

An open letter to Baroness Hallett, Chair of the UK Covid Inquiry

The Inquiry must urgently address its apparent biases, assumptions, impartiality, & lack of evidence-based approach

We, the undersigned, are a group of UK public health scholars and academics in related disciplines, widely published in our fields, deeply concerned that the Covid Inquiry is not living up to its mission to evaluate the mistakes made during the pandemic, whether Covid measures were appropriate, and to prepare the country for the next pandemic.

First, the Inquiry gives the impression of being fundamentally biased. The Inquiry originated in legal petitions brought by bereaved family groups. Yet there has been little opportunity for petitions to be brought by those who have suffered from the negative effects of pandemic policy decisions. This is preventing a more holistic assessment of impacts on population health and wellbeing. This lack of neutrality appears to have led to biased reasoning and predetermined conclusions, for example, to lockdown faster next time.

Second, the Inquiry is taking key assumptions for granted instead of examining and critiquing them in light of the evidence. The consensus position in pre-2020 pandemic plans was that non-pharmaceutical interventions, including lockdown, had weak evidence of effectiveness, and were predicted to cause substantial harm to society, especially if used for prolonged periods. This informed the initial response to Covid in early 2020. Yet, the Inquiry assumes that these measures are effective and appropriate. As a result, it downplays the harms to society caused by two years of emergency infection control mandates.

Third, the Inquiry lacks impartiality in the selection and questioning of expert witnesses. It has given preferential treatment to scientific advisers on SAGE, who have a vested interest in maintaining the justification for their policy recommendations. Very few scientists with an alternative position have been asked to testify, and the Inquiry has been confrontational rather than inquisitorial in its questioning of these views. The Inquiry has not seriously questioned the hypotheses and assumptions offered to government, especially from government appointed modelers, which were used to justify Covid policies. Neither has it seriously examined the social and economic costs of lockdown. It has also stuck to an agenda of UK exceptionalism failing to recognize the experience elsewhere in the world.

Fourth, the format of the Inquiry is impeding investigation into the key scientific and policy questions. The Inquiry has adopted a legal format that prevents a systematic evaluation of the evidence by biomedical and social scientists on the harms of restrictions to the British public, the impact on Covid from policies such as mandatory NPIs, and the state of evidence for best practice. It is focused on who did or said what, rather than asking fundamental scientific questions. Yet investigating the interplay between harms, benefits, and best practice is critical to preparing for the next pandemic. The Inquiry, as currently functioning, appears unsuited to this task of national importance.

Fifth, the Inquiry risks reducing public trust in the impartiality and independence of government accountability and oversight. Its size and cost (by some estimates £300-500 million) will make it the largest public Inquiry ever undertaken to date, and yet its shortcomings, if not addressed, risk compromising the credibility of future public inquiries.

We believe the Inquiry has a significant and important mission and we would like to see it succeed. However, if it is to do so, these shortcomings need to be urgently addressed. The Inquiry must invite a much broader range of scientific experts with more critical viewpoints. It must also review the evidence on diverse topics so that it can be fully informed of relevant science and the economic and social cost of Covid policies to British society.

We, the undersigned, believe this is an urgent national priority and fundamental to ensuring that future pandemic response is evidence-based and maximizes the health and well-being of all.

Drafted by

Dr. Kevin Bardosh, Collateral Global; Division of Infection Medicine, University of Edinburgh.

Prof. Sunetra Gupta, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford.

Signatories, arranged alphabetically by surname:

Dr. Colin Alexander, Department of Journalism and Media, Nottingham Trent University.

Prof. David Betz, Department of War Studies, King's College London.

Dr Carlton Brick, School of Education and Social Science, University of the West of Scotland.

Prof. Daniel Briggs, Department of Criminology and Sociology, Northumbria University.

Dr. Jennie Bristow, Department of Sociology, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Prof. Anthony J Brookes, Department of Genetics and Genome Biology, University of Leicester.

Prof. Garrett Wallace Brown, Chair in Global Health Policy, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Leeds.

Prof. David Campbell, Professor of Law, Lancaster University.

Prof. Karl Claxton, Department of Economics, University of York.

Dr. Robert Craig, School of Law, University of Bristol.

Prof. Charles Dennis, School of Business, Middlesex University.

Prof. Kevin Dowd, Durham University Business School.

Prof. Fionn Dunne, Department of Materials, Imperial College London.

Prof. Bill Durodie, Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath.

Dr. Ashley Frawley, Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, University of Kent.

Prof. Paul Frijters, Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics.

Dr. Alberto Giubilini, Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford.

Prof. Toby Green, Department of History, King's College London.

Dr. Peter Grove, Former Chair UK Department of Health's Senior Economic & Analytical Review Committee (IASRC).

Mr. Clive Hambler, Department of Biology, University of Oxford.

Prof. Philip Hammond, Department of Media & Communications, London South Bank University.

Dr Cheryl Hudson, History Department, University of Liverpool.

Prof Marilyn James, School of Medicine, University of Nottingham.

Prof. Lee Jones, School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London.

Dr Nicholas Joseph, College of Arts, Humanities and Education, University of Derby.

Prof. David Livermore, Department of Medical Microbiology, University of East Anglia.

Dr. David McGrogan, Department of Law, Northumbria University.

Prof. Paul McKeigue, The Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh.

Prof. David Miles, Department of Economics, Imperial College London.

Dr. Jose Lingna Nafafe, Department of Hispanic, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, University of Bristol.

Prof. Yossi Nehushtan, School of Law, Keele University.

Prof. George Ogola, Department of Cultural, Media and Visual Studies, University of Nottingham.

Dr Jason L. Oke, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford.

Prof. Paul Ormerod, Alliance Business School, University of Manchester.

Dr. Matthew Owens, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter.

Prof. David Paton, Nottingham University Business School.

Prof. Allyson Pollock, Population Health Sciences Institute, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Newcastle University.

Prof. Peter Ramsay, Law School, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Prof. Matthew Ratcliffe, Department of Philosophy, University of York.

Prof. Mario Recker, Centre for Ecology and Conservation, University of Exeter.

Dr. Andrew Shepherd, Chronic Poverty Advisory Network; Institute of Development Studies.

Prof. Karol Sikora, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Buckingham.

Sir Bernard Silverman, FRS, Emeritus Professor, Department of Statistics, University of Oxford.

Dr. Edward Skidelsky, Director, Committee for Academic Freedom; Department of Philosophy, University of Exeter.

Professor Michael Stewart, Department of Anthropology, University College London.

Dr Luke Telford, School of Business and Society, University of York.

Prof. James Tooley, Vice-Chancellor, The University of Buckingham.

Prof. Ellen Townsend, School of Psychology, University of Nottingham.

Prof. John Watkins, School of Medicine, Cardiff University.

Prof. Roger Watson, School of Nursing, University of Hull.

Dr. Stuart Waiton, Division of Sociology, Abertay University.

Dr. Meron Wondemaghen, School of Criminology, Sociology and Policing, University of Hull.

Prof. Simon Wood, School of Mathematics, University of Edinburgh.

Dr. Paul Yowell, Faculty of Law, University of Oxford.

Contact information: kevin@collateralglobal.org