

Boris: We will bash on with jab programme



Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz

COMMENT
LEO MCKINSTRY
Daily Express columnist

NOTHING has done more to expose the rotten nature of the European Union than the vaccination shambles. Brussels now faces a major public health crisis largely of its own making, as a third wave of Covid sweeps through the continent, lockdowns have to be reimposed and rates of inoculation remain dismal. Throughout this saga, epic official incompetence has been matched by a megalomaniacal obsession with control, and a cruel willingness to put dogma before humanity and a neurotic bitterness towards independent Britain for daring to escape the clutches of its bureaucratic empire.

The people of Europe are paying the terrible price for this mix of ideology and ineptitude. Less than 14 per cent of the EU's population have had the jab compared to more than half of British adults. That stark reality is driving the mood of panic and vindictiveness in the EU's ruling elite, as yesterday's virtual summit revealed.

The beleaguered President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had wanted to take a hard line with Britain, calling for powers to seize vaccine manufacturing plants and restrict exports of the virus to our shores.

Her tough stance – reflected in her boasts that we have far more to lose from a vaccine war than Europe because much of our supply comes from the continent – is a monumental exercise in distraction. She wants to shift the blame for Brussels' own failings, which include over-caution, lack of foresight, poor negotiation and inadequate contracts.

These mistakes are typical of von der Leyen's political career. She was only appointed because she was perceived as a mediocrity who could be easily controlled, especially by the power-hungry President Macron of France. But other European leaders, particularly those of Ireland and the Netherlands, are horrified by the antics of her Commission. Von der Leyen's predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, described a potential vaccine war as "stupid", while the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz warned the summit of the severe long-term "damage" to the EU.

Such voices wanted common sense rather than vengeance against Britain. They knew export bans and factory seizures would not only smack of tyranny but make a mockery of free trade and the rule of law.

Future investors would be deterred. Supply chains would be disrupted. Major companies would be reluctant to do business with the EU. Commercial agreements would be harder to reach.

So Brussels was forced to pull back from the brink. Von der Leyen did not get the showdown she wanted. Nevertheless, the draconian powers to act against Britain are held in reserve.

As one Whitehall source put it: "They have armed themselves with a bazooka and pointed it at us. It is quite incendiary." But such hostility shows once again how right we were to embrace Brexit.

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draconian measures. During crisis talks over the bloc's vaccines fiasco last night, top Eurocrat Ursula von der Leyen received the backing of member states to make a grab for "Europe's fair share" of vaccines.

Meanwhile leaders in Brussels were fighting among themselves over whether they should blockade vaccines or their components.

Dutch PM Mark Rutte said EU leaders had accepted proposals for increased export controls – but they've insisted that before they are used, relationships with other countries and global supply chains need to be taken in to account.

He also warned that production of the Pfizer jab in Belgium would

FORMER EU CHIEF SLAMS JAB WARS

FORMER EU chief Jean-Claude Juncker says the bloc would be foolish to trigger a vaccine war with Britain – and called on bosses to back down.

The ex-European Commission president said: "I don't think that this is the right way. We have to pull back from a vaccine war."

"Nobody in Britain, nobody in Europe understands why we are witnessing such...stupid vaccines war. "We are not in a war, and we are not enemies. We are allies."

He branded EU threats to block shipments of jabs as "stupid" and warned of "major reputational damage" to the EU.

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grind to a halt because it is reliant on components made in Britain.

He said: "We should not do stuff that leaves us with not more but less vaccines." His allies told Commission President Ms von der Leyen she risked triggering a global trade war that would be detrimental to the EU's supplies if she goes ahead with her blockade.

As the crunch meeting bumped along, the vaccination programme in England was powering ahead with nearly nine in 10 over-50s having had a jab. Speaking during a visit to a nursery in west London, Boris Johnson said: "We will bash on with our programme but of course we are going to keep working with our EU partners and our friends."

The Prime Minister added that he was "on the side of openness" in the trade of vaccines.

"I don't want to see blockades of vaccines or of medicines, I don't think that's the way forward either for us or for any of our friends."

Senior UK Government sources said Britain's jab programme would not be thrown off course by the EU if it turns protectionist. One insider



'On the side of openness'... Boris at nursery. Right: EU summit watched by Macron

said it was important for Britain "to show and be in favour of a global approach on the vaccines".

They added: "We are still absolutely confident we will hit our targets of April 15 and the end of July. We are continuing to push ahead."

Bitter internal divisions over the EU's low vaccination rate boiled over yesterday when Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz claimed his country had not been given its fair share of the bloc's supplies and warned there would be "damage to the EU like we haven't seen in a long time" if the issue continues. And French

president Emmanuel Macron told a TV channel: "We didn't shoot for the stars. We were wrong to lack ambition." The men lashed out as EU leaders prepared to meet online to discuss export bans that would hit UK supplies. But the threats were widely condemned, with even Jean-Claude Juncker, the former top eurocrat, warning Brussels to step back from waging a "stupid vaccine war".

The UK and EU agreed on Wednesday to work together to find a solution. Latest figures show 87 per cent of over-50s in England received their first dose by March 21.

The South-west had the highest



emerging for people to have their second vaccination.

The rollout programme is still on track and looks likely to easily reach the original first dose target of vaccinating the priority groups by mid-April.

Manufacturing a vaccine is

typified by complex biological processes more akin to manufacturing a specialist beer or artisan cheese. There are a high number of vaccine manufacturing failures and often supply shortages created by this volatility. Critically, there are regulatory requirements at each step. Logistics, procurement, manufacturing and supply chain professionals manage a well-choreographed ballet to coordinate these global flows, and these "hidden heroes" are



Pictures: GETTY; PA; REUTERS

DAILY EXPRESS VOTE Should the Prime Minister be tougher with EU over vaccine supplies?

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rate at 90.5 per cent while London was the lowest at 78.8. Some 93.7 per cent of older care home residents in England have also received their first jab.

NHS England estimates that one in five people aged 16 to 49 are also likely to have had a jab. Meanwhile

a quarter of people in England aged 80 and over are likely to have had both doses, meaning they are fully vaccinated.

Expert analysis showed the impact the vaccination programme has already had. Between December 8, when the first jab was

continually assessing the risks, responding to weekly, daily and indeed, hourly challenges. Many risks are factored into the targets, and effective collaboration with all stakeholders, including volunteers and the Armed Forces, ensure success.

By working together globally creating a "win-win", the UK vaccination programme can remain on target but as a nation we can support vaccinating the world – after all, the job is not done until this is achieved.

Infighting as Bloc heads can't agree

EUROPEAN Commission boss Ursula von der Leyen insists she received the backing of member states to make a grab for "Europe's fair share" of vaccines.

During crisis talks over the bloc's jabs fiasco, the top Eurocrat struggled to keep her export ban on Covid vaccines alive amid fears the plans could trigger a global trade war.

Before the summit she tweeted that it would "ensure that Europeans get their fair share of vaccines".

She also said the EU had exported 77 million doses to 33 countries since December, making the bloc the world's largest vaccine exporter.

But German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested the bloc should focus on boosting production rather than confiscating life-saving vaccines destined for Britain.

She said: "The problem at the moment with the vaccine supply isn't so much due to the question how much was ordered, but more about how much can be manufactured on European soil."

"Because we can clearly see: British manufacturing plants manufacture for Great Britain, the US aren't exporting anything, and therefore we rely on what

Struggling...Ursula von der Leyen



Alert eased after huge fall in hospital patients

THE Covid emergency alert level has been cut to three by NHS England after a "very sharp decrease" in the number of virus patients in hospitals.

It had moved to the highest level of four in November, when chief executive Sir Simon Stevens warned of rising numbers of "desperately sick" victims.

He said yesterday that the pressure had eased enough to return more control to local hospitals. Sir Simon added: "We had over 34,000 severely ill coronavirus patients in our hospitals in mid-January. That number is now 4,000."

The total is still

From Joe Barnes in Brussels

can be produced in Europe, and we have to expect this virus will preoccupy us for a long time." Ms Merkel was leading a group of worried European capitals urging Brussels to back down on its threat to blockade.

The nations, including Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Ireland and the Netherlands, fear Ms von der Leyen could trash vital supply chains by moving to cut-off shipments to Britain.

But Ms von der Leyen presented a slideshow detailing the number of vaccines exported from mainland Europe to the rest of the world.

A European source told the Daily Express that she deliberately pointed out that 21 million of the 77 million doses had landed in Britain.

Hardliners France, Italy and Poland continued to back an export ban on countries with a better jabs rollout than the EU.

Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki urged Brussels to go further by seizing control of factories and ripping

up patents for the Oxford jab, as well as blocking deliveries abroad. He said: "It is time to replace strong words with strong actions. We must put more effective solutions on the table."

By Hanna Geissler

around 400 more than the NHS was dealing with on the same day a year ago.

But he said: "That very sharp decrease is a consequence of both declining infection rates across the community and the impact that's now being felt from the vaccination programme."

The Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response (EPRR)

coronavirus alert figure is separate to the UK's Covid alert level which is set by the chief medical officers of the four countries.

It stands at four on a five-point scale.

Infection down...Sir Simon

