

Resignation of UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock seized on to engineer further lurch to the right

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Conservative government Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock resigned Saturday evening after admitting to breaking coronavirus rules over social distancing and close contact indoors.

He was replaced by former chancellor Sajid Javid, who left government in February 2020 following a conflict with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's then adviser Dominic Cummings.

Hancock exited after the tabloid *Sun* published images Friday taken from CCTV footage showing Hancock kissing Gina Coladangelo in his Whitehall office on May 6 this year. Hancock had been having an extramarital affair with Coladangelo—the pair first met as students at Oxford university two decades ago. He had authorised guidance banning intimate contact with people outside their household until May 17.

Johnson didn't immediately dismiss Hancock, with a spokesperson stating Friday that the prime minister had accepted Hancock's apology and "considers the matter closed." But by Saturday Hancock's position had become untenable, with leading Tory newspapers and MPs demanding his resignation and calling for Johnson to "take control".

Previously an economist at the Bank of England, in 2005 Hancock became a senior economic adviser and later Chief of Staff to Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. In 2010, he became an MP and in 2018 was appointed by then Tory Prime Minister Theresa May as health secretary. In 2019, following the resignation of May during the Brexit crisis, he challenged for the leadership of the party. After failing to win enough votes in a first ballot he stood down and endorsed Johnson for party leader.

The vultures have been circling Hancock for a while. Last November, the *Sunday Times* revealed that Coladangelo, a former director and shareholder at lobbying firm Luther Pendragon and communications director at the Oliver Bonas retail chain (founded by her multi-millionaire husband) was made an unpaid adviser at the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) before being handed a paid position. In September 2020, she was appointed a DHSC non-executive director, a part-time role paying £15,000 per year for 15 to 20 days of work.

Hancock faced a barrage of hostile headlines and commentary on Saturday, epitomised by the pro-Tory *Daily Mail*'s front page, "How can he cling on?" with the *Telegraph*, the Tories' house organ, reporting, "Tory MPs urged Boris Johnson to 'pull the plug' on Mr Hancock and expressed their frustration to party whips over the Health Secretary's 'hypocritical' behaviour."

The first Tory MP to call on him to resign was Duncan Baker. He was followed by former Cabinet minister Esther McVey who said, "If it would have been me, I would have resigned myself... and I'm hoping that Matt Hancock is thinking the same thing, that he doesn't have to have it pushed upon him."

Hancock was integral as health minister to the government's herd immunity strategy, which has led to the deaths of over 152,000 people during the pandemic. Yet he has not been forced to resign over his role in a policy of social murder, including his recent lying comments, under conditions in which at least 1,500 health and social care staff have died from Covid, that there is "no evidence that a shortage of PPE led to anybody dying of Covid."

Nothing is being said about Hancock's role in handing out tens of billions of pounds in Covid contracts to Tory cronies and companies connected to the government. One of these was a landlord at Hancock's local pub, who received contracts worth at least £30 million for supplying vials for coronavirus tests.

The Labour Party has confirmed yet again its craven defence of the government, with party leader Sir Keir Starmer tweeting politely on Saturday afternoon, "Matt Hancock is right to resign. But Boris Johnson should have sacked him." Starmer repeatedly backed Hancock to remain as health secretary over this past year, defying mass outrage in the working class over the government's homicidal policies, including his role in turning nursing homes into killing fields.

Not for the first time, a sex scandal is being used by sections of the ruling class to engineer a shift in policy. The exclusive focus on Hancock's affair with Coladangelo has served to divert public attention from the beneficiaries of Hancock's downfall.

The focus on Hancock's hypocrisy, and the accusations of small-scale cronyism in relation to his lover, are a happy narrative for anti-lockdown forces who are demanding the lifting of all restrictions on fighting the virus so that the corporations and banks can reap greater profits.

One of Hancock's critics, Sir Christopher Chope MP, a leading member of the Tories' anti-lockdown Covid Recovery Group faction, said his party association had voted "unanimously to call on Matt Hancock to resign immediately". He tweeted, "Covid regulations have created a dystopian world of denunciation, finger-wagging & hypocrisy. Let us be freed from this tyranny of diktat and arbitrary rule."

On June 10, before Johnson was forced by a surge of the Delta variant to push back the planned ending of lockdown restrictions on June 21, Baker had demanded the date be honoured, "It is futile to think we will end up with zero Covid, we don't with the flu, so as such I will be calling for us moving forward on June 21, employing a dose of common sense and learning to manage with Covid as it will not be eradicated for some time yet, if ever."

The *Sunday Telegraph*, which has itself insisted on an end to the "tyranny of lockdown", editorialised Sunday, "Matt Hancock had to go. He should have

done so sooner—There was a serious risk, given the charge of hypocrisy, of lockdown becoming a matter of us v them."

That Hancock's departure sees the return to government of Sajid Javid is the clearest indication that events are being seized on to shift the political agenda further to the right, requiring an upscaling in the offensive against the working class.

The first words out of Javid's mouth as health secretary were those making plain his fervent wish to end lockdown for good: "We are still in a pandemic and I want to see that come to an end as soon as possible, and that will be my most immediate priority to see that we can return to normal as soon and as quickly as possible."

Javid, an avowed Thatcherite and multi-millionaire former city banker, insisted as Johnson's chancellor on continuing the mass austerity cutbacks that had pauperised millions of people over the previous decade. He demanded that ministers be required "to go through every line of departmental budgets assessing value for money..." and present "radical options" to cut spending.

He favours slashing corporation tax from 19 percent (the lowest rate in the G20) to 12.5 percent and has mooted abolishing altogether the 45 percent rate of income tax paid by the richest.

As home secretary, Javid stripped Shamima Begum of British citizenship to stop her returning from Syria. Begum had been groomed and made the trip to Syria as a 15-year-old girl. Javid's action made her stateless, which is illegal under international law.

The Tory right is being given their head under conditions in which the government has declared July 19 "Terminus day" when all public health restrictions will be lifted. This is being imposed as a resurgence of the pandemic is underway driven by the Delta variant. Yesterday, Britain reported another 14,876 cases of Covid and 11 deaths, on top of 18,270 infections and 23 fatalities announced Saturday.



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