UK: Johnson government crisis worsens after Dominic Cummings press conference

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson's key advisor Dominic Cummings is at the centre of a deepening government crisis, after being exposed for traveling 260 miles with his family to his parents' farm during the UK's COVID-19 lockdown.

On Monday afternoon, Cummings attempted to explain away his actions in a press conference in Downing Street's rose garden. His story was a tissue of evasions, half-truths and lies.

According to his account, he received a call from his wife while at work on March 27, at the height of the coronavirus crisis, to say that she was ill and might not be able to look after their four-year old child. Cummings went home to check on her, then returned to Downing Street. The next day, he drove the three of them to his family farm in Durham, occupied by his parents.

He claimed as mitigating factors a supposed and unaccounted-for inability to secure childcare in London and fear of "attacks" on his London home by left-wing protesters. Durham would also enable the couple to access childcare from his sister and nieces if necessary.

Cummings then spent two weeks in Durham. Much of his account consisted of tortuous justifications for various eye-witness sightings of his trips outside the family farm and attempts to pre-empt any police investigation based on cell-phone locations.

He had gone to the local hospital to pick up his wife and child because there were supposedly no taxis. Woods he was seen walking in were in fact privately owned by his family.

But by far the greatest insult to the intelligence of the population was Cummings's explanation for his sighting on April 12 at a river by the local town of Barnard Castle. He claimed that COVID-19 had affected his eyesight—a hitherto unrecorded symptom. Given that he intended to travel back to London to resume work the next day, his wife supposedly suggested a "test-drive" to see if it was safe to do so.

That test-drive involved a trip to a local beauty spot, with wife and child in tow, stopping at a riverside location so his child could go to the toilet. The remarkable child had apparently previously managed to travel the 260 miles to Durham without needing a toilet break, as Cummings insisted he had not stopped on the way. The scenic "test run" coincided with his wife's birthday.

None of this should, in any case, have taken place.

When Cummings went home to tend to his sick wife on March 27, he believed she "might have COVID." He also felt there was a "distinct probability" that he too was already infected. According to his own government's guidelines, he was therefore required to stay at home and quarantine with his family for 14 days. Instead he returned to his place of work in Downing Street and the next day drove his ill family hundreds of miles across the country.

His actions are entirely of a piece with the Johnson government's declared policy of "herd immunity"—letting the disease run rampant through the population. The Tories had reluctantly been forced to impose a lockdown, but that was not going to stop Cummings doing whatever he wanted.

The claim that his actions were justified by the "exceptional circumstances" presented by "threats of violence" which left him "worried about the possibility of leaving my wife and child at home" is also nonsense. Unlike him, the rest of the population was observing the national lockdown not marching on Islington.

Cummings's central task throughout the press conference was to protect Johnson by claiming that he had not told his boss nor any other leading Tory of a

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planned trip to Durham by the prime minister's closest advisor and political ally. For two weeks, no one is supposed to have asked where he was.

Forced to acknowledge that he must have spoken to Johnson at some point during the two-week Durham stay, he admitted to a late-night phone conversation that both were supposedly too sick to even remember—until several weeks later when the *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian* exposed Cummings's movements.

Cummings's execrable attempt to put a stop to the Johnson government's crisis over his actions only deepened it. His strained efforts to solicit sympathy for a "worried father" notwithstanding, what came across most strongly from his account was naked class privilege and barely disguised contempt for the working people he was demanding sacrifice from.

The endless refrain that "reasonable people may well disagree" with his actions was a provocation for the millions of people who had not seen their loved ones—not even when they were dying or to attend funerals—and who did not enjoy a rural retreat complete with private woods during their lockdown.

Since the designation of Margaret Thatcher as "the Iron lady," political cowards and incompetents on the "left" have sought to invest their opponents with a semi mystical strength of purpose and Machiavellian genius to excuse their own betrayals and refusal to fight for those they claimed to represent.

Cummings was portrayed as one such "grey eminence" for his role in the Brexit referendum and in Johnson's political ascendancy. He has now emerged as the near universally despised embodiment of a hated and crisis-wracked government. The most telling Cummings-inspired pun is the recasting of Johnson's advice to "Stay Alert" in combatting the virus to "Stay Entitled."

Johnson's government is in free-fall. The prime minister's own approval ratings have dropped below zero for the first time during the pandemic after he backed Cummings. They now stand at minus 1 percent, a fall from 19 percent four days ago and 25 percent a fortnight ago.

Nearly 40 Tory MPs have called on Cummings to resign, including former Chief Whip Mark Harper and former Culture Secretary and former Attorney General, Jeremy Wright. Scottish Office Minister Douglas Ross resigned himself, saying he could not "in good faith" defend Cumming's behaviour.

Miranda Green warned in the *Financial Times* (FT), "This is a moment of great danger for Mr Johnson's government: only a few months old and confronting an unprecedented peacetime crisis, it already resembles an administration losing its grip."

The leaders of all the main opposition parties have signed an open letter calling on Johnson to sack Cummings—with the sole exception of Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer. Together with the trade unions he is still busy positioning himself as a key figure in a de facto government of national unity that many within ruling circles consider necessary in order to impose the back to work drive and the savage attacks on jobs, wages and conditions that will follow.

The FT reported yesterday that the Labour Party was mounting its latest "charm offensive" with the City of London, with Shadow City Minister Pat McFadden holding meetings with banking and asset management representatives such as Standard Life Aberdeen, the UK's largest listed fund group by assets, and the Investment Association, Britain's asset management trade body.

Iain Anderson, head of public affairs group Cicero, said, "There is now an entirely constructive and open relationship, and talk of partnership with finance again."

If workers want to be rid of Johnson's government and to take on big business, they must do it themselves—building rank-and-file organisations outside of the rotten pro-capitalist structures of the trade unions and the Labour Party and instead based on a socialist programme.

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