day as Prime Minister last October, proclaimed on the steps of Downing Street his intention to bring “integrity and accountability” to government.

Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist whose influence in creating the expansion of the steel industry in the late nineteenth century in the United States, and which made him one of the richest Americans in history, reflected that as he grew older, he paid less attention to what people said and, instead just watched what they do.

The belief that someone should be judged only on the basis of their actions rather than good intentions or stated beliefs is one which is much used.

This maxim is one which Rishi Sunak should increasingly be aware of.

Indeed, as the Hallett Inquiry probes more deeply into Sunak’s actions as chancellor during the pandemic, Sunak may become fearful his reputation and commitment to integrity and accountability irreversibly undermined.

This is hardly what he wants in the lead up to the next general election.

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