

ANDREW MARR SHOW, ROBERT JENRICK MP, HOUSING SECRETARY

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ROBERT JENRICK

(Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: Mr Jenrick, a very straightforward question: 540,000 people in this country have been told to self-isolate and are self-isolating. The prime minister and the Chancellor are not. Why not?

RJ: Well, good morning, Andrew. As you say, the Chancellor and the prime minister have been contacted overnight by NHS track and trace, which shows that the system is doing its job. They will be isolating, but using the pilot scheme for daily testing, which is available to a range of public sector organisations, which enables you to do your essential business and get tested on a daily basis in specialist asymptomatic testing centres like the one that there now is Downing Street. But then outside of that work environment to not socialise, not mix with other people. So it clearly is a less restrictive form of isolation than many other members of the public are enduring.

AM: It's very convenient. The editor of the Sun, Victoria Newton, said it was outrageous and clearly an awful lot of people are really, really angry this morning because it's one rule for you lot and one rule for the rest of us.

RJ: Well, the scheme is a well known and long-standing one. It's not just available for politicians, if you like, it's being used by 20 organisations in the public sector, including large ones like TFL that runs the transport network in London and like Border Force. Downing Street is part of that pilot as well and it ensures that the PM, the Chancellor can conduct the most essential business, but at other times of the day they won't be mixing with people outside of their own households.

AM: You say essential business, but there are lots of doctors who are meant to conduction operations and people doing other essential things up and down the country who have been told to self-isolate and are self-isolating. Is it simply a coincidence the prime minister was on this pilot scheme?

RJ: Well, as I say, there's a whole range of public sector organisations that are part of this particular pilot. We'll learn from this pilot, and so if it does succeed and is proven to be safe then it may be available to more people who may (talking together) On the broader point, we are obviously keeping under review whether or not the current arrangements are the right ones. From mid-August we're going to move, we hope and expect, to a different arrangement whereby if you're double vaccinated then you won't have to self-isolate in the same way. And from tomorrow, Monday, the (talking together) system will come to an end.

AM: I want to ask you who made the decision that number 10 was going to be part of this pilot scheme?

RJ: I don't know that, Andrew. But it has been part of it for some time. It wasn't a recent decision.

AM: This is about moral authority, this is about, as it were, the population listening to the government, listening to the government's advice and deciding to abide by it. And this is the kind of thing that makes people ask why should we self-isolate, why should we keep our apps on when the prime minister and the Chancellor and other ministers seem to get outside visits and get around it?

RJ: I understand that. But this is a pilot scheme that is involved over a range of different public sector organisations, not just Number 10 Downing Street. I've listed some of them already. It doesn't involve others. I mean, my department isn't part of it, and so the normal rules will apply to me and many other members of the government, as you'd expect. What I would just say, Andrew -

AM: Up and down the country people are asking themselves why should we self-isolate when the government are not? I'm going to give you an example of somebody called Ruth Adams, and she runs a company in Bristol which happens to make bathrooms and she has deleted her NHS app to stop her business from going under. She says; 'if someone else is told to self-isolate, then that would be an absolute catastrophe. I am not going to take the risk because this company couldn't stand to have another member of staff not available for work.' Why can't she be on the pilot?

RJ: Well, the NHS app and test and trace are a very important tool in our toolkit to tackle the virus at this critical stage. The evidence from a survey, for example, in the last three months of last year showed that it had helped to avoid 600,000 cases and to ensure 8,000 unnecessary deaths were avoided. So it is important that -

AM: You can't tell me these 500,000 people -

RJ: ... members of the public were pinged and that they do take it seriously and follow the guidance. Because it is one of the ways in which we as a country will get through the difficult days -

AM: You say that, you say that, you say that. But let's just remind ourselves what this - all these people being pinged is doing. Railway companies up and down the country are cancelling services. Big manufacturing companies like Rolls Royce are talking about having to close down or pause - cancels. Doncaster and Derbyshire and other councils are cancelling their bin services, hospitals from Craigmore in Scotland to across the UK are cancelling operations, right across the country the entire economy is being brought to a kind of juddering halt in many places by your policy. Can I ask very straightforwardly, have you really got this under control?

RJ: Well, can I explain why it's important that we do follow the guidance when we receive that - the reason - what you're suggesting, Andrew is it'd be better not to ask people to self-isolate and we disagree with that. We think this is an important part of our plan to keep the virus under control. The app is doing what it's been asked to do, which is to contact those people

who've come into close contact with people who've tested positive for covid-19. Cases are rising, that's driving of course more people to be contacted as well. What we're going to be doing in the days ahead are firstly, from Monday school bubbles will be retired, and so that will help with young people and families of course of the school holidays fast approaching, that as well will make a big difference I expect in reducing the number of people being asked to self-isolate. Because that's been very problematic in recent weeks. And then, secondly, from mid-August we'll move to a point whereby if you're double vaccinated then you shouldn't have to self-isolate in the same way. You will need to follow the testing requirements. The reason for the delay is to ensure that more of the population is double vaccinated.

AM: I was going to say why will it be safe then if it's not safe now?

RJ: Well, there's no full safe way of doing this.

AM: Because you're not vaccinating children. You're letting this run among the younger population.

RJ: Well, firstly, in that six-week period we will be able to further double vaccinate the adult population. We've reached the big milestone this weekend whereby two-thirds of the adult population have been double vaccinated, and every adult in the whole country has been offered at least one vaccine. But there's still a lot of younger people who haven't had a second jab. Hopefully many of those will come forward in the coming weeks to get the second jab, and of course we're urging them to do so. On the question of young people which you raise, we're still awaiting the final guidance from the JSVI on whether or not we should start vaccinating people under 18. We're very sympathetic to that argument, it seems like a sensible thing to do and ministers, armed with that advice, will be making a decision very soon.

AM: But you are still - the prime minister is telling people in the food processing industry, in the haulage industry, the transport

industry, factories etc, to self-isolate. But he's not prepared to tell himself to self-isolate, and that is the problem. You've a bit public messaging problem now in terms of why should we listen to you?

RJ: Well, all I can say is it is important that if anybody is contacted by NHS track and trace they do take the steps that are required of them. I appreciate it's frustrating and difficult at times. It is putting pressures on public services, on businesses and schools. However, it is an extremely important part of our way of keeping the virus under control. If we're able to roll out some of the pilots that we've been doing on a relatively small scale in certain parts of the public sector, then we will do so, and there is only - I say only because it's still a long period of time - there is only till the middle of August before we move on to the next phase where those people who've been double vaccinated will not have to self-isolate in quite the same way.

AM: Isn't the situation the Prime Minister either has to reverse his decision not to self isolate or he has to change the policy for the rest of us, which should it be?

RJ: Well we don't intend to change the policy, although we keep these things under review. We'll be guided by the expert opinion. The advice that we've received in the recent past has been that it will be better to wait this period of six weeks to ensure that more people are double vaccinated, that gives them more protection for themselves, also it decreases the amount of transmission that will happen as a result. So that's the plan, but of course we keep these things under review.

AM: Professor Ferguson suggested that we could see very, very high levels of hospitalisations and that we might have to think about another lockdown or another reversal, certainly of restrictions. If that happens has the government failed?

RJ: Well I think we have to be honest with ourselves that we're going to see a significant rise in the number of cases and the number of people going into hospital. As Professor Ferguson said,

it's likely that this wave that we've known about since at least the beginning of the year isn't going to peak until late August, possibly even into September, so there's going to be some challenging days ahead. It is true however, that we've significantly weakened the link between cases and serious illness. The last time we had cases at the level we do today the number of people dying from the virus was 30 times the number it is today, so we are in a much better position than we were at the beginning of the year, but it is going to be a challenging period. Of course we will do everything we can to avoid having to impose further restrictions and that's why we're urging the public to exercise caution, to exercise good judgement and common sense and to go about daily life in a sensible, careful way and to do things gradually rather than rushing back to normality, if you like, on Monday.

AM: Does doing everything we can to avoid restrictions include allowing a large proportion of the younger people, children in this country to become infected with Covid and therefore suffer the possibility of long Covid?

RJ: Well we're very worried about long Covid.

AM: What are you doing about it?

RJ: It's an incredibly cruel and debilitating set of conditions.

AM: So what are you doing about it?

RJ: Well we're doing two things. Firstly we're going to ensure that anyone who does suffer from these conditions is not left behind. That they're given the very best treatment that's available. We're still learning about the virus and about long Covid. This weekend we're announcing a further £20 million to fund another 15 research projects with leading UK scientists to learn more about it.

AM: So let them catch it and look after them afterwards? Let them catch it, let them suffer the risk and then trying and look after them afterwards?

RJ: No that's not correct. We're obviously going to research long Covid and ensure that we have the best treatments for those

people who contract it and who suffer from the very debilitating symptoms that some people are, but we're also of course trying to protect as many people as possible from the virus. We're doing that with the vaccine programme as I said in answer to your question a few minutes ago –

AM: But not children, not children.

RJ: As I said in answer to your question we are still awaiting the final advice from the JCVI about extending the vaccine programme to younger people. It seems like a sensible thing to do. The evidence we've received so far is compelling and ministers are going to make a decision armed with the advice in the coming days. If we can do that then I think the first step would be to vaccinate those young people who are close to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Those who have vulnerabilities themselves and those who are living in households with other people who are vulnerable.

AM: When it comes to the app a lot of people think it needs to be tweaked at least to make it less sensitive. That people are being pinged all the time at the moment because they've got somebody living next door to them. They're being pinged through a wall and this is causing a huge amount of devastation to the economy and to daily life. Is the government going to look at tweaking the app?

RJ: Well we keep all these things under review but as I understand it those cases are very unusual. Clearly that's not what the app was designed to do, but they are, if you like edge cases and in general the app is performing as expected and if you do get contacted by it then it does mean in the overwhelming majority of cases that you've come into close proximity with somebody who's tested positive and therefore as a precaution you should self isolate and get yourself tested.

AM: Worried scientists from all around the world are now looking at what they're calling the British experiment and they're particularly concerned that running hot, allowing the virus to run so fast through the population as we are now going to do is going

to produce new variants. If Britain produces yet another variant will that be a failure of the government policy?

RJ: Well there's no escaping the possibility that new variants might either develop in this country or come into the country. We're trying to tackle this in a number of ways. We're taking a robust approach with our borders, we've seen the steps that we took this week with respect to France which I know will be very frustrating to the many British citizens who either were in France or were hoping to travel there, but that was taking a precautionary approach with respect to the Beta variant, the South African variant which may only be relatively small numbers in France, between 5 and 10 percent, but that's still a far greater prevalence than there is in the UK where it's more around 0.01 to 0.02% so very significantly lower prevalence here. And then of course within the UK we'll continue to do our very sophisticated genomic testing so we can spot variants as quickly as possible.

AM: I'm sorry to jump in again, but amongst all the sophisticated testing and amongst all the observation you are allowing this virus to run very very hot amongst a lot of the population and your own SAGE advisers say, 'the combination of high prevalence and high levels of vaccination create the conditions in which an immune escaped variant is most likely to emerge.'

RJ: Well as the Prime Minister said earlier in the week there's no easy answer to when we should move into a somewhat less restrictive environment or when we should move from having legalistic rules to those whereby we exercise personal judgement but now does seem to be the logical moment to do that, despite the fact that there is a significant prevalence of the virus in society for a number of reasons. Firstly, because we're about to go into the school holidays which will mean transmission among the young and families will be more controllable. Secondly, because the weather is better in the summer and we're experiencing extremely good weather right now, so the climate is the most



benign we're likely to have. We did look at whether or not a further short delay to say September would have been appropriate and the evidence wasn't compelling. So now does seem like the most sensible time to take this step, but we're doing so very alive to the fact that cases are rising and urging everybody to exercise caution to do so carefully.

AM: So you talk about caution and you talk about personal responsibility. You said you'd take your mask off at the first possible opportunity, as soon as it was legal to do so. Professor Ferguson's going to keep his mask on. Are you not being selfish?

RJ: No, I didn't say that, Andrew. I was asked two weeks ago on another show like yours whether I wanted to wear a mask and I said I don't particularly want to, like millions of other people across the country. But I'll be continuing to carry a mask and I'll wear it in crowded places.

AM: I've got the transcript here. You were asked, 'if you are permitted will you be getting rid of your mask? And you replied, 'I will. I don't particularly want to wear a mask, I don't think a lot of people enjoy doing it.' It suggests very strongly your masks is coming off and I ask again, given what we know about mask wearing and given what we know about the speed of the pandemic at the moment isn't it selfish to take your masks off in those situations?

RJ: Well we're going to ask people to use their personal judgement and my judgement will be that I'll carry a mask and I'll wear it when I'm in crowded spaces, where I'm likely to come into contact with people who are not from my own household, and of course if I'm in a business or on transport and that organisation has decided that they're going to ask people to wear a mask I'll wear one because I respect their judgement and I respect the people who work there. And I think that's the sort of sensible common sense approach that millions of people across the country will follow. I do believe it's right to move from a period of legal

restrictions where the state tells you what to do to one whereby we exercise personal judgement and we trust people, we trust businesses to come to sensible conclusions.

AM: I was asking you about your own personal position. Let me ask you another personal question. Would you support a tax or charge to pay for social care?

RJ: Well we're working through options. The Prime Minister made a very strong commitment to tackle social care and to put it on a sustainable financial footing for the future. It wouldn't be right for me to comment on that other than to say that –

AM: Let me ask you for your own view, could we see a higher tax?

RJ: My own view Andrew is, as a member of the government and as Local Government Secretary so I can't divorce the two. What I can say is that as Local Government Secretary I see every day the stresses and strains on councils as a result of the cost of delivering social care and it's extremely important to me and the councils that I represent in Cabinet to ensure that social care is put on a sustainable financial footing.

AM: Which is why one might have thought you had a view about how to pay for this.

RJ: Well, we have provided further funding in recent budgets through a social care levy. That's enabled billions of pounds of additional funding to flow into the provision of services and I'm working very closely with the Health Secretary and the Chancellor and indeed the Prime Minister to bring forward our proposals and I expect that they will be presented quite soon.

AM: Out of time, stepped in at short notice, thank you very much indeed.

ENDS

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