

EUROPE

Britain's Boris Johnson gambles on public forgiveness for top aide

The prime minister said Dominic Cummings "acted responsibly" despite alleged lockdown breaches.



Dominic Cummings, senior aide to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, leaves 10 Downing Street in London on May 24, 2020. | Alberto Pezzali/AP Photo

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05/24/2020 01:01 PM EDT

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LONDON — Boris Johnson is standing by his man — but it's a political gamble that might yet cost him.

After lengthy face-to-face discussions with Dominic Cummings on Sunday afternoon, the British prime minister told the country he was confident that his chief adviser "acted responsibly and legally, and with integrity" despite alleged breaches of the U.K.'s coronavirus lockdown rules.

The revelation that Cummings traveled 260 miles from London to Durham to stay at a property close to family, after his wife developed coronavirus symptoms in late March, has led to calls for his resignation from opposition parties [and a handful of Conservative MPs](#).

But Johnson, speaking at the government's daily coronavirus press conference on Sunday evening, stood four-square behind Cummings — the strategic guru who masterminded the Brexit campaign and Johnson's path to a thumping election victory.

The prime minister said he fully accepted the adviser's explanation that he had "no alternative" but to travel to guarantee childcare for his four-year-old son should he and his wife become too ill.

"I think he followed the instincts of every father and every parent," Johnson said.

The U.K.'s guidance is that those who develop symptoms, as Cummings' wife did, "must stay at home for at least seven days." Other members of the household must stay put for 14 days.

But Johnson said the advice was also "absolutely clear that if you have childcare issues, that is a factor that has to be taken into account." The official guidance advises parents who develop symptoms to "keep following" general



Citizens who have made severe sacrifices and compromises in their own daily lives, though — including not being able to say goodbye in person to dying relatives — may feel that traveling hundreds of miles to stay near family stretches the parental allowances.

In truth, the precise interpretation of the rules now matters less than public perception — and initial polling looks bad for Cummings. According to a [YouGov snap poll](#) published Saturday evening, 68 percent of respondents said they thought Cummings had broken the lockdown rules, and several MPs reported having inboxes full of complaints from the public — many of whom have experienced similar situations to Cummings, but stayed put despite the difficulties.

It's a fault-line for Johnson's government that the opposition Labour Party, under new leader Keir Starmer, is determined to exploit. "This was a test of the prime minister and he has failed it," Starmer said. "It is an insult to sacrifices made by the British people that Boris Johnson has chosen to take no action against Dominic Cummings."

Downing Street and senior ministers had rallied to Cummings' defense on Saturday and the adviser himself insists that he acted "reasonably and legally" because he was acting in the interests of his four-year-old son.

But former Tory Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes [tweeted on Sunday](#) there could not be "wriggle room" for some people when it comes to lockdown restrictions, and that she had made her views clear to her whip.

Two days after the Guardian and Mirror first reported the story, it was still dominating front pages and the morning political shows on Sunday. These included new claims that Cummings had been [spotted 30 miles from his parents' house](#) on Easter day and in Durham on April 19, allegedly on a separate trip up from London.



periods ... he behaved responsibly and correctly," although the prime minister pointedly avoided a specific denial.

But it is the first allegation that has lodged in the public memory — and Tory backbenchers are highly attuned to constituent anger over any suggestion that there is one rule for those in power and another for everyone else. In backing Cummings to the hilt, Johnson is risking a confrontation with his own MPs, many of whom have never been all that fond of Cummings' radical, iconoclastic instincts.

“Cummings must go before he does any more harm,” prominent Brexiteer MP Steve Baker told Sky News' Sophy Ridge on Sunday. “If he doesn't resign, we'll just keep burning through Boris' political capital at a rate we can ill afford in the midst of this crisis.”

Other Conservative MPs have publicly joined Baker's call, including Simon Hoare, Roger Gale, Craig Whittaker, Peter Bone and Damian Collins, with the latter saying Cummings has a “track record of believing that the rules don't apply to him and treating the scrutiny that should come to anyone in a position of authority with contempt.”

The YouGov poll also found that 52 percent said they thought Cummings should resign. Meanwhile, an [online petition calling for Cummings to be sacked](#) had collected more than 140,000 signatures by Sunday evening.

Cummings is widely acknowledged, even by his critics, as a brilliant reader of public opinion. Under him, Johnson's Downing Street has been [assiduously monitoring and responding to what the public thinks](#).

Now, the question that decides how this saga ends could well be — what do they think of Cummings?

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