



Covid-19: Johnson is on back foot over next steps to control pandemic

Adrian O'Dowd

London

The government's next steps in handling the covid-19 pandemic have come under growing scrutiny with increasingly critical observations from MPs in a recent parliamentary quizzing of the prime minister.

Boris Johnson spent around 100 minutes answering questions from many MPs during a 27 May evidence session of the House of Commons liaison committee, comprising the chairs of all select committees. A fiery evidence session on the science, impact, and way forward regarding the coronavirus was dominated by questions about the recent controversy over the government adviser Dominic Cummings and whether his actions had broken lockdown rules.¹

Almost a third of the session was spent with the prime minister repeating his support for Cummings and rejecting a call for an official inquiry into whether the adviser had broken any rules, to which he replied, "Quite frankly, I'm not certain right now, that an inquiry into that matter is a very good use of official time."

Two metre rule

Other issues were discussed, such as why the United Kingdom has followed a policy of two metre social distancing when the World Health Organization had recommended one metre and other countries had insisted on one metre and had a good track record in controlling covid-19, such as Australia, Germany, and Singapore.

Johnson said, "The advice from SAGE [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] remains at the moment that there's a very considerable reduction in risk at two metres. My own hope is that, as we make progress in getting the virus down and in reducing the incidence, that we will be able to reduce that distance, which I think will be particularly valuable on transport and clearly in the hospitality sector."

The former health secretary Jeremy Hunt, now chair of the health and social care select committee, asked why it had taken until April to introduce the 100 000 a day test target "even though our first confirmed case was in January."

Johnson replied, "There were several different reasons. First of all, this was a totally new virus, and it had some properties that everybody was quite slow to recognise across the world.

"Our testing operation began much earlier. We did have a test, track, and trace operation, but unfortunately we did not have the capacity in Public Health England, we didn't have the enzymes, we didn't have the test kits, we just didn't have the

volume—nor did we have enough experienced trackers ready to mount the kind of operation that they did in some other eastern Asian countries, for instance."

He continued, "The brutal reality is that this country did not learn the lessons of SARS or MERS and we didn't have a test operation ready to go on the scale that we needed. We now have that."

Loss of confidence

The issue of Cummings re-emerged several times during the session, in relation to the new test and trace strategy launched on 28 May.

Simon Hoare, Conservative MP for North Dorset and chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, said, "My inbox tells me that as a result of the last few days, the response of the British people is going to be far less energetic than it was first time round, and that is as a direct result of the activities of your senior adviser. What do we say to our constituents who are likely to say you can keep your lockdown if it has to come back; if other people don't abide by it, why on earth should we?"

Johnson replied, "I don't think that's true about how the British people will respond to the next phases, to how to work the test-and-trace system. I don't think that's how they've responded at all throughout the crisis. They have responded with fantastic responsibility."

Yvette Cooper, Labour MP for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and chair of the home affairs select committee, said that the prime minister had put his political concerns ahead of clear public health messages in order to protect Cummings. She said, "Can you tell us—you have a choice between protecting Dominic Cummings and putting the national interest first. Which will it be, prime minister?"

Johnson replied, "My choice is what the British people would want all of us to make and that is as far as we possibly can to lay aside party political point scoring, put the national interest first, and be very clear with the British public about what we want to do and how we want to take this country forward.

"Frankly, when they [the public] hear nothing but politicians squabbling and bickering, it's no wonder that they feel confused."

¹ Mahase E. Covid-19: UK government's defence of senior aide has damaged public and NHS confidence, say experts. *BMJ* 2020;369:m210910.1136/bmj.m2109.

This article is made freely available for use in accordance with BMJ's website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may use, download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose

(including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.
<https://bmj.com/coronavirus/usage>