

Does Hell Hath No Fury Like a Sacked Chief Political Advisor?

Dr. Steven McCabe

There can be little doubt that the highlight of this week's events in Westminster will be the appearance of former chief political advisor Dominic Cummings before a Commons Select Committee on health and science when he'll answer questions on the UK's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. [It's speculated](#) that what Cummings says will be deliberately intended to serve as revenge on the man who sacked him last November, Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson.

As Sebastian Payne writing in *The Financial Times* suggests, Cummings's testimony, "which government officials expect to be supported by official documents from his time in government", could prove embarrassing to the PM as well as members of his cabinet. Rumours that an impending [cabinet reshuffle](#) may take place on Wednesday to deflect attention from Cummings appearance have been denied by No. 10.

In an era in which many have lost their jobs due to, either perceived, or outright, reluctance to slavishly follow Johnson's ideology, inconsistent as it may sometimes appear, Cummings anger at the manner of his departure is hardly surprising.

However, Cummings is different.

Until his sacking, Cummings was regarded as indispensable. It was acknowledged that he played a major role in influencing the outcome of the EU (European Union) referendum on continued membership in June 2016, when, by 51.9% of those who participated voted to leave.

Crucially, throughout his career as both a journalist and politician, Johnson can be prone to indecision. Despite having led leave so vociferously, Johnson was believed to be far less vehement in his belief of the virtues of a hard Brexit than was Cummings.

Johnson, as Sonia Purnell wrote in her 2012 examination of him, *Just Boris: A Tale of Blond Ambition* (published in paperback by Aurum Press Ltd), is an opportunist. Critics of him, of which there's never any shortage, contend he flirts with ideas and is more interested in propagating his personal brand as a 'Celebrity' politician, able to instil a sense of feeling good, rather than worrying about particular strategies or their operational detail.

Indeed, it's well known, Johnson has been sacked for inability to tell the truth.

Peter Osborne, never one to be accused of pulling punches, in *The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism*, published by Simon & Schuster earlier this year, makes plain his view he's arguably the most mendacious PM's ever to have been elected to this office.

Which brings us to Cummings who, until his dismissal, was employed to carry out the deep thinking as to how the country could be improved by radical government policies, particularly in a post Brexit climate as 'Global Britain'. If Cummings was vital in delivering the result in the EU referendum, his influence was critical in Johnson's decision to, illegally, prorogue Parliament, expel recalcitrant MPs and, of course, in calling an election in December 2019, based on 'getting Brexit done', won so emphatically.

England's political history is replete with individuals whose position is based on an ability to achieve influence over the leader in power and, of course, keeping them there. Continued patronage ensures the advisor's power rises and they're allowed, sometimes ruthlessly, to exert control.

Boris Johnson, the 'good time' politician, so fond of exhorting the public to be optimistic and trust his judgement, flawed and superficial as many argue it to be, until he sacked Cummings, appeared utterly dependent on his advisor's willingness to immerse himself in the complex detail of running government. Leaving others to sort out policy had been a characteristic trademark of Johnson's whilst he was Mayor of London between 2008 and 2016.

Significantly, if Johnson needed advice during normal times, he would, it was speculated this time last year, be even more reliant on Cummings to provide counsel during the crisis caused by the worst health crisis in a century. Reports of Cummings sitting on all key committees considering how to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic were hardly a surprise. After all, Cummings was considered to be the PM's 'eyes and ears'.

There are [reports](#) of Johnson missing five Cobra emergency meetings because, it's alleged, he was working on a Shakespeare book for which he'd used the advance to pay the divorce settlement to his second wife Marina Wheeler. This may be an issue Cummings addresses during his Select Committee grilling.

This time last year Cummings's power seemed all encompassing and his position unassailable. Having been publicly accused of broken lockdown laws he'd been involved in creating, resulting in many days of press attention, Cummings was forced to conduct, for an unelected official, an unprecedented and at times bizarre press conference in the Downing Street rose garden on the late May bank holiday.

Cummings' answers to questions were far from satisfactory. Some suggested his explanation for driving to Barnard Castle, to test his eyesight, verged on surreal. Moreover, claims he'd predicted, the pandemic in a blog written the year before, suggested someone who considered himself to be a contemporary Nostradamus, the sixteenth century French astrologer, physician and reputed seer who wrote *Les Prophéties*, containing predictions of future events, in 1555.

Subsequent examination of the electronic history of the blog [demonstrated](#), contrary to what Cummings had stated in his press conference, that the prediction had been inserted between 9th April and 3rd May, when the pandemic was well underway. Truth for Cummings, it seemed, similar to his then boss, was conveniently malleable.

Regardless of what we made of Cummings' version of events in Durham, being publicly backed by the PM and the majority of the cabinet created an impression Cummings was virtually untouchable. Some believed the reputation he'd cultivated as a Svengali/Rasputin figure at the heart of government made him far too dangerous for effective democracy.

Perhaps Cummings believed this his hold over the PM to be so great that, as long as he continued to occupy 10 Downing Street, he could never be sacked.

This was not so.

As events proved, when it comes to a straight choice between your chief political advisor and your partner, and father of your latest child, and whose relationship with Cummings was widely reported to be tempestuous, there was only likely ever to be one winner. Being alleged to be 'Chatty Rat' in leaking information to the press, an offence Cummings stridently proclaimed himself to be innocent of, was, it seems, the reason Johnson, no doubt with encouragement from those closest to him, decided to dispense with his counsel.

So, the scene is set on Wednesday for Cummings to use his appearance to vent fury at what he sees as the failings of the PM and his cabinet. Cummings, it may be surmised, believes Johnson only became PM with his assistance and considers himself to be far more intelligent and strategic.

Tim Shipman, writing in [The Sunday Times](#) suggests 'Dangerous Dominic', whose expertise as a data analyst made him legendary, "will deploy everything to win the argument". Shipman, like many other political commentators, believes Cummings will claim that he, not the PM, was the person able to make the correct decision.

What's deliciously juicy about Wednesday's Commons Select Committee appearance is the prospect of Cummings 'spilling the beans' in a way intended to inflict as much damage on Johnson as possible. Trevor Kavanagh, writing in [The Sun](#), believes that Cummings is "planning to destroy 'clown' Boris Johnson with bombshell evidence".

Whatever may be said about Cummings, he is no one's fool. Cummings, whose role I examined in a chapter last year, ['The Curious Role of 'Despicable Genius' Dominic Cummings', published in Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?'](#) is a peculiar character who clearly likes being in a fight and derives pleasure in attacking those in 'the establishment'.

As a libertarian he clearly believes in the right of those outside of the large organisations which dominate British society to have a greater say in how their lives are controlled. The use of lockdown as a way to control people's behaviour during a pandemic will, therefore, be an interesting line of attack should Cummings use this in his appearance on Wednesday.

We've already seen a taster of what to expect with the statement by Cummings last week. [Cummings](#) as claimed the initial strategy of dealing with the pandemic was 'herd immunity', something he claims he disagreed with. As he also claimed, this strategy was urgently altered when Johnson and his ministers were made fully aware of the potential for many hundreds of thousands of deaths and an accompanying economic "implosion" both of which would have been politically toxic.

Much will depend on not just the nature of the allegations made by Cummings but, more importantly, proving their veracity. Intriguingly, according to Steven Swinford and Oliver Wright in [The Times](#), one of Cummings' allies has claimed that he will "napalm" Johnson. Obviously, we will simply have to see the nature of the weapons Cummings deploys.

Unsurprisingly, some of Johnson's supporters are concerned at what else Cummings may claim. Though Cummings may claim Johnson to be a "clown who failed to learn the lessons of the first lockdown despite having "all the data", opponents of the former chief advisor to the PM will cite his inability to admit to culpability in admitting his own lack of adherence to lockdown restrictions he'd been so instrumental in conceiving. That he made the curious trips to Barnard Castle with his family when, significantly, he and his wife were believed to have been infected with Covid-19 is not forgotten.

Without sufficient evidence including documentation, which Cummings claims to possess, it's likely Johnson, something of a virtuoso in sidestepping allegations of wrongdoing, will argue that whatever former adviser claims about him to simply be the rantings of a bitter man seeking his 'pound of flesh'. Besides, as opinion polls continue to demonstrate, Johnson's popularity, given the vaccine roll-out is going progressing well, remains high.

What cannot be denied is the death and suffering that's already occurred due to the pandemic. At the time of writing, according to the [government's own website](#), the number of deaths from Covid-

19 “within 28 days of positive test” is 127,724. The key question to be answered by those in control last year is could this figure have been lower with more judicious action?

Moreover, for a geek fascinated by data and statistics, Cummings might wish to explain the fact that, even as the [government’s website shows](#), the number of death certificates recording Covid-19 is considerably higher at 151,904. Indeed, due to lapses in government handling of the pandemic, particularly because of initial testing – not to mention the obscene amount of money this cost, alleged to be £37 billion – even this number may represent a considerable understatement of the true death toll suffered so far from the pandemic.

What Cummings says on Wednesday will be poured over to seek the truth as to what may be gleaned about the handling of the virus. With the public enquiry promised by Johnson not due to commence until next year, at the earliest, and therefore publication of recommendations probably not for at least three years, Cummings may provide some useful ‘food for thought’ to suggest how any future pandemic may be dealt with.

However, what we should anticipate is a flurry of salvos from a man who, until just under seven months ago, was at the heart of government and who’s clearly embittered at his forced departure by a man whose credibility and judgement he holds in contempt. As Tim Shipman describes in his *Sunday Times* article, Cummings, is “a solitary figure preparing meticulously like the sniper in *The Day of the Jackal* for his big moment.”

[Shipman](#) quoting another ‘associate’ of Cummings who states his belief that recognising this is his best chance of telling his side of the story with the cloak of parliamentary privilege’, will “shoot to kill.”

If nothing else, we’ll undoubtedly learn much about the inner workings of government during a period of intense crisis which required Boris Johnson and the chief political advisor he was so dependent on, Dominic Cummings, were expected to take immensely difficult decisions for the good of everyone. The fact that we’ve ended up with such a relatively high death toll as well as having suffered huge economic consequences due to the pandemic, suggests decision-making could have been better.

What is for certain, is that what we’ll witness, similar to the old adage, is that hell certainly has no fury like a scorned former chief political advisor who’s out for revenge!

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). His latest co-edited book, *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenges and Benefits*, will be published in early Summer. Additionally, ‘AI Promised You a Miracle – Life Under ‘Greased Piglet’ Johnson’, will be included as a chapter in a forthcoming book, *Populism and the Media*, to be published by Abramis Academic Publishing in June.