

UK COVID Crisis: Standoff Between North and South over Lockdown

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Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, is furious. In a dramatic spectacle, the mayor spoke with anger at how the Westminster government was 'treating the north with contempt' in its approach to Covid-19. The mayor has reservations over Boris Johnson's three tier system which came into force this week; he argues that it is unfairly penalising the north of England.

Citing past rough moments in the relationship between the north and south of England, the mayor said that they were 'Being set up as canaries in the coalmine for an experimental regional lockdown strategy as an attempt to prevent the expense of what is truly needed.'

Greater Manchester, Liverpool city and Lancashire, he said were at the receiving end of the tightest of restrictions, together with an inadequate financial support package. He claimed the government was 'willing to sacrifice jobs here to save them elsewhere'. Looking exasperated, he complained that the package offered to people in his region was 'just not good enough' as it didn't take freelancers into account, thousands of whom contribute to the economy. He questioned 'What happens to the people driving taxis around this city if the pubs etc close?'

The government insists that there is simply no more money available, after millions were paid out to businesses to support furloughed workers earlier in the year. But Andy Burnham was sceptical of this argument, saying that he had seen how much was being paid to consultants working on the failing 'Test and Trace scheme'. Initially there were plans for Liverpool, Manchester and Lancashire to go into full lockdown or 'Tier three', but after the Mayor of Manchester's protest, only Liverpool was put on high alert, with negotiations still ongoing regarding Manchester. It has been reported the government intends on putting the city on high alert, but is currently discussing with the local authorities what financial support will be put in place.

The coronavirus situation in Liverpool and Manchester is undoubtedly serious, with the Mayor of Liverpool declaring cases to be 'out of control'. Intensive care beds are reportedly 95% full. It's been said that the rate of cases in one part of Liverpool was as high as 1031 cases per 100,000, higher than the national average. A further 18,980 cases were reported across the UK on Thursday bringing the total to 673,622. The nature of the pandemic now in Britain is that it is more serious than at any time earlier in the year. More and more experts and politicians are calling for a national lockdown as the only way to curb the spread of coronavirus. The Mayors of Manchester and Liverpool are also asking for a nationwide lockdown. Andy Burnham yesterday quoted government medical adviser Jonathon Van Tam, who said that a national lockdown is the only way get the virus under control.

The government is, however, reluctant to impose another nationwide lockdown for fear of what it would do to the economy. Matt Hancock the Health Minister has asked the northern mayors to set aside party politics' and 'come together' so the virus can be brought under control.

This is an important moment for the government. How it handles the crisis in the north-west of England could have a lasting impact on Boris Johnson's legacy. Andy Burnham is already making references to the 1980s when then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was accused of 'dividing the nation' over her policies in the north of England. 'The north is fed up of being pushed around' Burnham said yesterday... [it] stands on the brink of where we were in the 1980s, forgotten, left aside.' Such accusations of discrimination against the north could be potentially very harmful for an administration that said it would be a 'levelling up government'.

In addition voters may remember Johnson's words when we was elected in December last year, when he acknowledged that many Labour voters in the north had lended their vote to him: 'You may only have lent us your vote, you may not think of yourself as a natural Tory and you may intend to return to Labour next time round. If that is the case I am humbled that you have put your trust in me. I will never take your support for granted.'

Now Boris Johnson will have to show that he does value the north, and prove Andy Burnham wrong. But perhaps the damage has already been done. The rhetoric of the Manchester mayor's speech was desperate and defiant, of a politician abandoned and mistrusting of the government's motivations. We're at a critical juncture in the pandemic in Britain, when the government needs full compliance of the population in order to defeat the virus. It's in Johnson's interest to get the north of the country on board or face a bigger crisis than the one at the moment.

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