UK: Johnson government calls for slashing 90,000 civil service jobs

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has signalled massively stepped-up austerity measures, calling for 90,000 civil service jobs to be cut.

He made the call to cabinet colleagues last week, before outlining his plans to the *Daily Mail*. The head of one department later apologised to staff that they had learned of the jobs massacre "from the media rather than from me or civil service leaders."

Johnson has tasked cabinet ministers with reducing civil service staffing by one fifth. There are currently 475,000 full-time employees of the civil service across the country. Cabinet ministers have been given one month to submit proposals for their own departments, with two years for implementation. No announcements have yet been made about which departments will face the heaviest losses.

The "civil service" covers every aspect of public service and government policy support, including welfare benefits, passports, vehicle registration, border control and prisons.

Johnson is talking about a further wholesale assault on social provision, packaged as a move to help those struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. He has hinted that the £3.5 billion saved annually by the job cull could be used to fund tax cuts.

In typical fashion, Johnson is appealing to the most selfish social layers in the upper middle class, claiming, "Every pound the government pre-empts from the taxpayer is money they can spend on their own priorities, on their own lives."

Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg has joined Johnson's call for civil service staffing to return to 2016 levels. At that point, after five years of austerity under David Cameron's Tory-led coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, the civil service employed 384,000, the lowest number since the end of World War II.

Staffing increased subsequently by around 25 percent, chiefly due to Brexit, and later in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Declarations that the pandemic is over are being used to justify the cuts. Rees-Mogg has declared that "we're now trying to get back to normal."

Following the global financial crisis, Cameron sold his government's slash-and-burn measures as "cutting waste and bureaucracy". Johnson and Rees-Mogg repeat these claims under conditions where government departments are failing to stem mounting social and economic disasters on every front.

Johnson speaks of the need to reduce a civil service "swollen" by the pandemic, under conditions where infection rates are rising as a direct result of his government's "herd immunity" policies.

Rees-Mogg, the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, spoke last week of "the requirements of Brexit and the pandemic now receding," even as disputes over the Irish border are escalating the possibility of all-out trade war with the European Union.

Rees-Mogg has been spearheading efforts to end working from home, demanding that ministers send a "clear message to… your department to ensure a rapid return to the office." This Dickensian figure was reportedly found stalking his department's offices last month, leaving printed calling cards on empty desks, with the message, "Sorry you were out when I visited. I look forward to seeing you in the office very soon. With every good wish, Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP."

For all the government's insistence that its planned cuts are "not ideological," the announcement was followed by a report that Rees-Mogg had also called for an operational review of all arms-length funding

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bodies. These 295 bodies in England, including the Arts Council, the British Film Institute and Historic England, employ more than 300,000 people, and spend more than £220 billion each year.

Rees-Mogg's review will assess whether each "should be abolished or retained." As part of the process, it would ask whether the body is appropriately taking decisions under review or whether "an alternative is more fitting"—such as direct ministerial interference. Bodies surviving the review would be required to implement savings of at least five percent within three years.

The attack on public services is being accelerated by the Johnson government's need to fund its support for the NATO proxy war against Russia. Military spending already reached £3 billion, nearing the annual savings being sought from these job cuts.

Prior to his job cull announcement, Johnson had floated the idea of tax cuts in response to the cost-of-living crisis. These were quashed by Treasury, with a source telling the *Guardian* that Johnson was just "echoing the chancellor's ambition to cut taxes." Chancellor Rishi Sunak then ruled out a limited one-off windfall tax on energy companies, even as every household in the UK was hit by a 54 percent rise in energy bills, with another hike due in October.

There is concern within official circles that the scale of job cuts will meet a response from public sector workers. Not the least anxiety has come from the public sector unions who complain they were not consulted. The Public Commercial and Services (PCS) union declared a strike is "very much on the table."

Mark Serwotka, its nominally "left" leader, made clear the union's chief concern is to defer and restrict any such response from its members, stating, "it is almost inevitable we will vote to move to an industrial action ballot early in the autumn."

During a strike at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) last year, the only industrial action called by any union over COVID-19, the PCS showed greater energy in ending the dispute than in safeguarding workers' health. In the face of a state-orchestrated attack on the strike, the PCS's primary concern was to ensure it remained isolated.

Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA, representing senior civil servants, appealed to their role in staffing some of the most reactionary arms of the state. He tweeted, "Are ministers serious about what the consequences of these cuts would be? Are they really saying they won't replace people who leave in the Border Force or the MoD [Ministry of Defence]?"

Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), similarly appealed to the national economic interest. She told Sky News, "This is back to austerity—and we saw how austerity failed not only ordinary people but the country in the end by holding back growth."

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