Devolved nations may break ranks if pandemic worsens

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The pandemic may drive a new wedge through the United Kingdom, Cambridge academics have said.

The UK’s leaders are following a “four nations action plan” to limit deaths, striking an uncommonly consensual tone after a decade of constitutional wrangling over independence.

However, this consensus could collapse if the death rate spirals out of control, opening a new fault line, according to Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon, of the Bennett Institute for Public Policy social inequality research group.

They wrote: “While the incentives for co-operation are strong, there are countervailing dynamics too, and it is possible that co-operation could give way to greater divergence.”

Notable ceasefires include Nicola Sturgeon’s decision to pause her Scottish independence campaign, and Boris Johnson inviting her to join the Cobra emergency response committee, normally reserved for cabinet secretaries.

The paper said: “The imperative to co-operate in these circumstances may serve as a reminder of how intertwined and interdependent the different parts of Great Britain still are, especially when faced with a common foe.”

The constitutional crises of Brexit, precipitated by the UK government publishing documents and announcing key policies without consulting the devolved administrations, were not a feature of the Covid-19 response, they said.

All the UK’s leaders are drawing on the advice of Sage, the government’s scientific advisory group for emergencies, which informs decisions taken on a four-nations basis at Cobra, prompting a rare cross-government line of defence against public criticism under which Ms Sturgeon and Mr Johnson have defended each other.

“The devolved governments have publicly defended the common position and the evidence behind it — and in so doing have provided significant cover for Mr Johnson’s administration.

“But all may not be quite as harmonious as it seems. There have been small, but notable, differences in the timing of some announcements.

“The Scottish government announced a ban on large gatherings two days before similar steps were taken elsewhere. Northern Ireland and Scotland also suspended criminal jury trials before England and Wales. Non-essential construction sites in Scotland have been asked to close but there has not yet been any such edict in England.

“While these do not represent fundamental differences in overall strategy, and in some cases may reflect particular factors in the devolved territories, they do hint at the possibility that there is less cohesion in private.”

“While the temporary hospitals in England and Northern Ireland have been branded as ‘Nightingale’ hospitals, that in Glasgow has been named after Louisa Jordan, a Scottish nurse who died during the First World War.”

The paper added: “None of these issues have as yet led to a major public breakdown in relations, however tense things may be behind the scenes.

“And at the moment there is one overriding reason why this is the case: the current approach elicits high levels of public support. But should that situation change, the incentive to break ranks might well emerge.”

There were signs last week that the “four nations action plan” was breaking down, with Ms Sturgeon finding herself blindsided by a series of government announcements.