



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 29th May 2020



Beyond Dom. What really matters for the Government next month.

“A week”, Harold Wilson famously remarked, “is a long time in politics”. A month must, therefore, be something close to an eternity. Over the past few days, the Government has found itself thrown on to the defensive by the row surrounding Dominic Cummings and his decision to make a 525-mile round trip to County Durham in order to self-isolate. The embarrassment that this has caused Downing Street is, obviously, acute. Whether he remains in place or departs the scene (either relatively soon or, one suspects, only after a decent interval) is not central to a strategy that must be devised for lifting the lockdown in a manner that is compatible with both public health and public wealth. This will be an incredibly complex exercise. Why and in what ways will be set out in this FTI Analysis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The saga surrounding Dominic Cummings has been deeply draining in the short term but it is comparatively marginal in the medium term compared with the severity of the challenges facing ministers over the month of June. If they are seen to fail in this regard, forcing Mr Cummings out early will be of minimal off-setting value to them. If they are seen to have performed effectively, then the fact that he might still be in place will not prevent them from acquiring credit.

- The political objectives in June are: to move towards the ability to deliver a 75% 'normal' social and economic situation (including social distancing) by the start of July; to stem the economic cost of the crisis significantly and to prevent the need for a politically catastrophic second national lockdown from occurring later on.
- The delay in re-opening non-essential retail to June 15th from (an admittedly private and unofficial aspiration) June 1 is significant. It suggests continuing difficulties with suppressing the reproduction number, the practicalities of implementing social distancing across the economy and that the speed at which the NHS app can be rendered operational nationwide is not what was hoped.
- The crucial operational issues over the next month are (a) re-opening schools in more than a nominal sense, (b) introducing the app effectively, (c) raising testing to 250,000 a day by June 30, (d) devising a credible plan for social distancing on mass transit systems and (e) creating new 'air bridges' for international travel. Failure on any of these fronts could be extremely damaging to the government.
- Only in the event that the clear majority of the targets above are met will the UK be able to move to substantial household interconnectivity (including resuming office work, albeit with considerable restrictions), see the restoration of most of the hospitality sector (again under tight conditions) and international movement.
- In all of the above, open hostility from sections of the media is a serious threat.
- The 'Joker in the Pack' or 'June Surprise' would be an announcement by late next month of very significant progress having been made towards a vaccine with the prospect of a mass immunisation programme by September. It is in the interests of all concerned to lower expectations in this regard (that process has already started) but the speed of the trials means that it remains a serious possibility.

The Cummings controversy.

Many wounds in politics are self-inflicted. The controversy involving Dominic Cummings is a further illustration of that dictum. It is a slightly strange affair in that the essence of what is now known was in the public domain by mid-April, but was revived by a further claim (that of a second trip to the North East) that has been forcefully denied and which even those media outlets that floated it have conspicuously declined to take any further. If the House of Commons had been sitting this week (and in its customary fashion with

no social distancing) then Mr Cummings may well not have survived many Conservative MPs coming together and deciding that their own herd immunity required his departure. A party revolt by Zoom is not an easy exercise (and one yearns for the days when Zoom was a bland but much loved ice lolly). The statement issued by the Durham Constabulary yesterday has eased the pressure on No. 10. If we reach Monday without a further twist in the tale (such as an inaccuracy in the version of events that Mr Cummings offered in his press conference), then the middle ground sentiment among Conservative MPs will probably be that sacrificing him would stricken, not strengthen, the Prime Minister at a vital time. This may come with a tacit understanding that his aide will quit later this year.

There is a robust argument, nonetheless, that the Cummings saga is a sideshow.

- If he goes now and the Government mishandles the complicated schedule it faces in June then it will not be much better off (if at all) for his departure.
- If he stays and the Government is believed to deal with this series of hurdles well then his continued presence will not prevent ministers from securing due credit.
- Whether he stays or leaves, the primary issues associated with him during his ten-month tenure in Downing Street where he was perceived to have 'won' his internal battles (a short transition period and 'Thin Brexit', the 'levelling up' agenda for regional economic policy and a much increased status for science and technology in Whitehall and more widely) will not be unravelled. Indeed, it may well be the case that the crisis means that even those fights which he was seen as having 'lost' (the need for a fundamental restructuring of the departmental system at the core of government, opposition towards an enhanced economic relationship with China and scepticism about the virtues of HS2) might move in his direction, whether he is still in Downing Street or obliged to be outside of it.

The fundamental political realities facing the UK Government in the coming weeks.

It is hard to overstate how difficult lifting the lockdown in the circumstances in which the UK finds itself will be. The political imperatives for the Government are as follows.

- The need to move to the edge of a society and economy that is 75% 'normal' (with social distancing) by the end of June with a date in early July (Monday the 6th?) when this can be realised. 'Normal' in this instance means that there can be substantial household interconnectivity (with offices re-opened, perhaps with a staff rotation system for large employers), the majority of the hospitality sector is restored (albeit with constraints) and international business and leisure travel can resume to most countries where people would wish to go, without quarantine. Failure to make very substantial progress in this regard risks social breakdown.
- The economic costs of the measures imposed through lockdown and the various schemes introduced to soften the impact of the lockdown have proved to be far greater than was informally estimated at the time that the measures came in. By the end of June, the Treasury will need to have some outline of an exit strategy.
- While localised lockdowns in flare-up situations are acceptable, an outright second national lockdown would be a disaster politically and much harder to enforce practically than the initial lockdown. If the UK were forced to do this to avoid a second spike in infections and deaths when other European countries did not sense an obligation to do the same, then that would be a catastrophe for the Government on a scale of 1978/1979 (Winter of Discontent), 1992 (ejection from the ERM) and 2008/2009 (the post-global financial crisis economic recession).

Ministers and officials are well aware of this and are desperate to avoid making mistakes. Life for them is being made yet more difficult by the short timeframe in which they need to deliver results. This has become even more compressed. Though never formally or officially declared, the model on which the government was looking to liberalise the lockdown had the initial ambition that by June 1, the UK would be able to do rather more than a very limited return to primary school education, allowing outdoor markets and outside car showrooms to resume business and permitting individuals to meet with a slightly larger social circle from other households. It was imagined then that a far larger segment of non-essential retail would make a comeback by the start of June as well. That this has been, in effect, delayed is significant and instructive. It strongly suggests that:

- At a national level, the reproduction number (the range of which is estimated by SAGE to be 0.7 to 0.9) is not as low in the UK as it is in Italy and Spain, where the

lockdowns came in earlier and were more draconian. While there may be some inflation in the numbers due to the incidents in care homes and not in the wider community, and London is probably much lower than in the rest of the country, as of now there are still regions that are uncomfortably close to a number of 1.0 and that is acting as a restraint on the timetable for liberalising the lockdown.

- Ministers and officials have also determined that effective social distancing in the non-essential retail sphere will have to be more intense and intrusive than thought a month ago and businesses will need more time to prepare to open.
- The NHS app, trialled in the Isle of Wight with acclaim, has not been an entirely smooth exercise and will probably require further rolling out during early June before it can become the central component of controlling coronavirus. In the short term at least, it will need to come in after human tracing agents have started their work. The scheme launched yesterday was not the original Plan A.

The core practical challenges for the UK Government in June.

There are at least five core practical challenges that the UK Government faces in June.

The first is schools, and whether it is ministers or the teaching unions who ultimately run them. Many children have not had a formal education for some ten weeks now. Efforts have been made to provide teaching of some form virtually, but the reality is that there will have been a deep social and income divide in the amount and quality of education that has been received. Home-schooling in an extensive sense will have been largely an upper-middle class enterprise. The notion that the majority of children could continue like this until September is a seriously unappealing one, with long-term ramifications. Despite this, the government risks humiliation if either the teachers will not return to the classroom, parents refuse to send children back or children themselves do not show up. Most European nations have managed a reasonably substantial return to schooling. The UK cannot afford to be seen as having been incapable of doing this in the same manner.

The second is ensuring that the NHS app and human contact tracing system that is about to come in actually works in practice. The potential area of peril is not that the public will refuse to download it out of concerns for their privacy. All the evidence from the Isle of

Wight shows that if having the app is the price of expanded social and economic freedom then that trade-off will be accepted. The risk comes in whether (1) those who sense that they might have the virus will volunteer that information, (2) the app can accurately identify those with whom the infected person has been in close contact with and alert them of this fact and (3) whether those who are then advised to self-isolate for 7 or 14 days (depending on their household) will do so and what to do if they choose not to. The UK is not alone in Europe in experiencing technical difficulties with an app of this form and being privately nervous as to whether it will be as effective as it really should be.

The third element, which is vital to the second, is raising testing levels to the region of 250,000 a day and, ideally, having a substantial antibody testing capacity as part of this. The circumstances in which it is most likely that a person will be willing to endure self-isolation if they sense coronavirus symptoms is if they can receive a definitive answer as to the state of their health extremely quickly. Similarly, their contacts are most likely to accept self-isolation, when they might feel entirely healthy and unconvinced that they have been infected, if they too can be tested very quickly and so end their self-isolation immediately if they do not have the disease, rather than waste two weeks in seclusion. The UK is in a better place than it was on testing, but some way short of this key target.

The fourth element is a coherent plan for social distancing on public transport. This is particularly true for the London Underground which is the Achilles' Heel of the entire mass transit system in the UK. The theoretical appeal of opening up half of a large office on (if it is that date) Monday July 6th will be somewhat limited if a commute that pre-crisis involved travelling an hour a day each way suddenly takes triple that time or more. Staggering bus or train timetables over a longer rush hour period will be hard enough but the notion of extremely long queues simply to enter a Tube station is a nightmare. There is the real risk of a fiasco which might manage both to drive the reproduction number up and fail to allow for a significant reopening of the economy and society. Ministers need employers and employees to accept the idea of working from home for a far longer time.

The final aspect is air travel. The current official stance is that from June 8th anybody arriving in the UK (a national or a citizen from elsewhere) would need to enter a form of quarantine that lasts for 14 days. This cannot be more than the shortest of very short-term plans as it would render international business and leisure travel impossible. There

would be no prospect of overseas holidays this summer involving foreign flights. If every other nation were proposing to do exactly the same thing then ministers here would be afforded some protection in retaining such a stance, but all the evidence is that the norm in Europe (especially southern Europe) will be to permit entry without 14 days isolation.

Whether it likes it or not, Whitehall will need to negotiate a new network of 'air bridges' between the UK and nations where the virus is clearly in retreat and then hope that the modest measures that it can insist that airports and airlines impose (some testing and temperature checks) are enough to ensure that international transmission is limited. Such a blueprint could include almost all of Europe. The US is a much trickier question.

Ministers face an unenviable choice between certain unpopularity in July if they do not allow air bridges (which they will) and the risk of even greater unpopularity when we reach November or December if new cases of infection blamed on travel accelerate.

None of the above would make a rational person wish to be a minister, a senior civil servant or an adviser at the moment. This is a list of hard choices. In not a single instance does Whitehall hold all the cards. It is hostage to the co-operation of a host of outsiders.

A further complication, to be candid, is communications management. Tony Blair once described the UK print press as "feral". Personally, I think that was far too charitable. The media has little interest in areas of policy success; rather a mob mentality about the slightest hint of inadequacy in policy execution (even if the conditions in which those who have to take decisions have few, if any, instantly feasible, agreeable, options).

The real legacy of the Cummings affair may be that it has served as an alibi for sections of the media that instinctively wanted to run populist campaigns against ministers to acquire attention and, in a (doomed, in my view) desire to enhance circulation, to do so. This leads us to the surreal spectacle of *The Daily Mail* now in league with *The Guardian*. Downing Street will have to think very carefully indeed about its future strategy here.

The one potential ‘Joker in the Pack’ is substantial early progress on the vaccine.

Is there any reason why anyone sane in Whitehall should not spend June wearing a tin hat, a flak jacket and checking the small print of their political life insurance? Possibly one. In every contemporary US presidential election there is discussion about the arrival or not of an ‘October Surprise’, an event or revelation close to polling day that has the potential to change the course of the contest. In reality, most elections pass either with no ‘October Surprise’ or with the development not proving to have that much effect.

The possible ‘June Surprise’ or ‘Joker in the Pack’ is the exploratory vaccine known as ChAdOx1nCov-19 (or Chaddox One for short) that has been developed by a team at Oxford University and where there is an arrangement with AstraZeneca to manufacture it swiftly and at massive scale should it prove effective. There was a lot of early public confidence expressed by the research leadership, but relative silence more recently.

This has led to speculation that the vaccine is not advancing as it needs to, but the speed at which it is charging through different stages of human trials suggests that it is moving on very well at an unprecedented pace and that the lack of any running commentary is (wisely) one based on expectations management, not diminished confidence in a cure.

The earliest moment in the most optimistic but not completely incredible scenario for an announcement that the vaccine had been deemed to work to the extent required and be available for one final check via a trial before mass production began would be the end of June. It may well not happen by that early date, but it should not be discounted either.

Conclusion.

The candid truth is that June is destined to be an exceptionally difficult month for all in Whitehall. A substantial liberalisation of the lockdown has to occur if remotely possible. The constraints on policy are, though, obvious from the decision to make June 15th rather than June 1st the real date at which to attempt a step-change in the movement

back to normality. This leaves little time between then and a tentative target of July 6th for a substantial switch towards something close to 75% normal (plus social distancing).

A huge amount needs to be achieved in terms of schools, the App and contact tracing, a reconfiguration of public transport to allow an acceptable and orderly return to office life of a form and an entirely novel network of 'air bridges' to restore international travel. There is also the vexed matter of the Brexit negotiations (to which a future edition of the FTI UK Political Analysis will return shortly). The only silver bullet out there is a vaccine.

Yet, for all the sound and fury of the past few days, the whole of the last two paragraphs would have been exactly the same if the Prime Minister's Senior Adviser had chosen to self-isolate in Islington, rather than County Durham. That he did differently, and opted out of an apology, will not be the narrative on June 30th. Something far bigger will be.

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