

UnHerd

Transcript: Sajid Javid: Zero Covid has been an absolute disaster

Filmed: March 30th 2022

Freddie Sayers

Hello and welcome to UnHerd. I'm Freddie Sayers. So over the past two years, as you know, we have paid close attention to the Covid pandemic and different policy responses to it. We've had representatives from governments all across Scandinavia, Norway and Sweden and Denmark. We've spoken to people from Israel and the United States. But we have so far not spoken to a single representative of the government of the United Kingdom. Well, that ends today because joining me in the studio is the Secretary of State for Health, Sajid Javid.

Sajid Javid

Hi, very pleased to join you.

Freddie Sayers

And also thank you for seeing that there is a world beyond the BBC.

Sajid Javid

Absolutely – a big world.

Freddie Sayers

So, tomorrow, there is a change to policy, which means that first of all, free universal testing will no longer be available, and you don't need to test if you have Covid symptoms. What's the thought behind that, given that there is surging cases and given that the usual voices are calling for a return to restrictions?

Sajid Javid

Well, a few weeks back, we set out our plans for living with Covid. And I think it's fair to say we're probably the first country that I think is successfully moving from pandemic to endemic. There are other endemic diseases, flu, TB, and others around the world, and I think that's the phase that we are now in as a country. And we are setting out, step by step, how we live with Covid, and on April the first, it's a big moment, because there'll be new guidance around if you have Covid symptoms and how you might choose to respond to that. But as you say, one of the big steps we'll be taking is ending universal testing. We don't have universal testing for anything else, and it's right that we are now at a phase where we can focus testing on those that would really benefit from it and need it most, people in vulnerable settings like care homes, or hospitals, people who work in those vulnerable settings, and also those that might need testing, if they were symptomatic, to benefit from the excellent new drugs that we have to treat Covid. So that's where we are as a country. It didn't happen by accident. When I speak to health ministers across Europe and around the world, my counterparts, I can safely say they're all very envious of the position that UK is in and I wouldn't trade my position for any one of them.

Freddie Sayers

So why do you think we are in a stronger position than they are?

Sajid Javid

I think it's because of decisions that we've taken as a government. And I would go right back to July last year, when we decided, unlike any other country in Europe, to open up and start removing a lot of the restrictions that were in place, most of the restrictions, and had a summer, where, until Omicron came along, we were the most open country in Europe at that time. And I think that was an important move. And there were a lot of people, including a number of scientists, who were not recommending that move. But I think it was the right decision to take because if you were ever going to move restrictions at that time, if you look back to last year, when we'd had the Delta wave, it was right that you do it going into the summer, when kids are off school people, some people will be on holidays and things. So that was an important decision. The other thing, then, was when Omicron came along. We first learned about Omicron, like the rest of the world, in November. Clearly it was a new variant. In the early days, no one really knew just how severe it would be, how damaging it may or may not be. But it's right to take precautions. We decided to focus on our pharmaceutical defences, especially vaccines, but also the antivirals that we procured more per head than any other country in Europe. Also the testing, by making the testing, at that time – because we didn't know enough about Omicron, we could see the surge in cases – to allow people to test quite liberally so that they could be confident, especially if they were meeting vulnerable people. And by doing that, I think we were able to be in a position that we are today that we're able to open up, be the most open, the freest country in Europe, and live with Covid.

Freddie Sayers

I want to ask some questions about both of those decisions in a moment. But first, could we go even further back in time to the beginning of the pandemic. So you weren't Health Secretary, you had left government at that time, so you're watching from the outside. Normally, the British government are asked questions by journalists along the lines of why did you not lockdown sooner, harder, why were there not more restrictions? But I wonder what your view is of the opposite question, which is, given the huge change to society and the removal of liberties that had been there for centuries, on the basis of these models, do you now look back at that early period and believe that full mandatory lockdowns of that kind are worth it?

Sajid Javid

I think it's fair to say – when we look back at this and of course we should we should learn the lessons from it, that's why I think it's right to have a proper independent public inquiry – I think there'll be no government in the world that will say it got everything right. And I'm not in a position yet, because I just don't have all the data and information, as you say, I personally, I wasn't there in the early days, but I can understand why decisions were made when we had all that uncertainty. What did we know in the early days? Right in the early days, we knew –

Freddie Sayers

But now we don't have that uncertainty. We now have the benefit of hindsight. So looking at the thing in the round, looking at the possibilities for the future, do you now think we should be a lot more careful, possibly just rule out full mandatory lockdowns of that kind going forward?

Sajid Javid

I think for any government, a democratic government and we are rightfully a country that takes great pride in our democracy and our freedoms, that if any government is going to impose restrictions, take away freedoms from people, there needs to be a very, very, very high bar to that. Certainly that's my view, it's always been my view, and I think it's shared by almost all my colleagues in Parliament. And the test so far as – you talk about the future, who knows what the future holds in terms of whether it's Covid, or future pandemics, because there will be pandemics in the future. I think we have to be open to that. A lesson learned from this: there must be a very high bar. And also a lesson learned more positively, is that industry, working with government in terms of innovation, drugs and protection against new parasites and things, that it can move incredibly fast. And that partnership between the private sector and the public sector was important in terms of getting vaccines, turning them around. We're the first country in the world, first Western country in the world, to approve a vaccine, to use a vaccine. And also we're lucky enough to have a country where vaccine hesitancy is incredibly low. And that's been a real blessing for our country, how the British people just came forward in their millions, to not just protect themselves, but to protect people around them.

Freddie Sayers

So on that crucial question of lockdowns, you're a numbers guy, you come from a financial background, does it strike you that there is no neat correlation between countries that had highly restrictive lockdowns, and countries that got the best overall results after this two year period? It would be a lot neater if that data set existed, but it doesn't. Are you convinced that lockdowns are a worthwhile policy?

Sajid Javid

What I'd say is that there will be a lot to learn from this, but already what we know, when it comes to restrictions on society and movements in society and taking away freedoms, the impact, although the intent it's clear with this pandemic was sort of to stop the spread of the virus, the impact is far broader. You mentioned rightly the economy, the impact on businesses, people's life chances, particularly young people. The impact on schooling, look at how we're dealing with that.

Freddie Sayers

Was that a mistake to close schools?

Sajid Javid

I think the very, very, very last thing you should close down ever should be schooling, because the the huge long term impact you have on people's –

Freddie Sayers

Can you promise that won't happen again?

Sajid Javid

What I can promise is that the bar for taking any freedom away must be very, very high. I can't tell you for sure what may or may not happen in a future pandemic, not least because I might not be there and others, my colleagues might not. But I think we need to learn as a society from this, about the impact

other than on trying to stop the spread of the virus. So if I think again, back to my own department, the cases that we're seeing now in mental health problems, huge growth especially in young people with mental health problems. The cases of cancer that went undiagnosed in their thousands, because people stayed away from the NHS, because they knew the NHS was focusing on, understandably, on people with Covid. There's many, many long term impacts of this, and I don't think we still have fully understood that and digested that as a society. And we need to be cognisant of that.

Freddie Sayers

Would you be prepared to say, although you're saying you don't want make concrete promises about the future, but would you be prepared to say that, in that early period, insufficient attention was paid to the side effects of these huge draconian lockdowns by government and society?

Sajid Javid

What I'd say is governments across the world, they would all say when you look back, and this includes us, of course, that you look back, that you would do some things differently. We didn't get everything right. The Prime Minister's been clear about that. I think we got the big decisions right now – look at where we are as a country. And Covid is still there, we're learning to live with Covid. And people say to me now, perfectly understandably, they say 'look, you're saying we're learning to live with Covid. Look, Covid cases are going up, infection rates are going up.' But when we look at hospitalisations, the hospitals now in terms of the capacity are in a much, much better position to cope. We understand treatment of Covid, much more than ever before. But even if we look at those cases in hospital, some 55%, the NHS estimates, are people that are Covid positive in hospital, so they're classed as Covid patients, but they're not there because of Covid, they would have been in hospital anyway, getting their hip replacement or –

Freddie Sayers

So is that one of the things you'd say that we should have done differently?

Sajid Javid

We didn't have the data! We didn't have the data at the time. But now we know that this is exactly the kind of thing we were looking for, and for the NHS, the people in the NHS, they did everything they possibly could to help people, and they would be the first also to say, if we had more information, maybe we would have responded differently.

Freddie Sayers

Okay, so when you returned to government last summer, you obviously replaced Matt Hancock. Do you feel that you brought a different philosophy to this question than your predecessor had? Do you think there was a change of atmosphere?

Sajid Javid

This is the sixth government department I ran, and I can certainly tell you, as ministers change in departments, each minister brings their own approach and priorities. I think one of the first things I talked about were the, actually the way I put it was, I'm not just the Covid Secretary of State, I'm the

Health and Social Care Secretary State, there's a lot of things I need to look at other than Covid. Goodness knows we've got enough challenges long term for health, even before Covid came along.

Freddie Sayers

That was a difference, then, so you felt that maybe the government, while you were out of the government, was overly-focused on just Covid to the exclusion of other health concerns?

Sajid Javid

I wanted to make sure that we had, certainly in my department, that we were looking across the board, including the impact of Covid policies on non-Covid health outcomes. And my biggest challenge came with obviously discovering Omicron. And there were voices that were calling for, including scientists and others saying, 'The best way to respond to this is to lockdown again or put other restrictions in', and we decided rightly to focus on pharmaceutical defences. And it wasn't an accident. We did that. The British people responded brilliantly to the call to get boosted, understanding why antivirals are now making a difference, to get tested. And where they knew that if they perhaps seeing an elderly relative that's vulnerable, they knew maybe I should stay away. And they didn't need a government to tell them that. They responded brilliantly. And I think we've all learned huge lessons from that.

Freddie Sayers

Let's get into that December last year, that Omicron period. You were presenting yourself as the freedom guy, you were all about opening up. And then when Omicron was discovered, would it be fair to say you had a bit of a wobble?

Sajid Javid

No, no, because what you're probably referring to is the plan B measures, is that right?

Freddie Sayers

Well, I'm referring to the fact that during December, when you were being presented with nightmarish scenarios from modellers, and had understandable reason to be concerned, there was a spectrum of opinion within the Cabinet, I think that's now public knowledge, and that you were were keen to have some further restrictions beyond what were ultimately decided, is that fair?

Sajid Javid

I think that our response in the end was absolutely the right response. When we get the scientific analysis, both my department other departments were looking at that analysis, were there calls for taking different measures, taking restrictions, of course there were. Obviously I wasn't there in the past, but I think there's always a spectrum of opinions on something like this. We had to be –

Freddie Sayers

And you weren't at the extreme freedom end of that spectrum?

Sajid Javid

I was at the end of how we actually ended up responding, which was ultimately, I think, now looking back – we weren't to know at the time to be fair, because when we decided on our response and on

focusing on boosters on treatments and testing, there was still a lot to learn about Omicron and over time as we learned that it's intrinsically less severe that the vaccines work really, really well, especially if you had a boost, that was important information. But I think we got the balance right. It involves taking risks. Obviously we're talking about health here, but throughout my time in government, there's no perfection in making decisions here. Every decision, there's a risk to be taken, not making a decision is a risk in itself. And so you have to balance up the advice you've been given, including from experts like our scientists who I value greatly, and they're doing their job to set out different scenarios with lots of uncertainty, but it's for ministers to decide.

Freddie Sayers

But it's such an instructive episode that Omicron one isn't it? Because, first of all, on the question of modelling, those models that our government scientists produced from various universities turned out to be wrong. They were overly pessimistic. And they suggested that the impact on hospitalisations of Omicron would be much worse than it was. Do you now conclude that and what does that make you think about receiving that kind of advice in the future?

Sajid Javid

Actually, what it makes me think, because I think the scientists, by and large our scientists that work for the government, they were doing their job. Because we must be fair to what they were asked to do, which is with a lot of uncertainty, especially with the early days of Covid, but even with Omicron around the new variant, there's a lot of uncertainty about its severity, about how it might interact, not just with vaccines, but people who had prior infection, about its growth rate. And so taking into account this uncertainty, scientists come with scenarios, and they set out the assumptions that they've made. They've never, during that time, if I look back, no scientists came to me and said this is what definitely going to happen, or that's what's going to happen, they set it out. And in some ways, it's not that helpful, because there's so much uncertainty there. But they're doing their best.

Freddie Sayers

Do you not think there's a tilt towards the worst case scenario, because the incentive structure is such –

Sajid Javid

I think for some scientists, yes. I think that's right. And that's why I think it was important especially for someone in my position to get broad based opinion. So whilst I was getting advice from scientists at Sage and others with the government, I was also seeking out advice from people that had nothing to the government, even people outside the UK and asking for their opinions. French scientists, German scientists, and scientists in the US and others. And I wanted to take in a broad set of opinions, and then ultimately that helps inform and make a decision. I think that was actually very important that I did that.

Freddie Sayers

And do you think next time you get presented with models, speculative models, from those kinds of groups, you will be more wary or take them with a greater pinch of salt? Do you think that is the lesson?

Sajid Javid

I would say that when it came to Omicron, I was weary, my colleagues in government including the Prime Minister was weary in the sense that scientists are doing their job, they're doing their very best giving us scenarios. They weren't saying this is definitely what's going to happen. These are scenarios based on assumptions. But it was right for ministers to take that into account, to take into account other scientific opinions as well, ones that you that may not necessarily be associated with the state and take in other opinions. And once you've digested all that, come up with a decision, but respect that whatever you do, involved taking risks. You can't have a risk free approach. Look at what's happened in China and Hong Kong, where the so called Zero Covid policy, how it's been an absolute utter disaster. Now in this country, sadly, I look at what we're seeing that's unfolding. Hong Kong has had access to vaccines, pretty much in the same way as we have. They've had access to all the vaccines, including the the mRNA vaccines and others. And they've had a vaccine hesitancy issue partly because they told their population, don't worry, we're going to keep this thing out. So where was the incentive to get vaccinated, and look what's unfolding there now. And you might recall, some of your viewers won't recall, but in the early days, people said the Zero Covid policy is the way to go and that's what the British government should be doing and others. So whatever you do, there's a risk.

Freddie Sayers

Do you take from that a bigger philosophical lesson, which is that the attempts to micromanage, the attempts to completely control nature, which I guess is what Zero COVID was trying to do, elimination strategies, always trying harder, in fact, next time around, that's not the way to go.

Sajid Javid

It's doomed to fail. You can't control nature. We will fight things in nature we don't like like harmful viruses, and there will be more in the future. But I think there's a huge treasure trove of lessons that governments around the world will take from this. Before I came back into government, I was on a part time basis a senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School. My research project was on future pandemics and that's what I was looking at and trying to look at why did this particular pandemic, why do we think it began in China and what were the initial policies of some countries like Taiwan –

Freddie Sayers

Why do you think it began in China by the way? Do you think it was a lab accident or a leak or...

Sajid Javid

To be honest, I don't think we'll ever really know, we'll ever really have the full facts, because that would require China sharing full information with the WHO and others –

Freddie Sayers

Do you have a personal theory?

Sajid Javid

I do, but I'm not going to share that because this isn't about my personal views. It's about going with the evidence and the facts.

Freddie Sayers

So have you been surprised looking at the whole period and looking at your colleagues in government and in other parties, and indeed in other European and Western countries, how little regard was paid to traditions of freedom for healthy people and these things, which had been held as sacrosanct for so long? And how one-sided the rush was in favour of restriction – did that shock you when you were watching this period, first of all, outside government, and then inside it?

Sajid Javid

I think that the speed at which, not just in the UK, but broadly, if we look throughout Europe, the speed at which freedoms were taken away, was, if someone had told me that, before we even heard the word Covid, I would have thought, 'No, that doesn't sound right, doesn't sound like we could do that as a society.' As I say, I wasn't there at the time, and so, I hesitate to go beyond that. But when I say, as the Prime Minister said, there will be lessons to learn from this about our reactions and how we responded, I think that is part of it. And making sure as a society, Parliament in the future, government, that we set ourselves deliberately, a very, very high bar to do anything like that ever again.

Freddie Sayers

It's still going on, though, isn't it? You get countries like Italy, where non-vaccinated people are not able to work, they're not able to take public transport. It's become an incredibly divisive issue. And a whole chunk of society is basically being excluded from normal life. Do you watch that with concern?

Sajid Javid

I don't like any kind of division, and certainly anything like that. I think that is for, whether it's Italy, other countries, that's a decision for them. And I shouldn't get into that.

Freddie Sayers

But the whole question of mandatory vaccination, vaccine passports, it's become this incredibly divisive issue in a lot of countries, and we came quite close to it here.

Sajid Javid

Well, we didn't have vaccine passports, we didn't have mandatory vaccination, other than for in NHS settings, which, when the facts change, we changed our mind. That's what good governance is about. Other countries, you say, whether it's mandation of vaccines for the over 50s in Italy, or their approach to vaccine passports and for all sorts of settings, they've taken a different approach. There are many of them taking that right now. People that come in to see me from abroad, from, whether they're business people, they're ministers, they look at how open we are and say, 'Wow, this is like the old times.'

Freddie Sayers

And you would fight against any of those kinds of measures being introduced in the UK?

Sajid Javid

As I say, for any kind of measure that takes away an individual's freedom, there must be a very, very high bar. And I think the way we responded to the latest variant, Omicron, was the right, balanced, proportionate approach.

Freddie Sayers

Can you give us any commitment about what will not happen in a future pandemic? We've had people from the Norwegian government saying they regret closing schools, and they vow not to be closing schools for young people again, had other governments talking about avoiding lockdowns. What can we get as a promise?

Sajid Javid

What I can say is that there will be no knee jerk reaction to restrict people's freedoms, not at all. The reaction of this government will be absolutely focused on the pharmaceutical defences, the things that make sense, and we know work because we have a public that actually responds to science, responds to evidence. When the British public learned that the vaccines worked from, whether it's hearing from our own scientists, or the UKHSA and stuff, the vast, vast majority of people came forward. Over 92% of people have had at least one jab and that's phenomenal. That is what has allowed us to open up as a country. What we mustn't also tolerate though, is those people who spread false information about vaccines. That's something that's unacceptable, that does a huge amount of damage. People that deliberately spread false information, I'm not talking about people that are hesitant for whatever reason, I'm talking about those that are completely against vaccination, people that attack vaccination centres, or test and trace centres, that should not be something that we should tolerate.

Freddie Sayers

If there are side effects – which I guess all vaccines have some sort of side effects and there appear to be side effects with some of the Covid vaccines, myocarditis for example, does feature and is named on the packet as a side effect so it's not a conspiracy theory to mention it – it should be acceptable for people to consider that in their risk and make a personal judgement as to whether to recommend it to their, for example, young son or not?

Sajid Javid

Of course they should. Vaccines, they should be like any drug. It should be full information, full transparent information to all individuals. And then they make their own judgement based on that and potentially the risks of a vaccine versus the risks of not taking the vaccine, that should be a judgement for individuals. For children, it should be a judgement for their parents and their carers, and that's been our approach as a country. And I think it's been the right approach. What I object to is when there's completely false information, or when you have world leaders saying, 'Why don't you take detergent or something, and that's going to help you', completely made up information that's got no scientific basis. The government also has a responsibility to respond to that.

Freddie Sayers

Thank you, Sajid. One final question, it's a completely different topic, I'm afraid but there's a cyclist called Emily Bridges, who is a trans woman who is now competing against British cyclists in a competition. As Health Secretary, what's your view of that? Do you think she should be competing in the women's category?

Sajid Javid

Well, I don't think it's a Health Secretary issue. But if you're asking me more broadly, about what my view is on that, my own view is I think when it comes to sport, it should be about sex rather than gender and sex should be based on your biological sex.

Freddie Sayers

Sajid Javid, thank you.

Sajid Javid

Thank you.

Freddie Sayers

That was Sajid Javid, the Secretary of State for Health here in the UK, the person who decides exactly what our Covid policy should be. He is, I hope you won't mind me saying, a politician. And that means that he's going to be very reluctant to make firm promises unless they've been pre-agreed by the rest of his government. He's not going to criticise his colleagues overtly. We have to interpret what he says almost like a foreign language. We have to read between the lines. I think we can all agree it's a great thing that he came in to talk to us, we want more of that. And there is some hope at least, that lessons have been learned. And if we face another pandemic, things might not be the same again. Thanks for tuning in. This was UnHerd.