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## CORRIDORS OF POWER

## Scrutiny of Hancock's handling of the pandemic is far from over

Gareth Iacobucci

The erstwhile health secretary turned reality TV “star” Matt Hancock is back in the headlines.

On Sunday 26 February, Hancock was asked to explain why he appeared to be wearing a signed Newcastle United shirt that he had previously auctioned off to raise money for charity. A Magpies fan since his “Geordie Uncle Dave” used to take him to games when he was young, Hancock had posted a TikTok video<sup>1</sup> (of course he’s on TikTok) wearing the shirt shortly before his team lost to Manchester United in the Carabao Cup final. In a swift clarification on his choice of garment<sup>2</sup> he explained that he had sold the shirt for charity but that it was gifted back to him by the person who had bought it. So, aside from his team losing, there wasn’t too much harm done.

But things took a definite turn for the worse for Hancock on the morning of Wednesday 1 March when 100 000 WhatsApp messages that he had exchanged with ministers and officials during the pandemic were leaked to the *Daily Telegraph* by the journalist Isabel Oakeshott.<sup>3</sup> The most damaging claim from the messages is that, when he was health secretary, Hancock had dismissed expert advice from Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, to test anyone going into a care home—from hospital or the community—for covid-19 at the beginning of the pandemic.

Oakeshott—a prominent lockdown sceptic—obtained the messages while working on *Pandemic Diaries*, Hancock’s memoir, which she cowrote with him last year. Her startling decision to release them to the newspaper this week has angered Hancock, who issued an immediate denial, saying that the private messages were “stolen” and that the interpretation of them was “categorically untrue.” Oakeshott’s justification for leaking the messages was that it would take many years to conclude the official covid public inquiry, which she claimed was at risk of being a “colossal whitewash.”

There was further embarrassment for Hancock on Thursday when it emerged that he had described teaching unions as “absolute arses” during an exchange with the then education secretary Gavin Williamson over the decision to delay A level exams for a few weeks because of covid.

Quite apart from what these messages show us about the standard of discourse in government when major policy decisions were being made during a pandemic, the key lesson for Hancock here is to choose your ghost writer very carefully. With further leaks expected, and with preliminary hearings of the covid-19 public inquiry kicking off this week, his transition from Westminster to light entertainment after his controversial appearance on *I’m a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here*<sup>4</sup> seems unlikely to be as black and white as his beloved Newcastle United shirt.

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Provenance and peer review: not commissioned, not peer reviewed.

1 Hancock M. @matthancock. TikTok. 27 Feb 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/@matthancock/video/7204505764277259526>

2 Hancock M. @matthancock. TikTok. 28 Feb 2023. [https://www.tiktok.com/@matthancock/video/7204783999686954245?\\_t=8aEkjBR00IP&\\_r=1](https://www.tiktok.com/@matthancock/video/7204783999686954245?_t=8aEkjBR00IP&_r=1)

3 The Lockdown Files: Matt Hancock rejected expert advice on care home testing, WhatsApp messages reveal. *Telegraph* 2023 Feb 28. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/28/lockdown-files-matt-hancock-whatsapp-whitty-care-homes-covid/>

4 Iacobucci G. Sixty seconds on . . . the jungle. *BMJ* 2022;379:o2671.