

## Dominic Cummings

Much was written around the time of Mr Cummings' resignation. Here is a sample:

First: Robert Hutton

### Dominic Cummings's 2020 vision

#### *Why didn't Dom do data?*

The departure of Dominic Cummings from Boris Johnson's administration will, we're told, provide an opportunity for a "reset". Certainly there's likely to be a change of tone, if only because it would be hard to find anyone else who is as determined to have a fight with absolutely everyone. Or at least tell us that, or have their friends tell us that.

But the government's deepest problem will remain. Indeed, it predated both Johnson and Cummings' arrival in Downing Street, though they are its parents.

#### **Brexit was marketed by Johnson and Cummings as a policy with no short-term economic harms**

It's a problem exposed whenever we ask the prime minister's office for an estimate of the economic impact of the government's proposed Brexit model. Trust me on this: economic modelling matters to governments. Because even if you choose not to add the numbers up, they don't go away. Margaret Thatcher would have known this. She'd have employed homely, personal-to-national metaphors involving pocketbooks. Alfred Sherman would have found the requisite bit of Dickens – 'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty-pound ought and six, result misery'. These are traditional Tory themes. Their underlying truths are really still there whenever a minister pops up talking about an "Australia-style" Brexit deal, for example. The problem is not that the government isn't telling us the truth. It's that it's not telling it to itself.

The government can offer estimates of the economic benefit of its trade deal with Japan, for instance, but it has nothing to say about the likely impact of leaving the European single market. This is not because there is no one in the Treasury capable of performing such a calculation, or because there are no economic models for what happens when a country introduces barriers to trade. The only reason that the calculations haven't been published can be that the government doesn't want to know the answers.

Whatever the virtues of Brexit as an idea, it was marketed by Johnson and Cummings as a policy with no short-term economic harms. Theresa May never felt able to contradict that idea, and Johnson certainly has no interest in doing so.

Cummings of course set himself up as the enemy of self-deception. He had seen others indulge in it: Tories, Remainers, Brexiteers, sphinxes without riddles, the media, Bismarck's

enemies (I guess), classic third-rate suck-up-kick-down sycophants presiding over shambolic courts. Unlike fey, Oxbridge-educated OEs, such as David Cameron (riddleless sphinx) and Ed Llewellyn (c.t-r.s-u-k-d. sycophant), who didn't even aspire to shamateurism, Cummings was the illusionless man. He was going to be different; he had read Moneyball. He was going to find out the hard truths about the British government and look them in the eye.

Civil servants, like all functionaries in bureaucracies, know better than to believe such statements. All bosses say they want to be told hard truths, but clearly not all of them do. Nor, whatever they might tell themselves, or have their friends tell others, can all advisors, I mean, bosses, handle being told the truth by their subordinates. [Sometimes the truth has to be escorted away from your presence at gunpoint](#), as Churchill so very nearly put it. Johnson's government has revealed its preference not to hear some difficult things, so it is reasonable to assume it won't want to hear other difficult things either.

### **This is a government that would prefer to hear comfortable things than true things**

This, to taste, Nelsonic blind eye, or wilful, frightened disinclination to look your triumphs square in the face, has been sustainable on Brexit because of Britain's transition limbo. But customs forms are stubborn things. With our final departure from the EU now weeks away, the government finds itself building lorry parks in Kent for queues that ministers can't quite bring themselves to admit will exist. Businesses are urged to prepare, but the language is of "opportunities" and a "new start". The ads are confusing because they can't admit the reality, that moving things in and out of the country is about to get harder and more expensive.

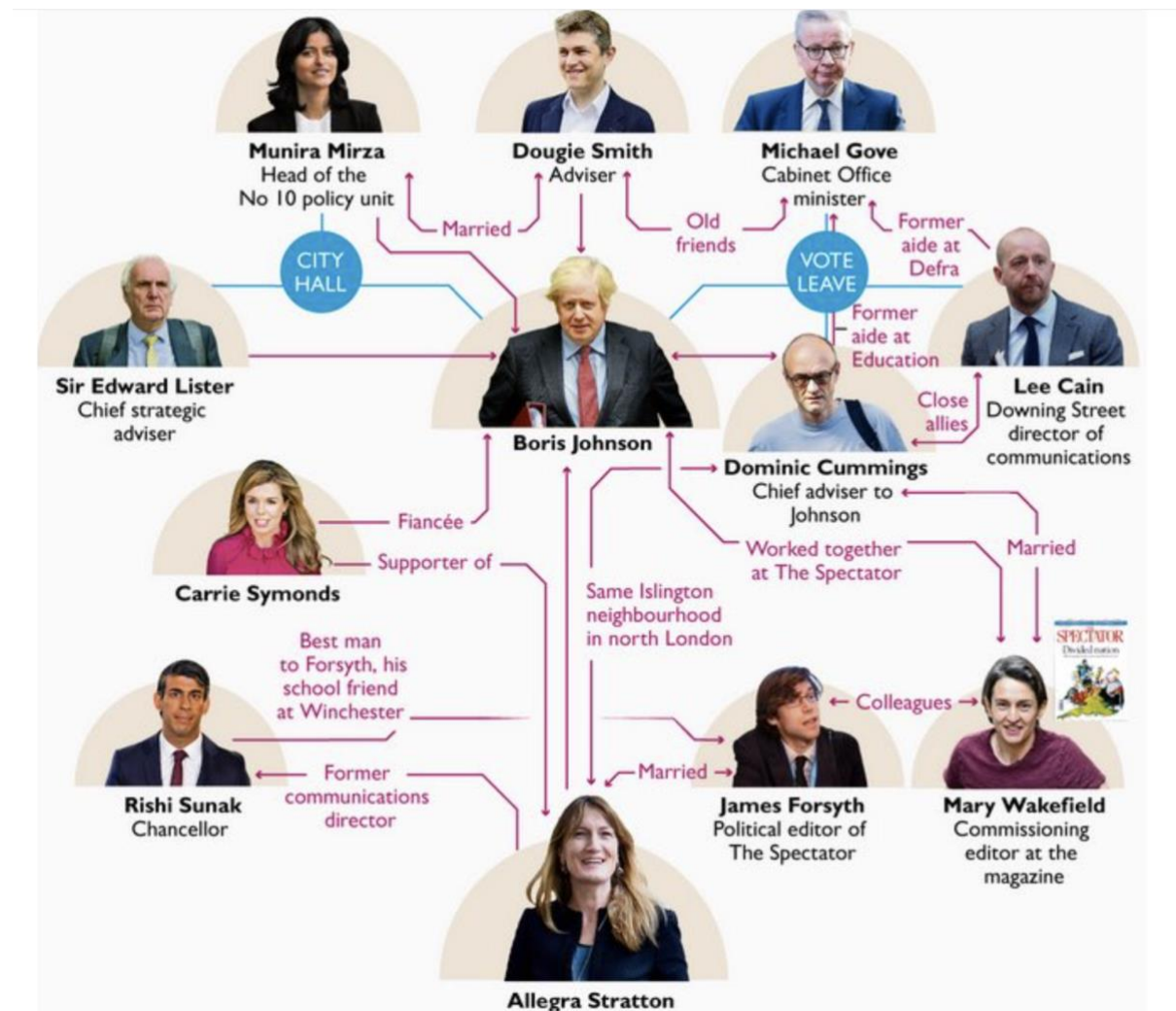
Of course, officials know the truth of their models. In this way, parts of government have come to resemble the Soviet Union: there is a reality that appears in public statements, and a reality around which people are working, and no one can mention that the two aren't the same.

Once upon a time, being clear-sighted about the world round you was a point of pride for Conservatives. And even for – they tell us, or have their friends tell us – people-who-aren't-members-of-the-Conservative-Party too. Though these people who aren't Conservatives do so very often always seem to end up working for the party. But again, we must return to self-deception and its foes. For realistic Tories, "[Havel's Greengrocer](#)" was a core parable, warning against the degradation of a political system that makes you lie and affect to not notice lies, and rubs your face in the fact that that's just what you're doing.

Ministers may tell themselves that this refusal to face facts is strictly limited to one area. On other issues, they may say, they want to hear the unvarnished truth. But even if this were true, it's a message that's unlikely to have reached officials. The clear signal from the top is that this is a government that would, on the most vital of subjects, prefer to hear comfortable things than true things.

Which leaves us with the great irony of Cummings' time running Downing Street: a man who was an evangelist for the idea of finding the truth in data oversaw an operation that suppressed data, for fear it might reveal the truth.

Next, much attention was paid to the way in which all the characters in the drama formed a close, if not friendly, network which included influential journalists.



Sam Freedman

## Dominic Cummings wanted to rewire the British state, but he needed to change the thinking of those in charge



When I worked at the Department for Education with Dominic Cummings his all caps and punctuation-free email rants to various officials were so frequent they had their own name: Domograms, writes Sam Freedman. | PA Images



[Sam Freedman](#)

@Samfr

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**Following Dominic Cummings' dramatic exit from No.10, Sam Freedman reflects on their time working together at the Department for Education and unpacks Cummings' criticisms of the civil service**

When I worked at the Department for Education with Dominic Cummings his all caps and punctuation-free email rants to various officials were so frequent they had their own name: Domograms. His frustrations with the way the civil service worked, expounded at length in (also largely punctuation-free) blogs and essays, were very real.

Some of this frustration was a hyperbolic version of the standard irritation ministers and advisers feel when their grand plans are delayed by necessary checks and balances. There

are good reasons for rules preventing ministers simply handing out contracts without any process. If anything, they're not strong enough.

But many of his complaints do have merit. Whitehall is still overly attached to a model whereby high-flying generalists are moved too frequently between different policy areas; where technical specialists are kept out of decision-making; and where hierarchies are rigidly enforced.

These more justified Cummings' criticisms are not new. Lord Fulton's report on the civil service, back in 1968, noted the lack of specialists, particularly those with scientific training, in key roles; the tendency to rely on generalists and the absence of modern project management techniques. Throw in a few insults and some mentions of AI and quantum physics and it could be a Cummings blog.

One reason the problems identified by Fulton are so endemic is the lack of incentive within the civil service to reform. But there's another, bigger reason, that Cummings largely ignores: it suits the way politicians like to work. The standard ministerial tenure is around two years. A mere 1 in 10 of the junior ministers appointed in 2010 made it to the end of the Parliament. Given the limited time they have to make an impact the last thing politicians want is a machinery that is geared to long-term, expert-driven, and evidence-based policy making.

There's a reason why all of Cummings' treasured examples of high-performance either come from the American military (Manhattan Project; DARPA) or single party states like Singapore or China. They are typically long-term, highly technical programmes, undertaken with no or minimal public transparency, and with the role of politician limited to signing cheques. The absence of any major social reforms from his analysis of success is something of a warning sign that what he wants is not in fact possible, certainly within the confines of British democracy.

The truly baffling thing about Cummings' worldview is the refusal to see the contradiction between his technocratic utopia of expert scientists driving paradigmatic change and his own rock-solid conviction that whatever policies he happens to support right now must be implemented at maximum speed.

For all his demands for a scientific approach to government not a single policy either of us worked on at the DfE had been properly evaluated through, for example, a randomised control trial, because they were rolled out nationally without any piloting. In technocrat utopia a major policy like the introduction of academies would have been phased in such a way as to allow for evaluation. In the real-world huge amounts of capital (real and political) were spent arguing academies were the way forward, so the suggestion that they might not work couldn't be countenanced.

**A genuine attempt at reforming the “wiring” of the British state would require taking the kind of systems-approach that Cummings waxes lyrical about and applying it to the entire system of policy design and delivery**

Not only are policies typically driven by political imperatives rather than evidence but they're not even internally coherent within departments, let alone between them. Again, this is not a function of civil service failure so much as incompatible ministerial agendas. Cummings' old department (and mine) has been arguing for a decade now that school autonomy is so critical to success that academies shouldn't have to follow the national curriculum and at the same time all primary schools should be teaching a national curriculum so prescriptive that it insists children learn about fronted adverbials: because one Minister believed in autonomy and another very much didn't.

This does not mean that nothing can be done to improve the performance of the British state, but it does mean that no civil service reform has a chance of working in the absence of political reform. Any government actually serious about doing policy better would have to start by constraining their own decision-making. Handing over interest rate setting to the Bank of England is an extreme example of this, but there are softer, and more democratic, ways to constrain Ministers.

For instance: creating a rule that anything other than emergency policy requires a pilot and full independent evaluation before being rolled out nationally. Or creating checklists of policy principles that have to met before sign-off. These are, of course, exactly the kind of bureaucratic checks on power that Cummings rails so hard against when applied to him; but it's hard to see how you incentivise Whitehall into long-term, evidence-based, policy making without doing it to Ministers first.

No amount of Fields medallists sitting in No. 10 NASA control centre can compensate for a junior Minister who cares more about a good headline in the Mail than a decent policy.

But even if, somehow, you could meaningfully reform the centre, the British state would still be dysfunctional, because good ideas are of little use without the means to implement them. Over five decades British governments of all stripes have chosen to hollow out local government and centralise numerous aspects of delivery from the financial management of schools; to building new housing and support for vulnerable families.

As Cummings has acknowledged in his blogs, this centralisation of power has not been matched by a growth in the administrative capacities of central government. Instead, increasingly, Whitehall has become reliant on procuring large private companies to provide services. Serco, to take one example, does everything from ballistic missile defence systems, to managing prisons and hospitals to, until recently, running school inspections.

The shift to a heavy reliance on a small number of companies to manage so much of the delivery of the British state puts a significant restraint on Whitehall's ability to realise any idea – however brilliantly contrarian it may be. It is largely limited to crude metrics when managing performance and has no meaningful way to affect the competence of these organisations; nor does it have much ability to stimulate a market given the dominance of huge conglomerates who can undercut competition. Again, there's limited value in having project management whizzes in your control centre when Capita actually does your project management.

The impact of this decades-long remodelling of state delivery can be seen in the mess of “test and trace” – with Serco being given a huge contract to manage a national infrastructure that has manifestly failed and would almost certainly have been more successful if done locally.

A genuine attempt at reforming the “wiring” of the British state would require taking the kind of systems-approach that Cummings waxes lyrical about and applying it to the entire system of policy design and delivery; looking at the relationships between central and local government as well as the proliferation of non-elected regional bodies and the private sector. This is, of course, conceptually, and practically, much harder than pretending you can solve the problem by hiring a few misfits into Downing Street and setting exams for civil servants. But it’s where you need to look if you’re serious about transforming the capabilities of government.

*Sam Freedman is the CEO of Education Partnerships Group, former ED of Teach First, and former senior policy adviser to the education secretary.*

Marina Hyde:

## So goodbye, Barnard Castle Spice. Looking forward to your solo material

### Marina Hyde

Dominic Cummings is leaving the band. But that was always the plan – nothing to do with the impending Brexit endgame

Is it bigger than Geri leaving the Spice Girls? Don't be ridiculous. There are, however, similarities with the scheduled [departure of Dominic Cummings](#) from Downing Street. [As Geri put it](#) in an address to fans 21 years after the event: "I need to say something I should have said a long time ago: I'm sorry – I was just being a brat."



No one's bigger than the band, as the Cummings [solo material](#) will surely prove. Shortly after Geri walked out, the Spice Girls went on to have a Christmas No 1 with [Goodbye](#), a hilariously-teeth-gritted "farewell" to someone none of them could be doing with any more. This year, Downing Street will also take Christmas No 1 – No 1 European death toll, unfortunately.

Still, a massive week for people whose showbiz is bald guys in lanyards. Or to put it another way, there's been a dirty protest in the [Slytherin skunkworks](#). There have been many, many times over the past 72 hours when I have wanted to drive extremely fast to Barnard Castle. Not stop in the car park or anything – just keep on driving, foot down, until the high-velocity contact with 12th-century stone made it



instantly possible never to have to think or hear about Cummings or [Lee Cain](#) ever again.

Real talk: Cummings was a great campaigner utterly defeated by the business of government, which was upsetting considering that was his [major obsession](#), and also that he was basically the government. It's possible Ginger Spice could have done better, and she hasn't been playing with a full set of platform heels since the Major administration. At the very least [she's a Tory](#), which would give her one up on Cummings with the entire Conservative parliamentary party.

To put it in terms Cummings would reflexively understand: it's special to see an English director of football lose the power struggle for once. Dom and the other guys whose names we've recently had to find out have only one speed: aggro. Furthermore, Boris Johnson's Downing Street has been like one of those boys' schools where girls are only accepted in sixth form. They're here now, however – and I keep reading that a combination of Johnson's fiancée, Carrie Symonds, his new press secretary, [Allegra Stratton](#), and his policy chief, Munira Mirza, has done for the Vote Leave faction. Typical. God, I hate to see women ruining everything for this group of great mates. I always think of these guys like the Beatles. The [Isis Beatles](#), obviously.

Let's face it, Johnson's No 10 has always come off like the sort of tedious mansphere where wan spads in suits give each other nicknames like [Gazza, Caino and Roxstar](#). Maybe you get the costumed vigilantes you deserve. Gotham had Batman. We got the giblets of the [Mirror's chicken suit](#).

I do mourn the missed opportunities this week. Times have certainly changed since I used to dress up in silly costumes for newspapers. Why on earth – WHY? – did the Mirror not send the Mirror chicken to doorstep Lee Cain yesterday? Think of the pictures. That moment when the navy wool coat, collar turned up against the [headlines](#), makes contact with the matted yellow fun-fur. When you realise that a Downing Street security pass isn't half as fun to wear round your neck as a red latex wattle. When the Cain eyes lock agonisingly with the Mirror chicken's big blue plastic ones, and Lee's just thinking: "What have I done? I've become the monster."

#### Advertisement

As for Cummings, the revolution devours its children. He has been thrown under a £350m bus, a feat last managed when East 17's Brian Harvey contrived to run himself over with his own car, an incident the singer put down to a bizarre chain of events sparked by eating [three baked potatoes](#).

Speaking of bizarre chains of events, Cummings seems to be claiming this shitshow was always the plan. Last night he reportedly ["pointed to a blog"](#) written in January where he said: "We want to improve performance and make me much less important – and within a year largely redundant." Well, he is much less important and now redundant, so two out of three ain't bad. Sorry about the catastrophically non-improved performance and everything, but turns out he really was a superforecaster.

It's like that bit in the Lion King, right before Scar gets [eaten by the hyenas](#), where he "points to a blog" wishing Simba all the best delivering on their [levelling-up](#) agenda.

Even so, is the timing a bit sus? The blog says Cummings will go "by Christmas", which you'll note falls six days before the UK finally creaks or crashes out of the EU transition period, with or without a deal. In that case, there's not been an exit like it since the Iraq war. I'm thinking of Paul Bremer, the head of the coalition provisional authority, who handed over to the interim Iraqi government then burned rubber straight to the airport. Aren't you staying for the party, Paul? It later emerged the [looming implosion of Iraq](#) was already so under way that he feared his plane would be shot down by surface-to-air missiles.

Anyway. As always with the madly elitist behaviour of his underlings, this Cummings tale is really a story about Johnson. This week MPs and commentators kept asking, archly, "But what does Boris WANT?" Jesus, guys – catch up. He wants a shag and some attention and someone else to make his problems go away, like he always does. The boggling insistence on seeing him as a nuanced and enigmatic character is what got us into this mess (led by a chronic newspaper columnist at a time of pandemic).

Even now, Johnson's supporters are subconsciously implying it's the job of other people to do the heavy lifting. As one ally had it: ["We can get the old Boris back"](#). Note the prime minister's passive role in all this. It does rather feel as if the public is being asked to put the spark back into its failing marriage with Johnson. If he's straying, it must be their fault.

At least no one asks "What's the worst that can happen?" now. Plenty more worst to come, no doubt, so hopefully News at Ten will cheer us all up with a montage of Dom's best bits set to Goodbye. Here he is arriving at No 10 with his [arse hanging out of his trousers](#). "Just a little girl, big imagination ..." Here he is at his table in the rose garden, [not apologising](#) for torpedoing the most vital public health message in decades. "Gotta keep it strong before the pain turns into fear ..." And here's the massive crescendo over this week's slow-mo walk out of Downing Street. "You'll always be SOME-ONE'S BA-BY..!" Cut to next May, with Cummings standing in [Palo Alto](#) wearing a sandwich board reading "Come and hire me if you think you're hard enough". As for what we'll all be dealing with, well ... aren't you staying for the party, Dom?

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist