

BORIS JOHNSON

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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(Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: I'm joined now live in the studio by the prime minister, Boris Johnson. Mr Johnson, welcome. Can I start with a very straightforward question: should parents of primary school children in England send them to school tomorrow morning?

BJ: Yes, absolutely they should in the areas where schools are open. And what we're doing, clearly is grappling with a new variant of the virus which is surging particularly in London and the Southeast, and that's why we've had to take exceptional measures for some parts to close primary schools, keep primary schools closed temporarily. Not something anybody wants to do. We've really fought very hard throughout this pandemic across the country to keep schools open. But lots of reasons for that. Schools are safe. Very, very important to stress that and that the threats to – the risk to kids, to young people is really very, very, very small. Indeed, as the scientists continually attest, the risk to staff is very small. But of course the benefits of education are so huge, overwhelmingly we want to keep our young people, keep children in education because that's the best thing for them. So that's why we've worked so hard to do it. So I'd advise all parents thinking about what to do, look at where your area is: overwhelmingly you'll be in a part of the country where primary schools tomorrow will be open.

AM: The reason I ask is that SAGE told you on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December that we couldn't keep on top of this new variant while keeping schools open.

BJ: Well, actually what they said was that we needed to take tougher measures. Sir Mark Walport, you just talked to, agreed.

And I agree with that. I think the issue really we've got to work out is

AM: How likely is it schools will be able to stay open, given where we are?

BJ: The issue – the evidence is not clear. Because we're looking at Tier 4, and what happens in Tier 4 areas. And we need to see whether those extra steps that we've all taken in Tier 4 areas are going to work in driving the virus down.

AM: If they don't work you may close primary schools?

BJ: I mean, Andrew, we've got to keep things under constant review. But we will be driven not by any political considerations but entirely by the public health question.

AM: Back to SAGE, the public health suggestion was that you will have to close schools to get on top of this new variant.

BJ: Well, there are different views, obviously, that are offered. It's worth stressing other public health experts also point to the long term damage to children and young people from being kept out of school, the social cost, the threat to mental health, the many other factors that you have to remember, particularly deprivation for families in their communities. You've got to think very, very hard about the consequences for families of closing schools.

AM: I absolutely understand that. So are you going to take legal action against a council like Brighton, for instance, which is just unilaterally closing its primary schools?

BJ: Well, we'll work very hard with authorities across the country to get our message across, that we think schools are safe. And schools are safe, there's absolutely no doubt.

AM: Would you condemn them for closing the schools?

BJ: Look, I understand people's frustrations, I understand people's anxieties. But there is no doubt in my mind that schools are safe and that education is a priority. If you think about the history of

the pandemic, we've kept schools going for a long, long time in areas where the pandemic has really been at very high levels. If you think about what they did in the Northwest – and yet – well, the evidence actually is that they were able to do that and to get the virus under control. So the question now is can we do that in these Tier 4 areas? Can we bring the virus under control and keep schools open? What I can tell you, Andrew, is that we'll keep this under constant review but we'll be driven by public health considerations and by the massive importance of education to children.

AM: A lot of parents are very worried and very confused, partly because for instance, in London, in Greenwich, your Education Secretary was threatening legal action to keep schools open, then three days later ordered them to be closed. When a council like Brighton says schools may close, Birmingham is saying much the same thing, in Greater Manchester Andy Burnham has said this is a decision that now must be taken by local authorities; there is a sense that up and down the country local authorities and some schools have given up on the government on this and have taken matters into their own hands.

BJ: I don't think that's the case, but obviously we're going to work with local authorities, work with schools and those responsible up and down the country. Our advice remains the same, which is that for public health reasons we think, in the large majority of the country, large parts of the country, it is sensible to continue to keep schools open, primary schools. As you know, secondary schools come back a bit later. And the second thing is that we are going to be ramping up testing across the whole of the system. And I don't think people have focused enough on this, if I may just for a second – one of the things we didn't have when we went into the first lockdown, where we sadly did have to close schools, was we didn't have this huge number of lateral flow tests. We now have tens, hundreds of millions of lateral flow tests, which I believe and hope can be used, deployed, particularly in

secondary schools to assist the return of schools. And it's not that the return will be safe – the schools are safe – the issue is how can you stop schools being places where the virus can circulate and then spread into all the other households? And lateral – daily lateral flow testing, or weekly lateral flow testing in schools, I believe, can make a huge difference.

AM: So let's talk about right now. I ask you again, what is your message to those councils around England who are saying that schools can close and should close? What's your message to them now?

BJ: My message to such councils is that they should be guided by the public health advice, which at the moment is that schools are safe in those areas where we're not being driven by the new variant to close them, and that the priority has got to be children's education. But obviously we want to work with them, and we're very humble in the face of the impact of this new variant of the virus. Let's face it, we have – we face a very, very difficult few weeks and months until the vaccine comes on stream, and I don't want to be sort of ...

AM: I ask you whether you can guarantee that schools will open on 18<sup>th</sup> January. You can't say yes can you?

BJ: Well, obviously we're going to continue to assess the impact of the Tier 4 measures, the Tier 3 measures. If you think about it, where we got to before Christmas if you remember –

AM: I'm going to come to that.

BJ: - was that the Tier 3 measures had actually been pretty effective in dealing with the old variant of the virus, and you were seeing – you remember what had happened in the northwest, there was real progress had been made. Then we saw this very stubborn strain in this stubborn epidemic, in Kent and parts of London, and people were saying, 'what's all that about? Are they doing things differently? Are they failing to follow the guidance.' And that wasn't it.

AM: We will get to that.

BJ: If you recall what happened... we became aware of this new variant. Since then – that's why schools (talking together) We now have to look at a package –

AM: If you can't guarantee – if you can't guarantee that schools are going to open later this month isn't it now the right time to accept that GCSE and A Level exams are going to have to stop this year?

BJ: First of all we think that in principle it's a good thing to keep schools open if we can.

AM: But in practise they may have to close and you may have to stop the exams.

BJ: We've got to be realistic. We've got to be realistic about this pace at which this new variant has spread and is spreading. We've got to be realistic about the impact that it's having on our NHS, as you've just now heard all morning – and we've got to be humble in the face of this virus. We have some things that are already working for us. We have a vaccine – two vaccines already, or three, that we'll be able to use soon.

AM: Three?

BJ: Well, we've got the Moderna coming.

AM: Moderna. Okay.

BJ: So you know, we've got – we can see the way ahead, we can see what's coming down the track in terms of a route forward for our country. We can see how we're going to get out of this with great clarity now, we can see how the vaccines can really, really help us to beat this. But we do have a tough period ahead.

AM: Can I move away from schools and ask whether it may be necessary in the near future to have tougher restrictions than you've got at the moment? Some kind of Tier 5, people are talking about.

BJ: Sorry, I'll want to answer your question about exams as well, Andrew, because you know – what I'm trying to get – the

message I'm trying to get over to people is I think the same time I was on with you last time, in October, you said how does it look? and I said we were going to have a very bumpy period over Christmas and beyond, but I thought that by the spring things would be better. I stick to that. I think that's roughly how it's going to be. It may be that we need to do things in the next few weeks that will be tougher in many parts of the country. I'm fully, fully reconciled to that. And I bet the people of this country are reconciled to that, because until the vaccine really comes on stream in a massive way, we're fighting this virus with the same set of tools.

AM: I'm just trying to understand what this might mean. I'm thinking back to March, when we were restricted to an hour's exercise. Other countries have used a curfew system. There was a complete ban on any households mixing. Is that the kind of thing a so-called Tier 5 might mean?

BJ: You've spoken about Tier 5, I haven't said that. But there are obviously a range of tougher measures that we would have to consider.

AM: What might they be?

BJ: I'm not going to speculate now about what they would be, but I'm sure that all our viewers and listeners will understand the sort of things. And you've mentioned some – clearly school closures, which we had to do in March is one of those things. It's not something we necessarily want to do.

AM: Isn't it time to act now, given how many new cases there are every single day?

BJ: The situation is very difficult. I think when you look at the country as a whole what people may reasonably say is, to take school closures, well they struggled on keeping schools open, they got the virus down throughout some very difficult moments once in the autumn. Why would they suddenly be closed now? And the

rates of infection are lower than they were then. So there's a sort of fairness issue across –

AM: In some places they're much higher of course.

BJ: They are, and they're much higher here in the southeast, in London and the southeast, they're certainly much higher. That's why it's necessary to take the tough action that we've had on schools. It's not something we relish doing at all. But I hope people are getting from this that we are entirely reconciled - and this is the crucial point – we're entirely reconciled to doing what it takes to get the virus down. And that may involve tougher measures in the weeks ahead.

AM: Let's talk about the AstraZeneca vaccine. We were told originally that by now there'd be 30 million doses available for us, and then it was changed to four million doses. How many doses are ready to go tomorrow?

BJ: Well, you've got to make the distinction, I think, between the number of doses that exist in the country and then are ready to go -

AM: Ready to go in the arm.

BJ: - into the arm. So I believe that tomorrow the 540 or so PPE vaccinations at 101 or so hospital sites, there will be 530,000 AZ. Oxford AstraZeneca vaccines.

AM: And how many Pfizer ones?

BJ: Well, that's on top of the million or so that have already been vaccinated.

AM: Still to be used, how many Pfizer?

BJ: There are a few millions more of Pfizer still to be used. I don't want to go into the

AM: You might explain those numbers, it's so important.

BJ: We are rolling them out as fast as we can. And the issue is not so much one of distribution – I saw some of your earlier guests sort of saying well, you know, we haven't got enough retired doctors to help administer this.

AM: On that do you think they should be filling in forms about deradicalisation measures, fire drills etc.

BJ: I don't. I think it's absurd and I know that the Health Secretary is taking steps to get rid of that pointless bureaucracy. But I think that in fairness people might also note – and this is not an international competition, but it is nonetheless the case that the UK is – remains the first country to get a stage three approved vaccine into people's arms. Vaccinating a million people, as we have already, we exceed the whole of the rest of the – Europe put together. (talking together)

AM: If you want to get us out of this by Easter we need to vaccinate at least two million people a week, is that right?

BJ: And the only hope that we have of doing that is that we're the first country also to have pioneered a room temperature vaccine, the AstraZeneca vaccine, which does offer real, real hope for the future. Now, that is the way forward. I wish I could give you here and now any sort of elaboration on the figures you've already heard about how we hope to get up to two million in a week and so on. I can't give you that yet. What I can tell you is that obviously everybody's working flat out to do this. We're greatly in advance of all comparable countries. But we do hope that we will have – we'll be able to do tens of millions in the course of the next three months. I can certainly give you that figure. And that's why, when you think about that figure, Andrew, that's why I go back to what I said in October, which I still think holds good, in the sense that I do think that is starting to look like ...

AM: Let's talk about how we got here for a moment.

BJ: - obviously we can't be one hundred percent certain, but I hope that that will be a real inflection point.

AM: So let's now talk about how we got there. Back in July your government commissioned a report into what was going to happen in this winter and Keir Starmer said to you, 'have you read it?' and you hadn't read it. Have you read it now?

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BJ: Well, let's be absolutely clear. That this government has taken every possible step that we reasonably could to prepare this country for the consequences of winter. What we could not have foreseen, I think reasonably was the arrival of a new variant of the vaccine (sic) but when - which was spreading between 50 and 70% faster.

AM: What we have here is that report.

BJ: Once we did understand that, on the I think 18<sup>th</sup> of December at 3.15pm we took decisive action.

AM: Except that this report, which you perhaps should have read in July does talk directly about the danger of mutation this winter and describes in extraordinary detail exactly what is happening now.

BJ: Exactly, which is exactly why we took the action that we did.

AM: But you should have known – you were warned in advance.

BJ: Yeah but –

AM: And this report says the way to deal with this is to stop community transmission or to hold it back which frankly, the government has failed to do.

BJ: Well with greatest respect, Andrew, the government –

AM: Let me take you through it then.

BJ: - the government has done everything we can to urge people, urge people not to allow community transmission and –

AM: You've heard but you haven't acted. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September when there were 6,000 new cases a day SAGE talked about there being a national lockdown being a circuit breaker. And you waited for seven weeks, seven weeks and it was then 24,000 ..

BJ: Absolute nonsense. Absolute nonsense. You could have spent from March onwards – let me – you could have spent the entire year in lockdown. You could have closed every business –

AM: Your own scientific advisors, you say you follow the science, your own scientific advisors said, time for a lockdown.

BJ: Scientific Advisors have said all sorts of different things at different times –

AM: So you're not following the science?

BJ: They're by no mean unanimous and what is absolutely clear, of course, is that you could have from March onwards, you could have closed down all transmission - you know the government could have basically pastoralised the UK economy.

AM: Sure, you could have done that, but -

BJ: And by the way there are people who advocate that. There are scientists who say that would have been the sensible thing to do.

AM: And a lot of people would be alive now who aren't if you'd done that.

BJ: However, the damage to people's mental health, the damage to the long term prospects of young people growing up in this country, the exacerbation of the gap between rich and poor, that would have been colossal. That would have been colossal. And it was the job of government to manage a very, very difficult situation which is being faced by every liberal democracy in Western Europe, as I think Sir Mark Walport just pointed out. And when you talk about, you know, how we should have locked down in September or done things differently, plenty of people have tried to do that -

AM: But the virus spread a lot - the virus spread very fast.

BJ: They had a lockdown I seem to remember in Wales in September. They locked down tight, they then took the brakes off and the virus immediately surged again. What we could not have reasonably predicted was that the virus would be spreading again by 50 to 70% faster. And actually if you look at what the tier -

AM: You couldn't have know that but you did know that mutations were likely.

BJ: - but look at what the tier 3 measures were achieving. And I think this is where people should remember the achievement of people in Liverpool, in Manchester, other parts of the country where working together with mass community testing they got the virus down and that was a huge achievement.

AM: Liverpool which did what you want are now calling for a national lockdown.

BJ: Well, there are plenty of places that worked very, very hard and very very well to get the virus well down and I don't believe it would have been sensible to have forced all those areas into more extreme measures, particularly if they'd already shown that by pulling together as a community they could do what it took. A lot of people will feel that it's unfair on them.

AM: A lot of people up and down the country are saying that you simply moved too late. In each case you have been buffeted by events, you have held off for too long and you've done the right thing a few weeks too late.

BJ: You know I'd make the same point. People will always argue that and I think it was Sir Mark Walport who just said on your show just now that the retro spectroscope is a magnificent instrument.

AM: You actually had the report.

BJ: No.

AM: You had the report, you didn't need the retro spectroscope, you had the projection.

BJ: I don't think anybody could reasonably quarrel with this point. If you want to stop Coronavirus spreading then of course it's open to you or to any government to close down the entire economy for the duration. If you look at all these examples of firebreaks or circuit breakers all they do is buy you some temporary respite. What we're doing now is using the tiering system, which is a very tough system –

AM: And about to get tougher.

BJ: And alas probably about to get tougher, to keep things under control, but we'll review it, we'll review it. And we have the prospect of vaccines coming down the track in their tens of millions offering people literally life and hope. And that I think is something that should keep people going in what I predicted, back on your own in October, would be a very bumpy period right now. It is bumpy and it's going to be bumpy.

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AM: And a lot of people are observing this from afar, including in Scotland and if I am a Scottish person –

BJ: Why do you afar?

AM: Well, Scotland's a little way away from where we're sitting now, it's 500 miles or so away.

BJ: Part of our country.

AM; Well, that is my point. If I am a Scottish voters, imagine me as a Scottish voter sitting in Edinburgh or Glasgow, maybe I voted in favour of the Union in the referendum, but since then I've seen Brexit happen and I don't like Brexit and I've seen the way your government's behaved over the Coronavirus pandemic and I prefer Nicola Sturgeon's version of that. And I want my country, Scotland, to leave the UK, what are the democratic tools in my hands to do that?

BJ: Well, I think that obviously the most important thing is the referendum that you had in 2014, which was a very important –

AM: Before Brexit and before the pandemic. Things have changed. Now a lot of people want to leave the UK.

BJ: Of course you know life moves on, things change. I you're saying that you would like to have another referendum

AM: This Scottish voter would like another referendum and wants the demo – he's only got a vote so he wants to use that vote to allow it to happen. How can they do that?

BJ: I think the only point I'd make is that referendums in my experience, direct experience in this country are not particularly jolly events. They don't –

AM: They change things.

BJ: - they don't have a notably unifying force in the national mood. They should be only once in a generation and I think that was what our – and I think that was what our friends in Scotland -

AM: What is different about the English wanting to leave the EU and having a referendum and being allowed to do and Scotland

wanting to leave the UK and doing exactly the same thing? What's the difference?

BJ: The difference is that we had a referendum in 1975, we then had another one in 2016. That seems to be about the right sort of gap. How about that?

AM: Let's move to Brexit, because the OBR says 4% down on GDP as a result of Brexit. You say there's lots and lots of opportunities and we're able to trade without non tariff barriers or tariff barriers with the EU. But this, I'm waving lots of paper at you this morning

BJ: Yeah.

AM: But this is your own government's handbook of rules for exporters to the EU. It's 159 pages of red tape and new declarations which a lot of small companies simply won't be able to do.

BJ: Well, first of all of course there are going to be changes and we made that clear.

AM: Looks like a non tariff barrier to me.

BJ: We've made that clear. And actually I think that there's a great opportunity for British SME's and for exporters of all kinds. Because now that, why don't you pick that up and wave it again?

AM: 159 pages of bumph. Red tape.

BJ: Now that, that is of course all that you have to do to sell around the world. And –

AM: And to the EU.

BJ: And so what we've seen is many companies in this country are not exporting in the way that they could. We have fantastic companies – fantastic products –

AM: Why would 159 pages of bumf make them likelier to export?

BJ: I mean the tragic reality of business life is that there is some bureaucracy. We're trying to remove it, but we have a massive opportunity to expand our horizons and to think globally and to think big. And this is the moment for this country –

AM: You use these big words. You say globally and big and excitement, we talk about sovereignty. I'm interested in what this is actually going to mean for ordinary voters. People who voted for you, for instance in parts of the country that feel left behind.

BJ: Yeah, well for instance from –

AM: How would a voter in Leigh, how will a voter in Leigh benefit from changes to the way you regulate, I don't know, the IT industry or AI, or whatever? Industries which are based in London, Birmingham, Cambridge and Manchester. Not in Leigh. How are they gonna benefit from that in real terms?

BJ: For instance, they've already got substantial sums of money coming back to them to this country as a result of leaving the EU. They've got – we've got control over our borders, a points based immigration system has already been established. And then when it comes to areas in parts of the country that feel that they've been left behind, one of the things that you can do, for instance, to say nothing of all regulatory changes that you can make, one of the things you can do is have free ports, you can –

AM: Which we could do inside the EU.

BJ: No, to nothing like the same extent.

AM: 80 of them you can use. 80 free ports.

BJ: You can use tax systems and subsidies in order to drive investment.

AM: The more you use subsidies the more we will face tariffs later on as a result of the deal that you've struck. It does mean tariffs and it does mean barriers if we subsidise in ways that the EU feel is uncompetitive for their companies.

BJ: Well, it's true that there is a clause that says that either side can take action if they feel the other side is unfairly undercutting them in some way and that's a potentially rather valuable thing for us. We might for instance want to legislate to do things differently. For instance one of the things we've done on day one

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of leaving the European Union is to get rid of pulse trawling, of stopping people from using –

AM: Again you could have done that inside the EU, the French have done it.

BJ: No, but we've done it from day one.

AM: As it happens but it's nothing to do with leaving the EU.

BJ: No, it's true. And we will be able – and we will be able to ban these huge Hoover trawlers that come in Hoover up everything off of the bottom of the sea –

AM: We are out of time,

BJ: That's to say nothing what we're able to do on animal welfare and I think it's

AM: I was going to ask you about your own future, whether you're going to carry on as Prime Minister after Brexit, but we're out of time. Yes or no?

BJ: Yes, yes.

AM: Yes, you are, right. We are I'm afraid out of time.

BJ: You should break out of your characteristic gloom, if I may say so, Andrew. Things are very tough and we're going through a very tough period as a country, but I really think people should focus on the amazing fact this country has created a room temperature vaccine which can be used around the world and we now have freedoms that we haven't had for 50 years and there are lots of reasons to be very positive about this otherwise grim new year.

AM: An Englishman talking to a Scot! Boris Johnson, thanks very much indeed for coming in.

Ends