

Clinching in the Breach: Matt Hancock Resigns

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From his secure fortress of contented spite, Dominic Cummings, exiled from the power he once wielded at Number 10 as one of the chosen, must have felt a sense of satisfaction. Biliouly, the former top aide to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson [had scorned](#) the now former UK Health Secretary in a performance before MPs lasting hours. Matt Hancock, Cummings explained last month, could have been sacked for any number of things he did in responding to the pandemic.

With history moving from its tragic gear into a farcical one, Hancock has resigned. It had all the makings of a tabloid fix: the minister’s name (Hancock), an aide, kissing, a leaking mole and CCTV. But the departure was not for mendacity or want of competence so much as an ill-considered moment in breach of COVID-19 regulations. With the country still continuing a lockdown that was meant to dramatically ease on June 21, a camera recording the Health Secretary snogging his aide, Gina Coladangelo, was leaked. The camera footage of the office incident was recorded on May 6.

Johnson was never going to sack his minister on grounds of incompetence. The leader has set the precedent others must follow. According to the vengeful Cummings, it [took a hail of 89 texts](#) from Johnson’s wife Carrie to lessen the support. It was left to Hancock to fall upon his sword, which he took some time to do.

In his [resignation letter](#), priorities are reversed. “The last thing I would want is for my private life to distract attention from the single-minded focus that is leading us out of this crisis.” The actual reason comes afterwards. “I want to reiterate my apology for breaking the guidance, and apologise to my family and loved ones for putting them through this.” People who had “sacrificed so much in this pandemic” were owed a sense of honesty “when we have let them down as I have done by breaching this guidance.” *The Times* tersely [opined](#) that such conduct suggested that “the government tolerates breaches of lockdown rules for themselves, while insisting the public adhere to higher standards.”

With the bigger picture of Hancock’s conduct miniaturised (the breach of social distancing rules, various questionable staff appointments – the list is long), Brandon Lewis, Northern Ireland Secretary, could now focus on the important matters: finding out how CCTV footage found its way into the pages of that undyingly malicious paper of poor record, *The Sun*. The culprit is said to be lurking in the corridors of the Department of Health and Social Care

(DHSC).

British press outlets [suggested](#) that the leaker had made contact via Instagram to an unnamed anti-lockdown activist. “I have some very damning CCTV footage of someone that has been classed as completely f***ing hopeless. If you would like some more information please contact me.” The same paper supplied readers with all the details, leaving little to the imagination. Included was a crude outlay of Hancock’s office, including the positioning of the Union Jack, painting of the Queen, bookshelf, coat rack and, it transpires, the “kiss door”.

On Sky News, Lewis [made](#) the government’s priorities clear. “I have seen some of the reports this morning outlining how different journalists think the tape might have got out there. That is certainly a matter I know the Department of Health will be looking into to understand exactly how that was recorded, how it got out of the system. It’s something we need to get to the bottom of.”

In comments that can only induce smirks of derision, Lewis preferred to focus on the principle that what took place in “government departments can be sensitive, important and people need to have confidence that what is happening in a government department is something that allows the government to be focused on these core issues, and the sensitivity sometimes in the security sense of those issues.”

Former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt was also busy directing attention to the things that counted – at least from a government perspective. By leaking footage of Hancock’s intimate moment, the leaker may well have sailed close to breaching the Official Secrets Act. Paying lip service to the “open society” and protections “for whistleblowers who find things out and release them in the public interest”, Hunt [told](#) the Andrew Marr Show what really bothered him. “[W]e need to understand how this happened, and to make sure that ministers are secure in their offices, to be able to have conversations that they know aren’t going to be leaked to hostile powers.”

A fevered panic swept through Johnson’s cabinet, with ministers fearing they might be the next one to be Hancocked. Justice Minister Robert Buckland [revealed](#) that sweeps were being organised to identify any filming or listening devices that had escaped detection. “I think there is an important principle here about need for ministers and civil servants who often are handling very sensitive material and information to have a safe space within which to work.”

The calls for investigation did not stop at the issue of a breach of ministerial confidence. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, [wished to guide](#) the debate back to the breach of those very regulations government ministers had insisted Britons follow. “What’s important now is for there to be proper investigations into which rules were broken in relation to use of private email, in relation to the appointment of senior staff and also in relation to the social distancing rules.”

Hancock had certainly built himself a fortress of impropriety during the course of the pandemic. The *Sunday Times*, having seen minutes of various meetings, noted that the minister had been using a private email address from March 2020 to conduct departmental correspondence, making accountability for decisions regarding the novel coronavirus slippery at best.

The deflectors were also tapping away. Those sympathising with Hancock within the government were aghast at the very existence of a camera in the office. Had he been the victim of an orchestrated sting by enemies in Number 10? Or did some meddlesome power such as China wish to cause ripples by installing a clinch catching “love bug”?

The smug *Mail on Sunday* [poured water](#) on suggestions of foul play. “In fact, pictures taken in September 2017, just before Hancock moved in, show that the camera which caught the clinch is clearly visible on the ceiling of his office.” But the Tories were also searching for another alibi that would, if not exonerate Hancock then at least provide a distraction from his conduct.

To that end, suspicion started growing legs with commentary on the camera’s make. While rented from a Singaporean firm, it stems from Chinese manufacturer Hikvision, a company [under contract to supply surveillance equipment](#) to the authorities in China’s Xinjiang region. Despite being blacklisted by Washington in October 2019 for its role in conducting surveillance of Uighurs in the region’s network of “re-education camps”, US cities, counties and schools [have made good use](#) of them during the pandemic. In Britain, city councils employ them in public spaces.

The China Research Group, run by Tory MPs keen to drum up fears about China, fastened on Hikvision’s role in the Hancock affair in a [statement](#). “There are questions over whether [Hikvision cameras] are currently used in Portcullis House (where MPs have their offices) and the Palace of Westminster (where the House of Lords and the House of Commons is located).” The group feared “the potential for Chinese intelligence agencies to tap into camera feeds in sensitive locations”.

The nature and scope of the forthcoming inquiry is uncertain. A full-blooded investigation, no holds barred, might well reveal a bit more than the Department of Health might want to reveal. Investigators run the risk of lionising a potential whistleblower while uncovering a good deal of rot at the centre of the Johnson government. And few civil servants, and certainly no government politician, would like to see that.

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