

THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

TRADES UNION CONGRESS: ADDITIONAL CLOSING SUBMISSIONS IN MODULE 2

INTRODUCTION

1. This is the further closing statement of the Trades Union Congress (**'the TUC'**) in Module 2 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, following the oral evidence of Simon Case on 23 May 2024. This statement is further to the TUC's written closing statement in Module 2, dated 15 January 2024 (**'Written Closing'**), and oral closing statement of 13 December 2023.
2. The TUC is working in partnership with TUC Cymru (formerly Wales TUC), the Scottish TUC, and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The TUC and its sister organisations aim to provide a voice for working people, and to shine a light on the outcomes decision-making had upon safety and wellbeing in the workplace.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SELF-ISOLATION

3. As was set out in the TUC's Written Closing, even prior to the pandemic it was evident that inadequate provision of sick pay would undermine infection prevention and control measures and would contribute to the uneven impacts of the crisis. Throughout the pandemic, numerous red flags arose around the inadequacy of the financial support available to workers but there was a resistance within the Treasury to providing adequate financial support.¹
4. Mr Case acknowledged in his oral evidence that there was a *'very big debate all the way through August, September and I think even into October, possibly even longer'* about financial support for self-isolation.² Mr Case explained that those responsible for Test and Trace, including Dido Harding, were consistently telling those in Number 10 that the financial support available was *'not enough'* and were making the point that those on lower incomes, working in care homes, transport and supermarkets, may struggle without their usual income whilst required to isolate.³ Mr Case acknowledged that the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson,

¹ See: paras. 32-34; sub-paras. 35(a)-(p); paras. 36-42; paras. 43-45; paras 46-67; and paras 68-75.

² Transcript [36/198/5-8].

³ Transcript [36/198/9-17].

was at that time ‘*very focused on enforcement*’ and that the approach was ‘*very much, you know, get people to comply*’.⁴ Mr Case acknowledged that a lack of adequate financial support for self-isolation was likely to contribute to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic upon certain groups, but that factor was not a significant feature of discussions which he was privy to, including with the former Prime Minister and Chancellor, and – crucially – that it should have been.⁵

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

5. As was emphasised in the TUC’s Written Closing, the response to the pandemic would have been more effective had central government taken a more open and collaborative approach to working with key partners, rather than viewing stakeholders as ‘*drag anchors*’ on decision-making.⁶ This submission is supported by the evidence of Mr Case. In relation to the Covid Taskforce, Mr Case explained:

‘I wanted to [...] make sure we brought in people from government departments or other places where they'd actually been working in the real world on things -- so, for example, Kate Josephs, who came in came from the education system, Kathy Hall, who came in and worked in NHS trusts -- to make sure that sitting around the table with the Prime Minister we had people who were much closer -- who'd had real, much closer exposure and experience of real world decision-making and the effects on public services.’

6. Mr Case, at least, appears to have recognised from an early stage in the pandemic the value of consulting those with on-the-ground experience and of ensuring diversity of thought and perspective within central government decision-making. This was in fact reflected in one of the recommendations Mr Case offered in respect of a future crisis:

*‘the answer to these problems don't just lie in government. There are things that we've got to get right but, as we've already discussed on the non-shielded vulnerable, so many of those things were actually down to individual police officers, social workers, whatever; so much of the answer to this lie in the private sector. So getting the relationship right between government and its thinking and the private sector is vital too’.*⁷

The essential point: that effective pandemic response lies not only within government but beyond it, is an important one.

7. Critically, social partnership can narrow some of the blind spots of a government to particularly vulnerable aspects of the workforce. Counsel to the Inquiry asked Mr Case:

‘--in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, the invisibility of children, the invisibility of the position of ethnic minorities, and vulnerable groups, and those in poverty stricken areas. So there was no real means by which diversity of view was being channelled into the

⁴ Transcript [36/198/12-16].

⁵ Transcript [36/198-200].

⁶ See: paras. 19-29.

⁷ Transcript [36/163/2-12].

ultimate decision-making body, the Prime Minister, and the two or three people around him?’⁸

Mr Case accepted that there was not ‘*the sort of full diversity that you’re describing*’.⁹ Social partnership is a critical means of achieving that ‘diversity of view’ in respect of workplaces.

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⁸ Transcript [36/55/9-15].

⁹ Transcript [36/55/17-18].