

Witness Name: Timothy Gowers

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: TG/01 - TG/02

Dated: 25th August 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY GOWERS

I, TIMOTHY GOWERS, will say as follows: -

My role (as far as I understand it) in decisions taken in March 2020.

1. I was contacted by Dominic Cummings by email on 14th March (see exhibit TG/01 – [INQ000253942]). To summarize our correspondence, he was looking for outside help and advice from people who could cast a critical eye on government policy and either endorse it or challenge it as appropriate. Over the previous few days, I had been thinking about herd immunity, and while the idea initially seemed to make sense to me, on further reflection I saw that the cost of allowing COVID to spread to the point that herd immunity was attained would be overwhelmingly high, and that significant measures such as lockdown would therefore be necessary. My main argument was that once that conclusion had been reached, it was clearly best to introduce those measures as soon as possible, since then the number of cases at the point where the measures started to take effect would be as small as possible, thereby greatly reducing not just the number of deaths and serious illnesses but also substantially reducing the length needed of the lockdown itself, with all its attendant negative consequences. An alternative view that seemed to be quite prevalent at the time was that the “optimal” timing of a lockdown was where the NHS was just able to cope with the caseload. That view seemed to me, and still seems, obviously incorrect, and I think may have led to many unnecessary deaths and longer lockdowns than we could have had if they had been better timed. (However, I must stress the words “may have” – while I think that what I say is probably correct, the spread of COVID sprang a few surprises, so I can’t say anything with total certainty.)

2. I set out my views on the same day (that is, also on 14th March 2020) in more detail in a pdf file (TG/02 – [INQ000253954]), which was later made public by the Guardian (with my permission), which I sent to Dominic Cummings in response to his first email. There followed a correspondence in which he made it clear that he was doing what he could to hasten the imposition of lockdown and similar measures, but was encountering resistance.

3. As far as I know, I had no direct influence on government policy, and I don't know whether Dominic Cummings showed my document to anyone else. The one impact I am fairly confident my intervention had was to strengthen Dominic Cummings's conviction that he was right to call for measures to be imposed rapidly: that is, that was his view before he got in touch with me, but not being scientifically trained he needed reassurance from people who were that he was not missing some important counterargument, and that I was able to provide.

4. At the time, Dominic Cummings had a reputation for being a champion of the herd immunity "let the bodies pile up" policy, so I would like to take the opportunity to say that it was very clear from all my interactions with him that saving lives was his top priority, and that this reputation was unfair.

Why me?

5. I am a mathematics professor at Cambridge, maybe not the most obvious person to be expressing an opinion on COVID to somebody at the heart of government. However, there is a large mathematical component to epidemiology, and although that is not my area of speciality, the points I was making were relatively basic ones that required little more than an understanding of the nature of exponential growth, which is part of the training of all mathematicians.

6. But why did Dominic Cummings turn to me, given that I am far from alone in understanding exponential growth? The main reason is that he already knew me from earlier interactions we had had (at his instigation) when he was working for Michael Gove when Gove was Secretary of State for Education. He sought my advice concerning a project to get everybody to study mathematics up to the age of 18, an idea

that has been revived by Rishi Sunak. As you probably know, Dominic Cummings has a great admiration for a certain kind of successful academic in a STEM subject, and I seem to fit his criteria, with the result that if his ideal technocratic government were ever to come into being (which of course it never would), I would probably be part of it.

Attendance at SAGE meeting.

7. I did indeed attend the SAGE meeting on March 18th, but I was on the end of a phone line. Because of that, and because I did not feel welcome at the meeting (my impression is that the SAGE members were not particularly happy that Dominic Cummings had brought in outsiders who were less expert in the relevant sciences, though I may be wrong about that), I hardly spoke, but Demis Hassabis, who was in a similar position to me and if I remember correctly was there in person, said much of what I would have wanted to say and I did at one point briefly express my support for what he had said. In short, my presence at the SAGE meeting probably made little difference to anything. It was also clear to me at the meeting that several people there did not share the view that the best policy was to lock down as soon as possible. However, I do not have a clear memory of who those people were.

8. It also goes without saying that I treated everything said at the meeting as confidential, as well as my correspondence with Dominic Cummings.

Main lessons from my perspective.

9. Politics obviously works in a very different way from science. A politician typically has a view and then seeks to back it up with evidence, ignoring inconvenient evidence that does not support the view. A scientist, in principle at least, follows the evidence wherever it might lead, even if that means discarding a previously held theory.

10. Most of the time, we muddle through with decisions being made in complicated ways by many people all with their different agendas, and although that often leads to bad decisions, that may be the price to pay for the many benefits of a democratic system. But the defects of that system became particularly acute during the pandemic, when decisions with potentially huge consequences had to be made quickly on the basis of partial evidence, and the cost of getting them wrong was measured in thousands of lives, severe damage to the economy, and so on.

11. Assuming we cannot significantly change our political system, even when an emergency such as COVID strikes, what can we do instead? The obvious alternative is to plan in detail for many different possibilities, so as to have policies in place, ready to be implemented quickly. This, I assume, is what is meant by pandemic preparedness.

12. The main lesson I take away from COVID is that we need to make certain decisions quickly and decisively: more than once, the UK did the one thing it shouldn't have done, namely to be reluctant to lock down and then be forced to do so later when the consequences both of the disease and of the necessarily longer lockdown were much worse. I worry that if we were to have another pandemic of similar seriousness to COVID, this reluctance would not have gone away, and the same pattern could well repeat itself. Maybe one could try to avoid that by setting up an organization to decide now, while we have time to think clearly, on the criteria for the timing of any future lockdowns (and other measures such as travel restrictions) that might be necessary. These would be based on factors such as the severity of the disease in question, who is affected by it and how, the R number, and so on.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: _____ 11th September 2003 _____