

'Disunited Kingdom?' COVID Restrictions Causing Discord in Britain

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday that the UK would take a 'middle road' through the pandemic to avoid the damaging consequences of a nationwide lockdown. The coronavirus situation in Britain is worsening at a rapid rate; a further 21,242 people tested positive for the virus in the last 24 hours, with a further 189 deaths where the person died within 28 days of a positive test. Chief Scientific Advisor Sir Patrick Vallance said that the R rate was over one, and that it was estimated around 53,000 to 90,000 people were becoming infected with Covid-19 every day in England.

In his address to the nation on Thursday, Johnson said that both the psychological and economic cost of full lockdown simply wasn't worth it. He said that instead, to combat the virus, Britain would tread a 'middle course between the Scylla of another national lockdown and the Charybdis of an uncontrolled virus.' This means continuing with the '[tier system](#)' in England, which sees restrictions implemented according to the degree of severity of the virus.

There has been much angst in the north-western cities of Liverpool and Manchester as the government was accused of treating the north 'with contempt' by Manchester mayor Andy Burnham. He was irate over the initial [government refusal](#) to provide more financial support to Manchester workers and businesses at a time when further restrictions were being imposed. Burnham wanted 80% of wages to be paid under a further furlough scheme. This would amount to £90 million over 6 months. But Johnson only committed to £60 million, Burnham said the lowest would accept was £65 million.

This resulted in a standoff between the Mayor and government which was only resolved once Westminster offered a more generous support package – incidentally arranged only after London itself was to be affected by the same Tier 2 restrictions. Andy Burnham tweeted on Thursday that he could 'hardly believe what he was reading' when informed of government plans to provide more financial assistance to areas affected by partial lockdown. He said: 'Why on earth was this not put on the table on Tuesday to reach an agreement with us? I said directly to the PM that a deal was there to be done if it took into account the effects on GM businesses of three months in Tier 2.'

The problem with the Tier system, in which regions are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, is that undoubtedly some areas will feel more hard done by than others. The north-west of England has been under restrictions for 12 weeks longer than other parts of the country. London, being the capital, will always be given priority, leaving the northern areas, as Andy Burnham has complained, with a feeling of abandonment. During the first lockdown, there was much more of a sense of national unity and that 'we're all in this together'. Now, the

regional differences are driving discord and disharmony.

The government, clearly disgruntled with Burnham's demands, at one point stopped communicating with him, and rather embarrassingly, he began learning of developments through others (in one case in the middle of a media appearance he was updated via someone's mobile phone). Burnham says such behaviour is disrespectful not only to him but to the people of Manchester, as he was elected, after all, by the people. Nevertheless the Manchester mayor stands by his actions, in a [BBC interview](#) declaring 'No-one is going to tell me what to do', and that if the people of Manchester don't like it, they can vote him out as mayor in the next election. He questioned whether the job of mayor was only to do the government's bidding, and explained that he wasn't always going to agree with the government's position and sometimes would 'ruffle feathers'.

A resolution may have been reached but damage has clearly been done. The north-west of England has been left to feel ignored by Westminster and betrayed by a Prime Minister who promised not to take their votes for granted in the last election. 'Blackmailed and bullied' was how one Lancashire council leader described the government's behaviour. The standoff is likely to have a longer-term impact on how people vote in upcoming elections, but also an effect on devolved powers in the UK. As Andy Burnham says 'If devolution is to be real, then the UK government cannot impose its will on the north of England any more'. This situation has highlighted the extent to which regional mayors can have significant influence over the lives of their citizens. Moreover however, if Burnham - who has already been crowned 'King of the North' - continues to get the support of the people of Manchester, then we could see an increasing appetite in the north of England for more devolved power.

The pandemic is therefore likely to have a profound impact on the future political organization of the United Kingdom...and that's not even mentioning the question of Scottish Independence...

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