



PERFORMANCE: Dominic Cummings, former chief adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, giving evidence to a joint inquiry of the Commons Health and Social Care and Science and Technology Committees on the subject of Coronavirus: lessons learnt PICTURE: PA

Cummings's political panto gave no solace to families of Covid victims

HAS IT really been a year since Dominic Cummings sat in the Rose Garden at Downing Street and told an incredulous public that he'd broken lockdown rules at the height of the pandemic in April 2020? His breach knocked public confidence in lockdown – so much so that academics found that, following the revelations, there was a marked drop in people's willingness to adhere to the guidelines in England.

Why bother staying at home when the government's most senior adviser took trips hundreds of miles from his London home and drove to Barnard Castle to 'test his eyesight'? Mr Cummings's appearance last week before a Commons hearing into the pandemic was political panto, albeit without any laughs and not enough intervals.

Over the course of seven long, long hours, Mr Cummings admitted that the government's shambolic approach, particularly at the start of the pandemic, cost lives.

He claimed there was no sense of urgency, even as other European countries were beginning to lock down; the government's plan was herd immunity; hospital patients were discharged to care homes without being tested for Covid; the government kept repeating the same mistakes, and health secretary Matt Hancock "should have been fired" on multiple occasions.

The suggestion that Mr Johnson wanted to be injected with coronavirus live on television by Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty to prove the virus wasn't deadly after all was possibly the most bizarre revelation.

If you thought that Boris Johnson at least appeared more intelligent than Donald Trump, who claimed coronavirus could be treated by injecting patients with disinfectant, Mr Cummings suggested otherwise.

Even Mr Johnson's partner Carrie Symonds was described in a hugely unflattering light, seemingly obsessed

Claire SIMPSON



with using her influence to get plum jobs for her friends.

Everything about Mr Cummings's appearance – the unironed shirt rolled up to the elbows like he was a teenager flouting school uniform rules (would any woman in public life get away with looking like she routinely sleeps in her car?), the leaning on the backs of chairs, the flippant delivery – aimed to give the impression he was shooting from the hip.

In fact, his evidence showed why you should never base major government policy on a few lines scribbled on a white-board.

Although Mr Cummings did blame himself, he also said it was "completely crazy that I should have been in such a senior position", as if he had been press-ganged into a senior role and forced to work against his will.

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His criticism carries more weight than most, given his links to Mr Johnson, but for all his claims, he produced very little in the way of evidence to back them up.

His apology to the tens of thousands of people who died needlessly seemed hollow. In fact the very language he used was bizarre.

The pandemic has killed 128,000 people in the UK but a man who was once arguably the most powerful in government talked about "that Spider-Man meme", referred to sci-fi film *Independence Day* and alleged that Mr Johnson wanted to emulate the terrible mayor in *Jaws*.

For the families of those who died, and the many more who have survived Covid, Mr Cummings's appearance was anything but entertaining.

Children's author Michael Rosen, who spent three months in hospital after contracting coronavirus last year, said the government's mishandling of the pandemic nearly killed him.

"Those of us who got Covid bad aren't watching this stuff with Cummings as if it's a Westminster soap opera," he tweeted.

Decisions Mr Johnson made, including allegedly delaying the first and second lockdowns last year, meant people died.

We know in the north how a lack of transparency over needless deaths only causes more hurt and confusion.

I'm not sure who is served by having a piecemeal Parliamentary probe, where disaffected former advisers air their dirty linen, instead of the full public inquiry families deserve.

Mr Cummings's appearance was less about revealing the truth and more about point scoring against his old boss. But he was right about one thing – the quicker history will be re-written. Whatever lessons need to be learned from the pandemic, they need to be learned now.

ON THIS DAY

MAY 31 1921

Devlin's Double Triumph

NEVER in the history of electoral contests in the North has such interest been evinced in the result of the elections for West Belfast. Not alone in the city but throughout the province, the Nationalists eagerly awaited the declaration of the poll, ever confident that Mr Joseph Devlin, MP would once more carry the national standard to victory. Throughout yesterday afternoon, the *Irish News* office and the National Club in Berry Street were inundated with telephonic and telegraphic messages from all parts of Ulster asking for details and when the fact was made known that Mr Devlin had been returned for West Belfast and was certain of election for County Antrim, congratulatory messages poured in from all parts.

A huge crowd had assembled outside the Central Committee Rooms in Berry Street and when the result was made known a wild cheer was raised whilst the national colours were raised high and a throng joined in singing 'A Nation Once Again'.

Mr Devlin, accompanied by a mighty concourse of supporters, made a tour of the Nationalist stronghold of West Belfast. Headed by St Peter's Brass and Reed Band, in their picturesque green costumes with silver mountings, the procession started from the National Club in Berry Street, the Clon Uladh national warpipe band in their Gaelic costumes following the brake in which were Mr Devlin and his conducting agents for West Belfast and County Antrim, Messrs Hugh Martin and T S McAllister, solicitor [Ballymena], Mr T J Condon [former Nationalist MP for Tipperary] and several ladies and gentlemen. When the procession turned up Clonard Street it could not have numbered short of 25,000.

In Hamill Square [Devlin's birthplace] Mr Devlin addressed a few words to his supporters: 'Never were a people put to a more severe test than in this crisis. Never did they respond so wholeheartedly. (Cheers.) We voted for the unity of our motherland and we won. West Belfast has never been false to Ireland. She was never truer than she is today. We will go on defending the right, fighting for our principles, promoting peace with honour and ultimately succeeding...'

'Scholar-Revolutionary' Takes Derry Seat

THE counting of the votes in the Derry City and County contest was resumed in Coleraine Town Hall yesterday. Sir Robert Anderson [Unionist] and Mr John [Eoin] McNeill [Sinn Féin] got the quota in the first count and were declared elected. ('Wee Joe's' popularity was such that he was elected for both West Belfast and Co Antrim. His fellow-Nationalist MPs, however, were a lacklustre lot while Eoin MacNeill, de Valera, Griffith and Collins were successful for Sinn Féin.)

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