

Boris Johnson defends key adviser over flouting UK lockdown rules

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At a Downing Street coronavirus press briefing Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson fended off demands for the resignation or sacking of his key adviser Dominic Cummings.

Johnson was speaking at his first press briefing in two weeks. Over the previous 48 hours, his government was thrown into turmoil as it emerged that Cummings broke lockdown rules. A joint investigation by the *Guardian/ObsERVER* and the *Mirror* newspapers revealed that he travelled hundreds of miles from London to the northeast of England, allegedly on two separate occasions.

Johnson declared in response that Cummings had no case to answer and had “acted responsibly, legally and with integrity.”

Cummings left London after the government had prohibited all non-essential travel from March 23. On March 30, Downing Street confirmed that Cummings was suffering from coronavirus symptoms and was self-isolating—Johnson and Health Minister Matt Hancock had tested positive just three days earlier.

According to the *Observer* and *Sunday Mirror*, Cummings left Downing Street on March 31 and drove with his wife—who was also displaying coronavirus symptoms—and their four-year-old child, to his parents’ farm 260 miles away in County Durham.

Under the lockdown, all non-essential travel was banned including visiting family members or second homes. Those living in a multi-occupancy household with symptoms were instructed to “stay at home and not leave the house” for 14 days.

Cummings and various government figures claimed that he made the trip to self-isolate in a self-contained part of his parental home to ensure that his child would be looked after if he or his wife became ill.

But according to a retired chemistry teacher, on April

12, when Cummings was supposed to be in self-isolation, he was out walking in the market town of Barnard Castle, 30 miles away from Durham. He returned to London on April 14, and according to another eyewitness he was seen five days later back in the northeast’s Houghall Woods admiring bluebells.

The home in which his parents live is co-owned by Cummings. On April 6, when Cummings was in Durham, Scotland’s chief medical officer, Dr Catherine Calderwood, was forced to resign after making two trips to her own second home in Fife just over an hour’s drive from her main home Edinburgh.

Downing Street has denounced the *Guardian* and the *Mirror* for publishing “inaccurate stories about Mr Cummings.” But within hours the hashtag #sackcumplings was trending and over 120,000 had signed a petition demanding his resignation.

Leading backbencher Steve Baker was the first senior Tory to demand Cummings’ resignation. Baker said he should resign “before he does any more harm to the UK, the government, the prime minister, our institutions or the Conservative party.” He was backed by eight other Tory backbenchers, including other leading hard Brexiteers.

Cummings loyalists doubled down, with ministers including Michael Gove, Rishi Sunak, Matt Hancock, Dominic Raab and Grant Shapps coming to his defence. Attorney General Suella Braverman, in defiance of all normal conventions, tweeted, “Protecting one’s family is what any good parent does. The @10Downing Street statement clarifies the situation and it is wholly inappropriate to politicise it.”

The lies continued to unravel. With the government denying police officers had spoken to Cummings family about his presence in the northeast, Durham Police confirmed they knew Cummings was at the

Durham property on March 31 and had spoken to Cummings' father about the security measures required.

Hours before Johnson spoke on Sunday, police officers were knocking at the door of the Cummings family home in north London.

While Cummings was in Durham, thousands of people nationwide were issued with on the spot fines for alleged breaches of the lockdown rules. In the four weeks to April 27, the police issued more than 9,000 fines to people throughout England and Wales. By May 11, the police had issued more than 14,000 fines, including to 862 repeat offenders.

Cummings was one of the chief advocates for the government's "herd immunity" policy, based on the mass infection of the population and the rejection of any systematic measures to suppress the pandemic. In March, the *Times* reported on a private event held at the end of February at which 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."

Cummings, the former head of the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum, is part of Johnson's inner circle of hardline Brexiteers who have championed "Britain Unchained" and the completion of what they describe as "the Thatcher revolution".

This war against society was on full display at Sunday night's press conference where Johnson followed his fulsome defence of Cummings with declarations that his government's back-to-work drive will continue unabated. Primary schools would begin selectively reopening on June 1, despite overwhelming opposition from parents and teachers. "Stage two" would soon follow, with secondary schools providing "some contact" for year 10 and year 12 students from June 15.

It is not known if Cummings infected any other people during his trips to the northeast or while out and about in the area. What is known is that by May 14, the northeast had the highest rate of infection in the country—with its R value at 0.80, double the rate of London. The first case of coronavirus in the northeast came from a person who attended a Nike conference that the government allowed to take place in Edinburgh

on February 26-7 attended by 70 employees from around the world.

Cummings has only been able to survive thus far because he has faced less criticism from the Labour Party than from within his own faction-ridden Tory party. Sir Keir Starmer declared at the outset of the pandemic that Johnson could rely on his "constructive" opposition at all times. He has been true to his word, refusing to issue any public call for Cummings' resignation. Instead, he wrote a polite letter to the head of the civil service, Sir Mark Sedwill, asking him to investigate the 260-mile trip known to have been taken by Cummings.

Even after Johnson's media briefing—packed with lies from start to finish—Starmer still refused to call on Cummings to quit, complaining instead that "It is an insult to sacrifices made by the British people that Boris Johnson has chosen to take no action against Dominic Cummings."

Starmer's predecessor Jeremy Corbyn also refused to call for Cummings to go, merely retweeting a comment from former shadow chancellor John McDonnell that didn't even name Cummings. The episode, McDonnell wrote, was a "fundamental test of character [!] for Johnson. He's dramatically failing it by defending the indefensible & doing it by obfuscation and avoidance."

Labour's soft-peddling, under conditions where Cummings is facing a possible police investigation, points to Labour's central role in defending a government that is falling apart at the seams. They are giving Johnson carte blanche to do as he pleases. While Starmer and Corbyn were issuing their polite protests, it was left to former Durham police chief Mike Barton to observe, "It feels like feudal times. We make the rules and it is for you, the great unwashed, to follow them."



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