

Covid Lockdowns and “Cancelling Christmas”

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The mind changer in Downing Street has struck again. With UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the helm, changes of direction are compulsive, natural and sudden. The U-Turn has become the prosaic expectation. “Too often it looks like this government licks its finger and sticks it in the air to see which way the wind is blowing,” Tory MP Charles Walker, deputy chair of the 1922 Committee, [lamented](#) in August. “This is not a sustainable way to approach the business of governing and government.”

As unsustainable as it might be, the UK was treated to another round of vigorous U-turning ahead of Christmas by a leader who radiates buffoonery and steady incompetence. On December 16, a decision was taken to ease COVID-19 restrictions over the festive period, a view distinctly at odds with a good number in the scientific establishment.

In November, [submissions](#) by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) to the government warned that mixing over the Christmas period could well lead to greater spread in the event restrictions were eased. According [to a paper](#) by the operational subgroup of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M-O), a relaxation “over the festive period will result in increased transmission and increased prevalence, potentially by a large amount.” The group also warned that, “SARS-Cov-19 has demonstrated high secondary attack rates in households (with estimates of up to 50% in one household infected from one infected member).”

The analysis also warned that the “bubble” policy – one where a certain number of households would be permitted to mix over a set number of days over the Christmas period – was still burdened by risk. “Allowing households to ‘bubble’ (i.e. effectively form a single, larger, isolated household) reduces the risks, but is very susceptible to small numbers of links between bubbles.”

Despite this, [Johnson was adamant](#) in his Wednesday press gathering: the festive season would be an exception. “I want to be clear we don’t want to, as I say, to ban Christmas, to cancel it.” To do so “would be frankly inhuman and against the instincts of many in this country.” This was a pointed reference to opponents sceptical about his epidemiological grasp of the dangers. Labour leader Keir Starmer had [previously pressed him](#) during Parliament Minister’s Questions about any existing assessments on the impact “on infection rates and increased pressure on the NHS”.

Johnson’s [response](#) was far from helpful and, given the circumstances, ill conceived. “I wish he had the guts to say what he really wants to do, which is to cancel the plans people have made and to cancel Christmas. I think that’s what he’s driving at, Mr Speaker.” But even conservative forums such as *The Spectator* [had to admit](#) that the prime minister was taking

an awful gamble: “that people will suddenly start adhering to government guidance and severely restrict their contact with their families, even though the law does not force them to do so.”

In his December 16 speech, Johnson [praised](#) the rollout of the vaccination programme. With 138,000 recipients of the first dose, he felt there was “no doubt we are winning and we will win our long struggle against the virus.” The reproduction rate of the virus had been brought below 1. But Britons had to hold their nerve. Infections were still rising in parts of the country. London had moved into Tier 3 restrictions.

An appeal was made to those in the UK “to think hard and in detail about the days ahead and whether you can do more to protect yourself and others.” Never tiring of confusing the citizenry, such regulations were to involve limits of three households meeting over five days. “I want to stress that these are maximums, not targets to aim for.” Think, he pleaded, of having a smaller and shorter Christmas.

On December 19, the mind changer was again in full flow. The very idea of holding Christmas was challenged and Johnson found himself doing exactly what he had accused the Labour leader of wishing. “I am sorry that the situation has deteriorated since I last spoke to you three days ago.” The reason given by Johnson in [his address](#) was ominous. Data from the advisory group on New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats (NERVTAG) had revealed the emergence of a new variant of the virus. “NERVTAG’s early analysis suggests the new variant could increase R [the reproduction number] by 0.4 or greater. Although there is considerable uncertainty, it may be up to 70% more transmissible than the old variant.”

This new variant had been skipping at speed through London, the South East and East of England. As things stood, it was seemingly not more lethal or causing illness of greater severity. This new incarnation was also unlikely to blunt the effect of the vaccines. But it was clear to Johnson that not taking immediate steps would lead to soaring infections, straining the NHS and causing the deaths of “many thousands more”.

The consequence: London, the South East and the East of England were to move into tier 4. These have become generally familiar: the necessity of staying at home and working from home; the closure of non-essential services in retail, indoor gyms and leisure facilities. People are not permitted to enter or leave Tier 4 areas; and residents in such designated zones cannot stay overnight away from home. Exemptions apply for exercise, childcare and those who cannot work from home.

The corollary of such restrictions was that Britons could not “continue with Christmas as planned.” Tier 4 restrictions meant that households were to be self-contained, “though support bubbles will remain in place for those at risk of loneliness or isolation.” To add just another sliver of confusion, household mixing would be confined to Christmas Day for those in Tier 3 zones.

Not all gloom, Johnson unfurled the metaphorical flag. “The UK was the first country in the western world to start using a clinically approved vaccine.” Nothing, however, could take away from the fact that Johnson had again been outmanoeuvred by facts and circumstance.

In the scathing [opinion](#) of *The Observer*, it was a decision taken too late, causing grief to families “who have been encouraged to look forward to Christmas for weeks by a prime

minister who, in characteristic form, foolishly over-promised in an attempt to avoid being the bearer of bad news.”

In the meantime, Johnson will have to deal with an increasing number of irate Tory backbenchers keen to recall parliament. Walker is one them, [increasingly suspicious](#) of the government’s motives. “The Government, in my view, knew on Thursday, possibly even Wednesday, that they were going to pull the plug on Christmas but they waited till Parliament had gone.” A Johnson tactic, through and through.

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Featured image: Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a press conference on 16 March, with Chief Medical Officer Prof Chris Witty and Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance. Picture by Andrew Parsons

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