

Johnson’s “herd immunity” strategy and the London Conference on Intelligence whitewash: Britain’s ruling class and eugenics

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Last Sunday, the London *Times* reported on a private event held at the end of February at which leading Conservative government advisor Dominic Cummings explained the UK’s coronavirus response. Those present summarised his position as “herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.” A senior Conservative source described his view as “let old people die.”

The Prime Minister’s Office denies Cummings made such comments, which align closely with the fascistic conceptions taking root in the Conservative Party and its periphery.

Last month, Cummings was responsible for eugenicist Andrew Sabisky being hired as a special government advisor. Both Sabisky and Cummings share the view that intelligence is overwhelmingly genetically determined, and that much educational effort is therefore wasted.

One of their leading defenders in the press and an advocate of “progressive eugenics,” Toby Young, was the government’s first choice to lead the Office for Students, a national regulatory body. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made social Darwinist statements himself, and last year a Tory parliamentary candidate said that a group of people living on social security “need putting down.”

Innumerable posts on social media have drawn the connection between this reactionary ideology and the government’s criminally delayed and negligent response to the pandemic in Britain. The phrase #boristhebutcher was the top trending hashtag on Twitter in the UK a week ago. Many of those criticising the government’s disastrous original policy of “herd immunity”—allowing the virus to spread through the majority of the population relatively quickly—have described it as a “eugenic experiment.”

The dominant concern motivating the policy was to minimise any interruption to the profit-making of the major corporations. And when this proved impractical—with growing public anger as scientists predicted hundreds of

thousands of deaths if the “herd immunity” plans continued—the government, including Cummings, shifted policy towards a massive £350 billion corporate credit handout. Nevertheless, while not all those initially advocating a “herd immunity” strategy advocate eugenics, the strategy and eugenics find fertile soil in the increasingly sociopathic demands of contemporary capitalism.

This was clearly demonstrated by events at University College London (UCL) at the end of February. Just as the Covid-19 virus was developing into a global threat, the university released its “Investigation into the London Conference on Intelligence” and “Inquiry into the History of Eugenics at UCL.” Both reports whitewash a eugenics conference hosted by one of the university’s own professors, and the historical inquiry falsifies the history and contemporary influence of the ideology.

In December 2017, the *London Student* revealed that honorary UCL lecturer James Thompson had been hosting a secretive annual “London Conference on Intelligence” (LCI) on the university’s campus for four years. The LCI was attended by a collection of pseudo-scientist fascists, white supremacists and eugenicists—some in academic positions—presenting topics such as “Admixture in the Americas,” “The Welfare Trait: How state benefits affect personality,” and “Evolutionary indicators for explaining cross-country differences in cognitive ability.”

Following protests by students and academics, UCL agreed to conduct an investigation, but one designed to prevent any reckoning with what had occurred. The university refused to answer questions from journalists, and Thompson was allowed to move quietly into retirement. The findings of the investigation were initially withheld, which UCL justified by launching another inquiry into the institution’s involvement in the development of eugenic ideology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Now that both reports have been released, the UCL's position is clear. The "investigation" into the LCI explains that Thompson, when booking university facilities for the conference, did not tick the box indicating that the meeting might be considered controversial and that "The remainder of the section of the room booking form asking for event details, including its title, attendees and entry requirements, etc. was not filled in."

In two astounding paragraphs, the report states:

"What remains controversial *is not the nature of these meetings*, which were private events which a member of UCL's honorary faculty is entitled to organise, this being one of the 'perks' of such an honorary position which is usually part of a quid pro quo where honorary status brings advantages to the University in terms of contributions to its educational or research activities [emphasis added]."

"[Thompson's failure to flag the meeting as controversial] deprived UCL of the opportunity of *taking appropriate action to mitigate the risk of reputational damage*. A correct answer would be to acknowledge the controversial nature of the topic and speakers, and to note that the organiser hoped the private nature of the meeting would mitigate any potential negative impact [emphasis added]."

No mention is made of the fascist white supremacists Emil Kirkegaard, Richard Lynn or Edward Dutton, to name a few, who attended the LCI, despite their work being referenced in the appendices.

The separate "Inquiry into the History of Eugenics at UCL" makes only fleeting references to the LCI. Its findings and recommendations were considered so inadequate that the majority—nine of the 16 members—of the inquiry's own committee refused to sign the chair's main report.

One of the members of this group, professor of the history of biology Joe Cain, explained, "I tried really hard to get the London Conference on Intelligence on to the agenda of that committee, but I met with a brick wall. We absolutely should have talked about it—but we just didn't." He said the committee had made no attempt to assess whether eugenicist ideas had influenced teaching at the university. Stating that "the fact is we didn't look," he added, "I'm sure students would let us know if the sort of crazy eugenics you see in the LCI meetings were being taught, but eugenics can also be much more subtle than that."

The inquiry was also criticised for what a dissenting member of the committee, in an anonymous comment to the *Guardian*, called a "tendentious focus on race." The main report admits that "commission members disagreed on the meaning and role of race in eugenics." The anonymous member continued, "I have no issue with addressing racism, but the fact is that the early eugenicists at UCL were far more focused on targeting people based on things like

poverty or disability."

These are incisive comments. The report includes references to disabled and low-income groups, but is "focussed on race, as per [its] terms of reference." It leans on the reactionary assumption that eugenic ideology is fundamentally bound up with "whiteness" and that it originates from "racism... married to science." The threat of eugenics is to be solved, in part, through efforts to "decolonise the curricula in all departments" and the opening of "a number of paid posts in relevant UCL Centres such as the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation."

This is a fundamental distortion of the history of eugenics and its pernicious role in contemporary politics.

The ideology developed out of a social Darwinist response to the threat of socialism. It gained a significant following in ruling circles in response to intensifying class and inter-imperialist antagonisms, expressed in fears of "national deterioration." Eugenics was used to justify inequality and poverty, carry out sterilisations of the disabled and mentally ill, "prove" national and racial superiority, and, especially in the United States, promote anti-immigration laws. The ideology found its fullest and most devastating expression in the policies of Nazi Germany.

Despite the fact that UCL's report includes a quote from Karl Pearson, a eugenicist professor at the university in the early 20th century, lauding "Reichskanzler Hitler," none of this history is explored or raised in warning. To do so would invite questions the ruling class and its institutions are not prepared to answer about links between the persistence of social inequality and national tensions, the revival of fascism and the growing influence of a network of race scientists, eugenicists and social Darwinists amongst the ruling elite.

The university's actions are proof that this reactionary ideology can be seriously confronted and opposed only from a socialist perspective. The life-threatening actions of the Tory government of Johnson and Cummings in regard to the Covid-19 crisis are proof of the urgent necessity to build that opposition.



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