

BORIS JOHNSON

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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Andrew Marr: I'm joined now by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

Mr Johnson, tens of thousands of people have died in this country from coronavirus, families have been torn asunder, and in some cases people have not even been able to say goodbye. Given the chance to talk to those families, what would you say now?

BJ: Well, I have met relatives of those who have died and my message to all of them and to all the bereaved is that they have my deepest, deepest sympathy. And I think the best thing we can do now for all those who have suffered in the course of this pandemic is to bring it to an end in the speediest possible way whilst trying to keep our society going, keep our economy moving. And I know it's a very tough balance but that's what we've got to do.

AM: There's another group of people – you say speedy end; looking ahead all those people who have created businesses that they've devoted their lives to, people who've lost their jobs and don't see other jobs coming up – looking ahead at the next six months with something like terror – what would you say to them?

BJ: And again my deepest sympathies are with them too because they do face, and they have faced, serious uncertainty over the last few months. We've tried to deal with that as well as we can with a huge package of measures that everybody knows about. 190 billion pounds worth of support already. We're going to continue to support businesses with the job attention bonus and all sorts of stuff to keep them through to Christmas and beyond. But in a way, Andrew, your first two questions have summed up the dilemma that any government faces in the course of this pandemic, any Western democratic, compassionate government.

Because on the one hand we have the imperative to save life, and it is a moral imperative to save life if we possibly can; on the other hand we have to keep our economy moving and keep our society going. And that's the balance that we're trying to strike, and that's why we've got the package of measures now that are reinforced both nationally and locally. And what we want people to do is to behave fearlessly but with common sense. Fearlessly but with common sense, to follow the guidance, whether national or local, get the virus down, but allow us as a country to continue with our priorities. So continue to keep kids in education, continue to keep our economy moving as far as we possibly can. And what I hope is that – and I believe very strongly – is that in the course of the next few weeks and months the scientific equation will change and we will start to see progress, whether it's on vaccines or on testing, that will enable us to take a different approach. But for the moment that is the balance that people have to adopt, that's the line we've got to follow.

AM: And it's the balance that you have to think about every day of your working life. Now, at the beginning of this you had great public support and you had great support inside the Conservative Party. That is waning. I have to ask you straightforwardly, a lot of people are asking this question: inside your party they say the Boris Johnson of autumn 2020 just isn't up to it.

BJ: Well, I think the reality is that this is a government that's facing an unprecedented crisis, and I think that if people wanted me to approach it with the sort of buoyancy and elan and all the other qualities that I normally bring to things I think people would think that was totally inappropriate. And it is, because we face a pandemic in which already tens of thousands of people have died. And the struggle we have now is to contain that pandemic and yet to keep our economy moving. And what I can certainly tell you, Andrew, is that as soon as we have done what is necessary and as soon as we have got the virus under control and we're able to move forward in the way that I think everybody would want, then

you will see this country and this government really accelerating our progress. And indeed, what we're saying at this Conservative Party Conference is that we're not going to allow ourselves in any way to be deterred by coronavirus. We're accelerating our programme for national renewal. We were elected – we had a massive majority in 2019 to change this country for the better. This is the moment not to be deterred, not to slow down, but to speed up. And that's what we're going to do.

AM: Now, we've got a lot to get through. May I turn to the strategy with which you're dealing with the coronavirus? There are two key elements to it. One of them is the local restrictions and the local curfews and lockdowns and so forth. If you look at Oldham, Oldham has been under really quite tough local restrictions now for six weeks, and today, compared to the beginning of those restrictions, the rate of infection has nearly doubled. It's simply not working is it?

BJ: Well, I'm afraid it's simply too early to say. And yes of course I know it's deeply frustrating for people in Oldham and for businesses in Oldham to be labouring under the kind of restrictions that we've got. And nobody wants to impose these types of things. But the advice that we're getting is that in these areas where we've got local lockdowns, stringent local lockdowns, we need to wait and see whether the R starts to come down. Because some of these things have been intensified and the ratchet, as it were, has been tightened just in the last few days. So you've got to wait and see whether the rate of infection starts to come down.

AM: But we've got a fair amount of evidence – not just Oldham – the city of Manchester, for instance, has been under restrictions since July and the rate of infection on the 24th July when they went into restrictions was 20.5 per 100,000 people and it's now 205 per 100,000 people: nearly ten times as much after more than

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six weeks of those restrictions. I put it to you, genuinely, I don't understand why these restrictions aren't working, do you?

BJ: Well, I think there are all sorts of factors in play. And clearly what's happened is that we've put a lot more load back onto the risk factor, in the sense that we've got schools back, we've got businesses back, things are moving again in a way that they weren't during the lockdown of March and April. But we've also managed to keep hospital admissions much, much lower than they were during that period. We've managed to keep the death rate down, although obviously we have to make sure we keep it down. So the balance is how do you ensure that places across the country continue to fight the virus effectively whilst keeping the economy moving? And the way to do it – and you're going to lean over and shut me up at this point – but the way to do it, the most important thing, is to remember the guidance: hands, face, space. Get a test if you have symptoms. Rule of six. Those are the crucial things. And also, Andrew, bear in mind that this otherwise blissfully freedom-loving Conservative government has imposed measures that would amount to serious fine if you fail to comply. So in these areas – and I appreciate the fatigue that people are experiencing, but we have to work together, follow the guidance and get the virus down whilst keeping the economy moving. That's the balance we're trying to –

AM: Can I jump in?

BJ: .. they're furious with me and they're furious with the government.

AM: They are.

BJ: But you know, I've got to tell you, in all candour, it's going to continue to be bumpy through to Christmas, it may even be bumpy beyond, but this is the only way to do it. ..

AM: Apart from the fact that in lots of parts of the country these restrictions do not seem to be working, to a lot of people who are under them they also seem grossly unfair. Going right back to Oldham again, if somebody dies in Oldham and there's a funeral

there's a absolute limit on the number of people who can attend that funeral of 20, and just a few miles up the road in Manchester, where the rate of infection is higher, 30 people can attend a funeral. Same in Burnley. And all across the north people say it's just not fair, it's inconsistent and it's unscientific.

BJ: I totally get that, I totally get that. So the Oldham restriction on funerals and the different measures that are in different places, I totally understand people's frustration. But let me invite you to speculate on what would happen if we – you had several voices on your programme earlier, I was watching – you have some suggesting we should basically let it rip, or the lockdowns were inappropriate, let's put it. The lockdowns and the restrictive measures were wrong. I just can't accept that. And as prime minister I couldn't take a course that could expose us to tens of thousands more deaths in very short order. And you know, we've got to continue to bear down on this virus whilst protecting the economy. That's the balance we've got to strike. And with great respect to some of the other voices that I heard on your show, we haven't actually had any - people who attack, not the policy, but the consequences of the policy – we haven't had any alternative suggestions. No one has come up with any better proposals that I'm aware of.

AM: Yesterday you said that people up and down the country had become complacent and blasé during the summer. Can I put it to you that your government was paying us to go and eat out, which spread the virus, was telling us, ordering us to go back into the office, which spread the virus. If anyone was complacent and blasé it was you.

BJ: Look, I take full responsibility for everything that's happened since the pandemic began of course, and the government is trying, as I say, throughout this to strike a balance. We had to go into lockdown in March and April, and that was effective in bringing the virus down. And I think it was right to reopen the economy. I think if we hadn't done that, Andrew, if we hadn't got

things moving again in the summer we'd be looking at many more hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, of billions, tens of billions more lost from the economy. And I think it was right to support the economy, to put our arms around jobs..

AM: But we know that that helped spread the virus.

BJ: And I also think that it is important now, irrespective of whether Eat Out to Help Out – you know, what the balance of that was, that unquestionably helped protect many – there are two million jobs at least in the hospitality sector. It was very important to keep those jobs going. Now, in so far as that scheme may have helped to spread the virus obviously we need to counteract that and we need to counteract that with the discipline and the measures that we're proposing. But I hope you understand the balance we're trying to strike.

AM: It's very, very difficult, I do understand that. But let's look at another restriction that you've introduced, which is the 10pm curfew on pubs. You will have seen, I'm sure, people pouring out of pubs in central London, Liverpool, elsewhere, and it looks to many people as if this kind of 'last orders gentlemen, please' culture is actually making things worse not better. You've said there's scientific evidence behind this. Can you produce any hard scientific evidence for this curfew at all?

BJ: Well, the scientific evidence is of course that the virus is transmitted by person to person contact and is transmitted – yes, it's transmitted in homes, it's transmitted between people, but it's also transmitted in what they call hospitality sectors, which means in pubs and bars and restaurants, particularly as people get more convivial as the evening goes on. So one of the things that

AM: But .. makes this worse, not better.

BJ: No, Andrew, one of the things that has been put to us is that you can – by curtailing the hours you can reduce the transmission. And what we're saying to people is that's the objective, so people just need to follow the guidance. And obviously it makes no sense if having followed the guidance for all the time in the pub they

then pour out into the street and hobnob in such a way as to spread the virus.

AM: That's the effect. Let me turn –

BJ: If I may – the answer is for all of us to follow the guidance.

AM: Okay, let me turn to the other element of your policy at the moment, which is track and trace. On 3rd June you promised everybody that there'd be 100 per cent returns of the results for track and trace within 24 hours, and you've come nowhere close to that. Why have you broken that promise?

BJ: Well, actually track and trace have I think done an outstanding job. And it's massively expanding since March. I'm not going to claim that the service is perfect, because it isn't. But they have been turning around –

AM: My question is why really. My question is why? Because you promised a hundred percent and the figure at the moment is 38.1% which is miles away from a hundred percent. So what's gone wrong?

BJ: The answer is that the demand has massively increased. The capacity is obviously also massively increased since I made that commitment. If you look at the numbers that we have we've got about 300,000 tests that are being conducted every day and that's the capacity I should say. And people have criticised me for saying that I wanted this to be a fantastic system and I do, and yes it's not perfect but it has made a huge difference to our ability to see where the virus is, where it's spreading, in which groups it is most prevalent and it is helping us a huge amount to fight the virus.

AM: You've said huge, huge –

BJ: It is not perfect, Andrew. I'm not going to claim it's perfect. Am I frustrated with it? Yes, of course I'm frustrated with it. Am I going to blame NHS test and trace and attack the thousands of people who are - no of course I'm not but I take full responsibility for the service. I think by international comparators it is really

very, very good indeed and yes it could be a lot better, but we're going to get a lot better. And by the way they're going to get up to 500,000 tests a day by the end of his month.

AM: Okay. Now let's look at a pattern. World beating track and trace system you said, an app by the middle of May you said, turn the tide in 12 weeks you said, a significant return to normality by Christmas you said. There is a pattern here of over promising and then under delivering. Why is that?

BJ: Well, several points there. Actually if you look at what happened in the course of the pandemic we did turn the tide in the sense that the numbers went massively – I think most people would say that the lockdown that we had did turn the tide. We now have, as I constantly warned, we now have a second spike. But let me just – you're asking a fair question.

AM: I'm basically saying, you know, you keep saying we're going to be world beating this, world beating that and to most people it simply doesn't feel like that. I'm asking you, can you promise people in the future a bit more reality and a little bit less rhetoric?

BJ: What you've got to do is realise that this is a pandemic in which people need to understand that there is hope. And there is hope and we will get through this and we will get through this very well. And it's up to government to show that we have the tools and we have the imagination and we have the creativity to get through this. And we certainly will. And if you ask me do I think things can be significantly different by Christmas, yes I do. But you know, and we're working flat out to achieve that. But I'm not – be in doubt that you know, it is still very possible that there are bumpy, bumpy months ahead. This could be, this could be a very tough winter for all of us and we've got to face that fact. But on the other hand, but on the other hand I think what people want to realise is there is a way ahead. If we follow this balanced approach we can do it and do it together.

AM: Let me just stop you on that. We've had a very very high rise in the number of infections over night and yesterday and we're told there is some obscure statistical reason for that. Can you explain to people why there's been a sudden spike?

BJ: Well, the reason for that is because there was a failure in the counting system which has now been rectified.

AM: And is that going to last for some time?

BJ: No, because it was a computing issue. But all the people who had a positive test have now been notified and I think the data that we have is realistic, and again it's very useful in helping us to identify you know where the incidence is and what we need to do to tackle it. And just get back to my central message.

AM: I've got a central question as well.

BJ: We need to behave fearlessly but with common sense. Follow the guidance, drive the virus down whilst keeping the economy open.

AM: You've talked about the vaccine and Matt Hancock's talked about the cavalry is coming. Is the cavalry coming this year?

BJ: Well, you've just ticked me off for trying to –

AM: I was asking for a factual answer. Is the vaccine coming this year?

BJ: I think it's possible. It's possible that we will make significant progress on the vaccine this year. I went to see the scientists at AstraZeneca in Oxford and those teams they seem to be doing fantastically well.

AM; But if it doesn't come year are we into –

BJ: But I don't want to get people's hopes up on the vaccine unnecessarily because I think there's a good chance but it is not certain.

AM: And if it doesn't come, if the cavalry doesn't arrive, are we facing a yoyo, in and out of restrictions up and down this country, possibly for years to come?

BJ: No. I don't think that's going to happen and if you talk to the scientists they're all virtually unanimous that by the spring things will be radically different and we'll be in a different world. Because that is the normal cycle of a pandemic like this. But I also think if you look at where we are, so many things are better. We have better treatments, Dexamethasone, Remdesivir, Regeneron, all these treatments that are now available that weren't a few months ago, that's changed the equation. We will find all sorts of ways I'm absolutely sure, particularly through mass testing programmes of changing the way we tackle this virus, but for the moment, Andrew, to repeat my central message we have to take the balanced approach that we are.

AM: And at the same time you are visibly and loudly losing the support of the very Tory MPs you most relied on in the past, in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords. Steve Baker of the ERG; "the consequences of taking away liberty to protect public health have been devastating to our society and economy by any standard." What do you say to him?

BJ: Well look, I understand completely what Steve is saying and nobody in my position wants to do any of the things that we've had to do. I'm a freedom loving Tory.

AM: Really?

BJ: I don't want to have to impose – yeah, I don't want to have to impose measures like this. Are you crazy? I mean you know this is the last thing we want to do. But I also have to save life. And that's our priority. And I think also by the way, that the priority of the British people. And I think that they will want to see their government continuing to work, continuing to fight the virus and that's what we're doing.

AM: We have to move on, we've only got 5 minutes left. Yesterday you spoke to the President of the European Commission. After that conversation were you more or less confident we're going to get a deal?

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BJ: Well I had a good conversation with Ursula von der Leyen and she and I both issued a statement after that saying that we thought there was every prospect that we could get a deal. Everybody's been working very hard, I thank Michel Barnier –

AM: I've got you here, what do you think in your waters?

BJ: I think it's there to be done. I think alas our you know there are some difficult issues that need to be fixed and there's no question that you know the EU needs to understand that we're utterly serious about needing to control our own laws and our own regulations and similarly they need to understand that the repatriation of the UK's fisheries, which were lost in 1973 is very important.

AM: You've been characteristically bullish about a no deal, saying it will be absolutely fine. Is that really still the case, given the effect on the economy of Coronavirus now? Mark Rutte for instance has said that a deal, he says; "is a geopolitical necessity in the middle of a pandemic." Do you think he's right?

BJ: Well good for Mark.

AM: Do you agree with him?

BJ: Good for Mark in which case I hope that they'll agree to the deal that we've set out, because it's a very good deal for the EU. All we're asking our friends and partners to offer is terms that they've already offered Canada, which is you know a long way away from here. We're very close to our European friends and partners, we've been members of the EU for 45 years. I see no reason why we shouldn't get those sorts of terms.

AM: Are you in any way worried about the effects of no deal in the middle of a pandemic?

B: I don't want the Australian WTO type outcome particularly, but we more than live with it. More than live with it. And this country you know, I think actually the people of this country have had enough. They've had this for a long long time, being told that this or that was impossible or intolerable.

AM: We are no nearly out of time.

BJ: I think we can prosper mightily under those circumstances.

AM; The new Leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Douglas Ross, said this yesterday. He said: "The case for separation between England and Scotland is now being made more effectively in London than it ever could be made in Edinburgh." Do you think he was talking about you?

BJ: I think he was talking about those who don't value the Union in the way that I do and I think that the Union is one of the great achievements of this country. And by the way, I think its value, it's use has been amply demonstrated during this crisis. Not just in the way the Armed Services have helped deliver tests around the country, but the way the financial support for the whole UK has been delivered by HMT, by the Treasury.

AM: I put it to you that it's your signature policy of Brexit, very unpopular in Scotland, and your political personality, very popular in parts of England, very, very unpopular in Scotland that is driving the case for independence more than any other thing.

BJ: Well I think actually that Brexit is a huge opportunity for Scotland and the Bill that we're just getting through the House of Commons, the Internal Market Bill, will involve the devolution of substantial powers to Scotland and elsewhere and not least over fish and you know just to get back to this fish point, it seems absolutely incredible to me that the Scottish Nationalist Party should actually be supporting a policy of you know, literally handing back control of Scottish fisheries to Brussels. Abandoning the future prospects of young people growing up in Scotland who have a great future in that industry.

AM: Straight question. If the SNP – If the SNP win a big majority in the Holyrood elections next year on a mandate for a new referendum on independence, do you simply turn your back on the Scottish people and say, no, you can't have it?

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BJ: Well what I would say is I think, as we've been discussing throughout this conversation, this country has a big job now of building back better building –

AM: So yes or no? Do you allow them that referendum, yes or no?

BJ: - from Coronavirus and I don't think this is the time, quite frankly, for us to have another referendum. We had a referendum in 2014 –

AM: So no is the answer?

BJ: - we were told it was a once in a generation event, right, by the leaders of the Scottish Nationalist Party, and six years, it doesn't seem to me, is a generation.

AM: Eight years or so ago, I had a stroke and I came back to work quite quickly and I suffered, I was quite surprised, by real fatigue after that. It was a serious as it were, insult to the body and there is always a response to that. You've had Coronavirus. Have you suffered anything like that?

BJ: Well no. I have huge sympathy obviously for what you went through, Andrew, but no. I had a nasty bout of it, no question, but

AM: There's no long Covid for you?

BJ: No, not in my case and this is information put around –

AM: It's not tittle tattle, because it's obviously very, very important.

BJ: it's not tittle tattle, it's drivel. It's not tittle tattle, it's balderdash and nonsense.

AM: It's very very important to the country to know that the Prime Minister is on it and up to it and healthy enough and that's very –

BJ: Yes I know and it's anthropologically crucial.

AM: It's crucial, so here is the question.

BJ: I am fitter than several butcher's dogs.

AM: So here is the crucial question. If you found that long Covid caught up with you, as it does for many people, would you be straight with the British people, tell them and stand down?

BJ: Look I can't repeat my mind. I think the issue is that when I alas got this wretched thing I was too fat. I was too fat. And if I

may say so this is a teachable moment for our great country because we are one of the world's greatest place on earth, a great place on earth but alas, as a nation –

AM: We're too fat.

BJ: - we are slightly too fat. We are fatter than virtually anybody else in Europe apart from the Maltese for some reason, and we need to think about this.

AM: Very last question. We're over time.

BJ: I don't wish to cast any aspersions on my Maltese friends.

AM: You're the only probably in the world who understands what President Trump is going through now.

BJ: Yes.

AM: You went through exactly the same thing. What would you tell him if he was here?

BJ: I'm sure that President Trump is going to be fine. He's got the best possible care and I think that you know he just needs to – I mean most important thing to do is follow his doctors' advice and he's got superb medical

AM: A few less cheeseburgers?

BJ: - medical advice. Look, you know I think that certainly you know it is – this is an important point, you know. Obesity - I'm not making any comment about President Trump, but obesity, since you mention cheeseburgers, is one of the problems that this country needs to address. Not just because it threatens all our health but in the long term we need to tackle it to reduce the pressures on the NHS. It costs us all a fortune in taxation to cope with it.

AM: Boris Johnson, Prime Minister thank you very much.

BJ: You don't have to worry about it, Andrew.

AM: Thank you very much indeed for joining us today.

Ends

