

British ruling class fears Dominic Cummings crisis undermines “social contract”

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday called on Britain to “move on” from the outpouring of anger directed against his key advisor Dominic Cummings for breaking the government’s COVID-19 lockdown.

The “very, very frustrating episode” should be brought to an end—so the government can implement its back-to-work drive and send millions of workers into dangerous conditions guaranteed to produce an additional explosion of the pandemic.

Johnson used the phrase “move on” five times in 20 minutes when appearing before the Commons Liaison Committee, adding that he “did not propose to add” to his previous statements on Cummings or the “autobiography” his key advisor delivered at an unprecedented Downing Street press conference Monday.

When asked whether the Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark Sedwill should investigate Cummings’ actions, Johnson replied, “Quite frankly, I am not certain that right now an inquiry into that matter is a very good use of official time.”

The “public”, he maintained, wanted the government to “focus on them and their needs, rather than on a political ding-dong about what one adviser may or not have done”.

Johnson has only ensured that the crisis of rule facing his government will rumble on. According to his own account, Cummings broke Britain’s public health lockdown to travel 260 miles with his wife and four-year old child—with both parents infected with COVID-19—to his family estate in Durham, supposedly for help with childcare. He later took a family drive to the local beauty spot of Barnard Castle on his wife’s birthday, claiming this was to test his eyesight.

Even professional dissembler Michael Gove, Minister for the Cabinet Office, was left stranded in the middle of his own sentence in an LBC Radio interview in response to the question, “Would you have gone on a sixty-mile round trip to test your eyesight?” Gove said, “I have on

occasions in the past driven with my wife in order to make sure that, er... What’s the right way of putting it...”

A YouGov poll reports that 71 percent of the population think Cummings broke lockdown guidance, 59 percent think he should resign, and 70 percent think his actions and continued employment will undermine public health measures. A poll by Mumsnet found that 81 percent of parents would obey the rules and not travel for childcare. Twenty three percent said they had been in similar situations to Cummings and remained at home. Johnson’s popular approval ratings have collapsed 20 points in four days to minus one and the ratings for the Conservative Party fell 16 points in one day to minus two.

Even in ruling circles, the government’s stance is considered untenable. A substantial section of the Tory Party have decided Cummings’s family outing is not the hill they want to die on. Forty three Conservative MPs have called on Johnson to sack his advisor and an additional 17 have made open criticisms. Brexiteer grandee Steve Baker said, “Dominic Cummings must go before he does any more harm to the UK, the government, the prime minister, our institutions or the Conservative party.” Junior Scotland Office minister Douglas Ross has resigned in protest.

BBC *Newsnight* presenter Emily Maitlis on Tuesday summed up the situation as, “Dominic Cummings broke the rules. The country can see that, and it’s shocked the government cannot. The longer ministers and the prime minister tells us he worked within them, the more angry the response to this scandal is likely to be.”

After receiving complaints from Tories, the BBC issued a groveling apology admitting political bias. Maitlis did not make her scheduled appearance on *Newsnight*.

There is obviously personal and political animosity in the attacks on Cummings made by various factions of the ruling elite. He has long been a bogeyman of the pro-EU camp of British business and politics for his leading role

in the 2016 Brexit referendum. At the same time, he has referred to the European Research Group of Brexiteer Tory MPs as a “narcissist-delusional subset” and made a point of setting himself up as a champion of popular sentiment against the political class and media.

But underlying the various animosities is a more serious nervousness that Johnson’s continued defence of Cummings is destabilising the ruling class’ control of the political situation. The scandal threatens to become a catalyst for massive popular discontent about the government’s handling of the pandemic.

On Tuesday, the *Guardian* published its “view on the Cummings crisis: a social contract ripped up,” expressing concern that “The government’s serious mistakes in this crisis, contributing to the highest death toll in Europe, have already imperilled public trust in its stewardship ... The unique social contract agreed in March must hold if the country is to stick together in the months to come, but it currently feels fragile. The failure to remove Mr Cummings risks undermining it still further.”

The *Financial Times* agreed, editorialising, “The Dominic Cummings affair reveals UK government’s weakness.” The article warns, “Mr Johnson’s reliance on one man is bad for his government. He has burnt through much political capital defending what the public rightly sees as the indefensible.

“The saga is also bad for the country because it will undermine observance of the next stage of lockdown—and rattles faith in the government machine.”

The real fear behind talk of rattled faith in government is of the development of an oppositional movement in the working class in response to the ongoing return-to-work agenda and its consequences. With a second spike of the pandemic made inevitable by ending the lockdown, the ruling class is concerned that the scandal over Cummings is undermining the government’s ability to deal with the political fallout.

In these conditions of worsening crisis, the Labour Party is functioning openly as a prop to the Tory government and a partner in the next phase of the coronavirus response. Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer refused even to sign a token letter from opposition MPs calling for Johnson to sack Cummings. On *BBC Breakfast* yesterday morning, Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy simply said, “The Prime Minister has got to take responsibility for this now.”

Meanwhile, the party continues its talks with the City of London and particularly with the asset management industry, which is central in the massive funnelling of

social wealth to private business prepared under the cover of the pandemic.

Labour’s concern is not that Cummings flouted public health measures, in line with his and Johnson’s preferred policy of “herd immunity,” but that he is making it difficult to carry out the reopening of the economy.

Tony Blair’s main political adviser, a precursor to Cummings, Alistair Campbell, criticised the government on *BBC News* for “throwing everything at saving Dominic Cummings” instead of working on a “develop, execute and narrate strategy.”

He has described this strategy previously in the *Evening Standard*, saying, “The next challenge is how to get life back to ‘normal’. This may require levelling with the public on the need to balance limiting deaths among the older generation and limiting the joy of life for younger generations.”

Cummings has not torn up the “social contract”, he has confirmed that no such contract exists. It is a euphemism for a political alliance of Tories, Labourites, trade union bureaucrats and the media against the working class. All these forces have used a barrage of lies, threats and deceptions to hand hundreds of billions of pounds to the corporations while leaving care homes, hospitals and key workers undefended in the face of the pandemic. They are united still in efforts to drive workers to illness and death to renew the flow of profits to the super-rich.



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