

From consensus to confusion: The UK

1. The Political Context

The UK government entered the Covid-19 crisis with a legacy of 10 years of austerity and a country divided by nearly four years of Brexit. Boris Johnson started his premiership in July 2019 as one of the least trusted leaders in recent history (Grieve 2019, Curtis 2019). In the lead up to the general election six months later, a litany of mishaps appeared to undermine his reputation even further. His decision to prorogue (close) Parliament was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court, 21 senior Conservatives were expelled from his party, and the government lost 12 parliamentary divisions (votes).

However, Johnson could rely on three sources of political capital when the crisis hit. He had vanquished his opponents to win the most decisive general election victory in 10 years, he fulfilled his promise to 'Get Brexit Done' when the new parliament ratified the EU Withdrawal Bill, and as a consistent supporter of the NHS he had distanced himself from his party's austerity agenda by promising more money for hospitals, schools and the police (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019).

Full of confidence following election victory, he started to marginalise the media. Journalists were excluded from political briefings, and ministers banned from appearing on the BBC's flagship radio news programme, *Today* (Mason & Sparrow, 2020; Mayhew, 2020; Mail Online, 2020). Johnson's controversial senior adviser Dominic Cummings exceeded his powers by sacking a political adviser and was accused of threatening to 'whack' the BBC (Shipman, 2020; Merric, 2020).

Disagreements with the three devolved nations, not least over Brexit, threatened consensus within the Union. Hence the context is one of a leader with a semi-authoritarian approach to governance with significant strength in parliament, but not necessarily commanding the support of the whole country.

2. The Chronology

(i): Diffusion of Covid-19	(ii): Official actions taken by the government and institutions
28 February – First case of local transmission in the UK	
2 March	Johnson chairs first weekly emergency committee (COBRA) on Covid-19, saying the UK is “very well prepared”.
5 March – First confirmed Covid-19 death in hospital ¹ . The number of cases passes 100.	
13 March – Confirmed cases rise 208 to 798.	Government advises care homes to close to visitors with Covid-19 symptoms. Premier League fixtures and London marathon postponed.
14 March – cases rise to 1,140 and deaths to 21.	Government announces that UK has moved from ‘contain’ to ‘delay’ and ends community ‘test and trace’.
17 March	Chancellor announces largest package of emergency state support for business since the 2008 financial crash with £330bn loans, grants and tax cuts.
23 March – infections rise to more than 6000.	Government begins lockdown, banning people from leaving home except for essential tasks or exercise.

¹ Hospital deaths only were reported until April 29 when deaths in all settings were recorded.

	NHS writes to 1.5m most clinically vulnerable telling them not to leave home.
25 March	The Coronavirus Act 2020 gives the government emergency powers
27 March – infections double every 3-4 days. Deaths total 759.	Johnson and Health Secretary Matt Hancock test positive and start isolating.
2 April – daily hospital admissions peak at 3121.	Hancock declares target of 100k tests/day by the end of April.
April 5	Johnson admitted to hospital and later intensive care. Televised broadcast from the Queen is watched by 23.5m.
April 10 (Good Friday) – daily hospital deaths peak at 980. Doubling time for cases is six days.	Crime falls by 21%. Police issued 1084 fines for flouting lockdown in four weeks.
April 14	Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that public sector borrowing will reach £273 billion (15% GDP).
April 21 – deaths up 828 to 17,337.	Parliament votes to agree a 'hybrid' virtual parliament.
April 27	Johnson returns to work
April 29 – daily deaths <u>in all settings</u> are now recorded, reaching 26,097. Estimated 1/3 deaths are now in care homes.	
April 30	UK's testing capacity reaches 100k/day.
May 5 – at 29,427 deaths the UK has the highest number in Europe.	
May 11	Johnson briefs parliament on the 'roadmap' for easing lockdown. Schools to reopen in England from June 1. Tax payers are now paying the wages of 7.5m people at a cost of £8bn a month.

May 15	Transport for London negotiates £1.6bn bailout following 90% fall in public transport use.
May 28 – deaths reach 37,460.	<i>Launch of NHS Test and Trace.</i> Testing capacity reaches 200k.
May 31 – people in hospital with Covid-19 falls 15% week-on-week. New admissions fall by 20%.	Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment) 2020 removes many of the lockdown rules in England.
June 2 – Official report shows people from ethnic minority backgrounds up are up to twice as likely to die from Covid-19.	MPs vote to end hybrid parliament.

iii: Communication moments and media events

The Health Secretary chaired the first government emergency (COBRA) meeting to discuss the virus on January 24, informing reporters that the threat to the UK was “low” (ITV News 2020a). The next day the Foreign Office advised against all travel to China’s affected Hubei province. The Prime Minister missed four further COBRA meetings, chairing his first on March 2 (Calvert et al. 2020a; Waterson & Mason 2020). At a televised press briefing on March 3, Johnson spoke positively about shaking hands with hospitalised coronavirus patients, on the same day that a subgroup of SAGE, the government’s scientific advisory group, advised against “handshakes”. On March 16, he led the first daily press briefing. These 60-90-minute sessions were broadcast by the BBC, establishing a format that placed government scientists alongside ministers. Deploying short, memorable slogans and distinctive

'emergency' graphics that were widely disseminated on hoardings, the www.gov.uk website, newspapers and social media, the briefings provided the focal point for public communication.

Four key media moments challenged the government's narrative: the response to Johnson's sickness absence from 27 March-27 April, the rising criticism of government delays as exemplified in a *Sunday Times* article of 19 April (Calvert et al. 2020b), Johnson's widely-criticised launch of the 'roadmap' to easing lockdown on 10 May, and the government's response to the behaviour of Johnson's adviser Dominic Cummings in driving 264 miles to Durham on 27 March, the day Johnson tested positive for coronavirus.

iv: Political and social issues

Although the government had distanced itself from post-2010 austerity it could not avoid the damaging legacy of local government cuts of 40% over 10 years, and a largely privatised system of elderly care that was desperately in need of reform (LGA, 2018). The 2011 Dilnot Commission Report had described Britain's social care system as "inadequate, unfair and unsustainable" and warned of a £1.2bn funding gap (Dilnot 2011). Its recommendations were ignored although the 2019 Conservative Manifesto contained a commitment to bring plans for an integrated and sustainable social care system to parliament within a year (Conservative Party 2019). A three-day pandemic planning event in October 2016, Exercise Cygnus,

had revealed flaws in Britain's Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response (EPRR) plan but the conclusions were never published (Nuki & Gardner 2020).

Public trust in government was already low following a series of controversies dating back to the Iraq War of 2003 (Ipsos MORI 2019; Park et al. 2014; Whiteley et al. 2016; Williams 2020) but there were three impartial public institutions that continued to unite the nation: the NHS, the BBC and the monarchy.

v: Social networks and the web

Social networks had become polarised over Brexit into various ideological camps, including a vociferous anti-Johnson and anti-government one. During the crisis further ideologically diverse camps emerged, one in favour of lockdown and another that questioned strict social distancing, citing Sweden as more successful in protecting public health and the economy. The dominant group supported lockdown, evidenced by the public shaming of those flouting rules even before lockdown was fully introduced: the #covididiots hashtag went viral during the weekend 21-22 March (O'Reilly 2020). There was also extensive sharing of messages which reinforced the government's initial slogan: 'Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.' Social media users promoted a weekly 'Clap for Carers' at 8pm every Thursday, mirroring similar in Italy, that ran from 26 March to the end of May. Its extension to include all key workers, including supermarket staff, led to the creation of a website and the posting of videos online using a hashtag to curate

images of participation from around the country². While conspiracy theories abounded regarding Covid-19 being caused by 5G networks, as well as whether Johnson's diagnosis was a hoax to gain public sympathy, these were spread by a minority and largely drowned out by messages of solidarity with key workers and the sharing of volunteering opportunities to support the most vulnerable. 'Captain Tom', a 100-year-old army veteran who raised £32.8m for the NHS by walking laps in his garden occupied social and mainstream media for weeks in April and May.

The tenor changed with the introduction of the new slogan on May 20, alongside the easing of lockdown. 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives' was widely mocked with a meme generator allowing users to subvert the slogan and share their humorous version³. Critics of the easing, and the flocking of citizens to beauty spots during the hot May Bank Holiday weekend, U-turns over the full opening of schools and the enforced wearing of face masks from June 15, likened to selling condoms at a baby shower, abounded. These, on the back of the scandal which emerged over Cummings journey to Durham, and subsequent 60-mile round trip to Barnard Castle at the height of the pandemic, allegedly to test his ability to drive⁴ led to more widespread criticisms of the government's handling of the pandemic.

Hence, social media initially amplified the government's message and encouraged social norms to develop through shaming and supporting key workers, especially as health professionals turned to social media to plead with the public to obey the guidelines. However, it was also a platform for criticism, in particular, the sharing

² See <https://clapforourcarers.co.uk/>

³ <https://www.gizmodo.co.uk/2020/05/coronavirus-stay-alert-slogan-generator/>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52801667/cummings-drove-to-barnard-castle-to-test-vision>

of alternative perspectives from non-British media sources (Dettmer, 2020). Anti-government voices also focused on the long-term record of post 2010 Conservative governments as well as the specific handling of the crisis, mirroring downward shifts in the polls.

3. Analysis

After a slow start, the UK lockdown began on March 23 and achieved high compliance largely through consent rather than enforcement (Nice 2020). The government communications campaign focusing on the widely-viewed televised daily briefings achieved high levels of political consensus, media cooperation and public engagement (Mayhew 2020a, Tobitt 2020, Thinkbox 2020, Johnson, C. 2020, Johnson, J. 2020). Approval was 72%, according to YouGov, during the first week of lockdown (Schofield 2020) and remained high despite Johnson's absence (Coates 2020, Curtis 2020, Recchia 2020, Opinium 2020 a,b,c,d), demonstrating the largely "non-partisan status-quo bias" also seen on social media (Blais et al. 2020). This started to slide after May 10 when Johnson launched a widely-criticised 'roadmap' for the easing of lockdown and worsened in response to the Cummings affair two weeks later. Approval dropped to 46% as lockdown was eased and the downward trajectory continued to 41% by May 29 (Walker 2020). By June 8, a YouGov international survey of 22 countries found that the UK government's net approval rating of -15 was joint lowest with Mexico (Armstrong 2020). What changed in the intervening 11 weeks?

A 'part-time' Prime Minister?

As the pandemic took hold in China during January 2020 Johnson and his girlfriend Carrie Symonds returned to London after a week's holiday on the Caribbean island of Mustique. In mid-February, as floods threatened homes in the north, midlands and Wales, Johnson spent 10 days at his country home. At weekly parliamentary questions to the Prime Minister on 26 February the outgoing Opposition Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, described him as "a part-time Prime Minister," calling on him to chair a COBRA meeting (Walker 2020). Three days later, and 11 days after a court approved Johnson's second divorce, Symonds announced their engagement and her pregnancy on Instagram, saying the baby would be born in the summer. Wilfred was born on April 29.

The intrusion of the Prime Minister's complicated private life, the use of vaguely inaccurate statements and an on-off approach to visible leadership continued to influence communication processes during the first six months of the 2020 coronavirus crisis. The format for briefings was established at the first session at 5pm on March 16, and deviated little thereafter: the elegant but neutral wood panelled room, the three wooden lecterns facing the camera, with the Prime Minister at the centre flanked by two Union Jack flags - the Chief Scientific Adviser on one side and Chief Medical Officer on the other. The session began with a daily update on the statistics, followed by thankyou's, announcements, a rundown on charts by the scientist of the day, and finally questions from the media, starting with the BBC, and later involving the public. The refrain throughout was: "This is

an unprecedented global pandemic, and we have taken the right steps at the right time to combat it, guided at all times by the best scientific advice”.

Before his illness, Johnson chaired six of the 10 daily briefings. After his return he chaired just five of the remaining 34 until 31 May. Given the campaign’s focus on the daily briefings this is a significant reduction in his public presence as leader of the UK government’s response to the crisis. This contrasts with that of Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who chaired more than 50 briefings during the same period, often taking advantage of her earlier 12.30 slot to subvert the agenda of the UK government⁵. Johnson’s place at the central lectern was taken by a revolving cast of 11 senior ministers, of whom only one was female. Most prominent was the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, with 17 appearances, followed by Dominic Raab, Foreign Secretary and Deputy during Johnson’s illness, with 11.

Where the campaign went wrong

The Coronavirus Act 2020 passed into law on 25 March giving the government wide-ranging emergency powers but why did it choose to draft a new bill when it could have invoked pre-existing emergency law, the Civil Contingencies Act? It has been argued that in bypassing the CCA the government also avoided its in-built accountability, local funding imperatives and the principle of *subsidiarity* whereby decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level and coordinated at the highest necessary level (Lent

⁵ see <https://www.gov.scot/collections/first-ministers-speeches/>

2020). This made consensus less sustainable over time as central government sidelined local authorities and public service providers.

A failure to deliver timely and accurate information to all stakeholders began to reassert itself, firstly in response to Johnson's illness. On 6 April, Raab told the daily briefing Johnson "continues to lead the government". That evening Johnson was admitted to intensive care. On 3 April Hancock described staying at home as an instruction "not a request", later saying "you should 'play your part. Do it for the people you love". On 11 April the Home Secretary Priti Patel told viewers to "play your part" or the police would be "unafraid to act". Speculation grew in early May that there were moves to ease lockdown when anonymous sources were cited in Conservative supporting newspapers culminating in a detailed rundown of the 'roadmap' in the *Sunday Telegraph* on May 10, followed that night by Johnson's much-criticised broadcast (Malnick 2020). MPs, the Opposition, the devolved governments and the rest of the media had to wait until the following day for a full briefing. This was the moment when Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland began to publicly diverge from the UK-wide timetable.

Then, on May 23, two left-supporting newspapers published details of Cummings' journeys across the country over the Easter break. No.10 insisted that his actions were 'in line' with government advice, devoting 90 minutes of live TV to Cummings to defend himself personally. More than 180,000 constituents bombarded their MPs with complaints (Procter et al. 2020), 44 Conservative MPs and a petition of 1m people called on Cummings to resign (Mason 2020) and social and mainstream media exploded with critique. A series of polls found that confidence in government advice

fell following the controversy (Fletcher et al. 2020) while a national survey conducted immediately before and after the Cummings story broke found that the number saying they were prepared to break lockdown rules had doubled (Cartwright 2020).

Then came the damaging U-turn. On 9 June, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson admitted what teachers had been saying for weeks, that opening primary schools to all children before the summer break as stated in the 'roadmap' was not practical with social distancing. Attempts by ministers on May 16 and 17 to isolate the teaching unions and councils by upholding those still teaching as heroes, and those who questioned the plan as operating against the interests of children, had failed. Following the schools U-turn the political editor Nicholas Watt told the BBC's *Newsnight* programme that he had picked up "lots of unease" among Conservative MPs, being told by "a very senior Tory MP" that "our leadership is pitiful. Boris Johnson needs to be honest".

Conclusion

The UK entered lockdown relatively late but public, media and political cohesion and compliance remained high, despite the illness of the Prime Minister. The government moved quickly from its habitual side-lining of mainstream media to a bold attempt at accountability, with ministers and science advisers presenting a united front. The failure to build a national consensus, despite government claims to the contrary, and a return to anonymous briefing of favoured sources, undermined trust between the

government, media and the public. This reached a climax over Johnson's support of a controversial senior aide widely believed to have broken lockdown rules at the height of the pandemic. The adviser survived but the reputation of the government and the Prime Minister fell dramatically, leaving the field increasingly open to critical voices. A series of policy U-turns bred confusion, eroding the simplicity of the government's message. It is possible even for divisive governments to instil a shared national purpose and a sense of equality by suspending partisan conflict but to be effective this must be sustained.

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