



The UK Covid-19 Inquiry

Like other major public inquiries, the UK government's Covid-19 Inquiry was set up to listen to the accounts of victims and their families, as well as seeking to establish facts, find fault, and learn lessons. **John Williams** considers some of the evidence provided to the inquiry

A listening exercise, *Every Story Matters*, encourages the public to submit testimony on their own experiences of the pandemic. The inquiry's terms of reference set out a series of aims including:

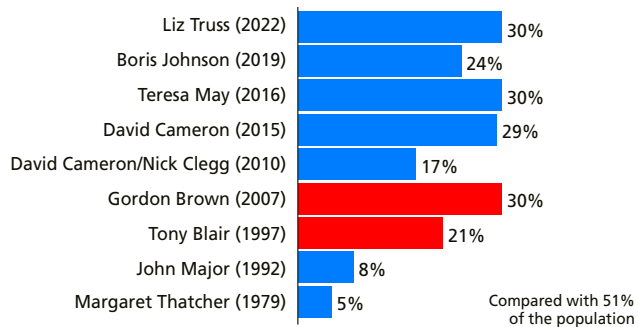
- examining the public health response to the pandemic
- examining the response of health and care professionals
- examining the economic response to the pandemic, including government interventions
- learning lessons from all the above

Representation and equality

Evidence provided to the inquiry in November 2023 has thrown up lots of material of sociological interest, especially around issues of representation and equality. For example, allegations were made, by civil servants and others, about the existence of a culture in Downing Street in which women's views and experiences were routinely ignored and excluded.

Senior civil servant Helen MacNamara, who was the deputy Cabinet secretary in the key early stages of the pandemic, told the inquiry how she struggled to be heard by people in government when raising issues specific to women. She said the culture inside Number 10 was toxic, sexist and macho, and that female staff felt they had become 'invisible overnight.'

MacNamara reported that she had had 'lots of conversations' with then-deputy chief of staff, Cleo Watson, about the 'differential impacts' of Covid-19 policies on women and that she was 'trying to do something about it.' Of special concern here was a 'lack of thought' about childcare during school



SOURCE: SUTTON TRUST

Figure 1 Cabinet positions, by gender

closures, and the rising levels of domestic abuse likely to be suffered by vulnerable women. These perspectives seemed to register little, especially because of the relative lack of women in key cabinet positions (see Figure 1), and also the level of 'misogyny' routinely identified in exchanges between male ministers and their advisors at this time.

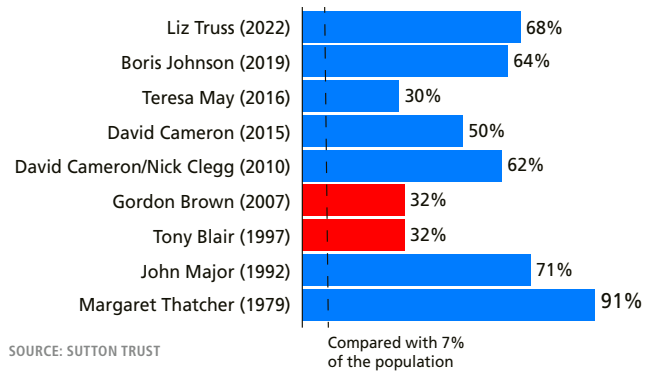
Differential impacts

Issues specifically around the differential impact of Covid-19 on working-class people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds also seemed to be hardly raised. Key cabinet members disproportionately come from wealthy, private school backgrounds and they were said to understand little about the everyday experiences of less privileged social groups when making policy decisions (see Figure 2).

Commenting on the evidence, Lyanne Nicholl, CEO of the 50-50 Parliament pressure group, has said, 'The reality is that without a truly gender-equal parliament, policies will continue to be made from a male perspective.' She went on:

Equal seats mean an equal say, and in this case, the imbalance in the gender distribution may have lost lives and created cruel, and avoidable, circumstances. If we're serious about equality, that means the make-up of our parliament, our representative bodies, and our public services, should truly reflect the diversity in this country.

Nicholl contends that if the Covid-19 inquiry teaches us anything at all, it is that when we leave



SOURCE: SUTTON TRUST

Figure 2 Cabinet positions, by education

women out of the policy discussion, we leave them out of the solutions, and that this is to the detriment of wider society. The real-life consequences can be catastrophic.

Questions

- 1 Why is it important always to have a wider diversity in government decision-making bodies?
- 2 Why are women so underrepresented in senior positions in political institutions and parties?
- 3 What promotes 'toxic and macho' cultures in public bodies and why are they so damaging?

Weblinks

Lyanne Nicholl's New Statesman article:

www.newstatesman.com/author/lyannenicholl

You can see details about the UK Covid-19 Inquiry here: covid19.public-inquiry.uk

Here is more comment on the treatment of women during the Covid-19 outbreak.

www.tinyurl.com/2m683fcy

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