HOUSE OF COMMONS

Health and Social Care Committee and Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: Coronavirus: Lessons learnt, HC 95

Wednesday 26 May 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Greg Clark (Chair); Aaron Bell; Paul Bristow; Dawn Butler; Greg Clark; Chris Clarkson; Rosie Cooper; Dr James Davies; Dr Luke Evans; Katherine Fletcher; Jeremy Hunt; Barbara Keeley; Mark Logan; Rebecca Long Bailey; Carol Monaghan; Taiwo Owatemi; Sarah Owen; Anum Qaisar-Javed; Dean Russell; Graham Stringer; Zarah Sultana; Laura Trott.

Questions 944-1240

Witnesses

I: Dominic Cummings, former Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Examination of Witness

Witness: Dominic Cummings.

Q944 **Chair:** The Science and Technology Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee are undertaking a joint inquiry into the lessons that can be learnt from the UK's response to the covid pandemic. The public inquiry, which the Prime Minister has announced, will most likely take evidence and report well after most of the pandemic is over. Our inquiry, we hope, will be complementary to this, being focused on lessons that can be learnt already and which can be applied during the months ahead to benefit decisions that will have to be taken during those months. Of course, the evidence we gather in our inquiry will be available to the public inquiry. We will hear from the Health Secretary in just over two weeks on 10 June, after which we will make our report to Parliament.

Just a word on how we will organise this morning's proceedings. This is a hybrid meeting, with some members of the Joint Committee joining remotely and some in person. We will have four sections. The first is about the early days of the pandemic, which I will chair. My colleague Jeremy Hunt will then chair a discussion on lockdown measures and the performance of Test and Trace. I will then chair a section on vaccines. Jeremy will chair the final section on the lockdowns of the autumn and winter period. We will have a short pause between the sections during which the cameras will be briefly turned off.

I am very pleased to welcome Dominic Cummings, the chief adviser to the Prime Minister from July 2019 to November 2020. Good morning, Mr Cummings, and thank you for offering to appear. Perhaps I can start with some general questions about the background to the covid pandemic before turning to my colleagues.

In your Rose Garden statement, you said, "For years I have warned of the dangers of pandemics. Last year I wrote about the possible threat from coronaviruses and the urgent need for planning." Indeed, your blog of March 2019 warned of escapes of viruses from labs in Asia posing "a real danger of a worldwide pandemic that could kill human beings on a vast scale." On 22 January, Wuhan, a city the size of London by population, was sealed off from the rest of the world. On 30 January, the WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern. Given that context and what you had thought about this over the years past, did this set alarm bells ringing? Did you think what you had thought about in advance was happening?

Dominic Cummings: I think it is right that the public's representatives are trying to figure out what happened and the lessons to be learnt. I hope you will get all the senior people involved in here to speak to you about it. The truth is that senior Ministers, senior officials and senior advisers like me fell disastrously short of the standards that the public has a right to expect of its Government in a crisis like this. When the public needed us most, the Government failed. I would like to say to all the families of those who died unnecessarily how sorry I am for the mistakes that were made, and for my own mistakes at that.

Regarding the beginning of this crisis, yes, you are right that I, like many people, had talked about this before. When it started in January, I did think in part of my mind, "Oh my goodness—is this it? Is this what people have been warning about all this time?" However, at the time PHE here and the WHO and the CDC—generally speaking, organisations across the western world—were not ringing great alarm bells about it. I think in retrospect it is completely obvious that many, many institutions failed on this early question.

I can't remember the precise date, but the truth is that I think the Taiwanese Government basically hit the panic button on something like new year's eve of 2019. That might not be the exact date, but within a few days. They put into effect a plan that they had figured out from having been terrified of previous outbreaks, like SARS and whatnot. They immediately closed the borders, they produced various new quarantine systems, they did a whole bunch of things right off the bat in January, but I think it is obvious that the western world, including Britain, just completely failed to see the smoke and to hear the alarm bells in January. There is no doubt about it. There were meetings—

Q945 **Chair:** Do you remember a time when you personally were seized of the importance of it?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I talked to people in January about it. On something like 25 January, I said to the private office in No.10 that we should look at pandemic planning. I said that I wanted to go to Porton Down and talk to some of the people up there about it. I think it was on the same day—possibly one day before or after—that I said to Matt Hancock, "Where are we in terms of scanning the pandemic preparations plans? Are we completely up to speed on this? Is it resourced the way that it should be? Etc, etc."

Q946 **Chair:** So that was about 25 January?

Dominic Cummings: Do you want me to get the exact date?

Chair: If you have it.

Dominic Cummings: Yes, it was 25 January on both things. On 25 January I spoke to private office and on 25 January I said to the Secretary of State—

Q947 **Chair:** When you say "said", was that a conversation, a memo or a text?

Dominic Cummings: I have got the exact words of a text that I sent him. I think I spoke to him, possibly the next day, at a meeting about it, as well. I said, "To what extent have you investigated preparations for something terrible like Ebola or a flu pandemic? Please ensure we take a risk-averse approach to funding preparations in the SR"—SR is an abbreviation for spending review—"I am going to dig into this plus bioterror."

To which Hancock replied, "We've got full plans up to and including pandemic levels regularly prepped and refreshed, CMOs and

epidemiologists. We are stress testing now. It is our top tier risk register. We had an SR bid before this."

I replied, "Great. I am reading about the CDC and preparations for a flu pandemic. It is very worrying." So—

Q948 **Chair:** So on 25 January you instigated a set of inquiries within the system. Would you—

Dominic Cummings: However, I would like to stress and apologise for the fact that it is true that I did this, but I did not follow up on this and push it the way that I should have done. We were told in No.10 at the time that this is literally top of the risk register. This has been planned and there have been exercises on this over and over again. Everyone knows exactly what to do.

It is sort of tragic in a way that someone who wrote so often about running red teams and not trusting things and not digging into things— While I was running red teams on lots of other things in Government at this time, I didn't do it on this. If I had said at the end of January, "We're going to take a Saturday and I want all of these documents put on the table. I want it all gone through and I want outside experts here to look at it all," then we would have figured out much, much earlier that all the claims about brilliant preparations and how everything was in order were basically completely hollow. We didn't figure this out until the back end of February.

Q949 **Chair:** Thank you; we will come on to more detailed aspects of that. In terms of those texts that you referred to that first documented your concerns and your involvement, will you share them with the Committee after the meeting?

Dominic Cummings: Sure, yeah.

Chair: Thank you.

Dominic Cummings: Just to be clear, there were conversations about it before that, in January, in No.10. Obviously, it was periodically on the news. It would sort of flare up and be big news, and then it would die out again. I don't want to imply that that was the first time No.10 talked about, because that's not the case. There were conversations in No.10 about it right in the first week back in January.

Q950 **Chair:** When we talk about No.10, there are lots of people who work in No.10. When did you talk to the Prime Minister about it first?

Dominic Cummings: It was definitely raised with the Prime Minister in the first half of January, for sure, because it was on the news.

Q951 **Chair:** Did you have a conversation with him about it?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q952 **Chair:** When would that be?

Dominic Cummings: The first half of January.

Q953 **Chair:** Was that a chat, a conversation?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, just a general chat with me and other people.

Q954 **Chair:** I see. During the months that followed, was covid the most important matter that you dealt with, say from January onward?

Dominic Cummings: It depends what you mean. Retrospectively, it was the most important issue, obviously. But at the time—

Q955 **Chair:** How did it feel at the time?

Dominic Cummings: In no way, shape or form did the Government act in January like it was the most important thing. It did not act like it was the most important thing in February, never mind in January.

Q956 **Chair:** What proportion of your time would you say, in February for example, was devoted to it?

Dominic Cummings: In January, not very much. In February, a lot more of my personal time.

Q957 **Chair:** More than half, or less than that?

Dominic Cummings: I would say, the first half of February probably less than half. After the reshuffle, which I think was the 12th, more than half.

Q958 **Chair:** Did it increase after that?

Dominic Cummings: By roughly the last 10 days of February, it was over 90% of what I was personally spending my time on. There were other things floating in and out. This is a really important point to register: the Government and No. 10 were not operating on a war footing in February on this in any way, shape or form. Lots of key people were literally skiing in the middle of February. It was not until the last week of February that there was any sense of urgency in No. 10 and the Cabinet Office.

Q959 **Chair:** Would you say that you were operating on a war footing in February?

Dominic Cummings: As I said, in the first 10 days or so of February, no, because there were all sorts of things going on. There was the HS2 nightmare; there was the reshuffle going on. That happened on the 12th, and then the PM went away on holiday for two weeks. I didn't go on holiday; I was in Downing Street throughout that period. I spent more and more on my time on it. However, again, I want to apologise for this: obviously, in retrospect, I should have been hitting the panic button far more than I was in February. I did increasingly hit the panic button as February went on, but I, like most people, were wrongly reassured by things such as the WHO and what we were being told internally.

Q960 **Chair:** The WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January. The WHO was not giving reassurance—quite the opposite.

Dominic Cummings: They did say that, but after 30 January it was not at all seen in Whitehall that there was going to be a pandemic.

Q961 **Chair:** I'm not talking about Whitehall; I'm talking about what was going on around the world. We had TV pictures of Wuhan being sealed off and reports of people's doors being welded shut.

Dominic Cummings: Yup.

Chair: Were you not aware of that towards the end of January?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q962 **Chair:** And you weren't on a war footing. You explained that is something that you regret. Finally, you said that it did not occupy the majority of your time during February, and it increased over time. Will you give a brief summary of the other things that you were dealing with? What were the principal demands on your time during February?

Dominic Cummings: There was— Well, I was working very much on the whole science and technology agenda. I was working on procurement reform. Ironically, in January and early Feb, one of the things I spent most of my own time on was trying to get to grips with the procurement system. I had weekly meetings in the Cabinet Room on procurement in January and February, to try to get to grips with the nightmare of that whole thing. Ironically, that was completely overtaken by covid. We had to bin the procurement meetings that I was running, because of the procurement problems with covid, if you see what I mean. Planning, procurement, science and technology—

Q963 **Chair:** So science and procurement. Anything else?

Dominic Cummings: There were various national security issues that I was dealing with in February. Essentially, the first 10 days of February were HS2, the reshuffle and various things like that. Then, the Prime Minister and other people went off on holiday. I was dealing with some of those things from the 12th, but then increasingly with covid in the last two weeks of February.

Chair: Okay.

Dominic Cummings: After the election, I hired a guy, a physicist called Ben Warner, and brought him into No. 10 to try to start to build a proper data and analytical office in No. 10. Because one of the great problems that No. 10 had in 2019 when I was there was a huge lack of those kinds of skills.

Chair: So that was taking time.

Dominic Cummings: I brought him in. I sent him off to start attending the SAGE meetings—

Q964 **Chair:** Let's come on to that because I want to ask some questions about SAGE meetings. I want to leave time for comments on this. Again, some contextual questions. Obviously, you are not just the adviser but the

chief adviser to the Prime Minister. Did you have to book meetings with him? Or did you, as it were, pop in and out of his office?

Dominic Cummings: I would just pop in and out of his office.

Q965 **Chair:** You sat literally outside the door, I think. Is that right?

Dominic Cummings: Effectively, yes. Not literally, but yes.

Q966 **Chair:** And did you write notes to him, as well? Or was it through that kind of informal popping into the office?

Dominic Cummings: I sometimes wrote notes, but most of our interaction was talking.

Q967 **Chair:** Did you write any notes to him about the covid situation during January and February?

Dominic Cummings: I did in February; I'm not sure if I did in January.

Q968 **Chair:** Did you keep a copy of it?

Dominic Cummings: I can check exactly what I said to him in February, in terms of things that were written down.

Q969 **Chair:** If you have it, would you share it with the Committee?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, I will.

Q970 **Chair:** Thank you. You were there, sitting outside the office, and you sent at least one note. Did you use text and WhatsApp, with thoughts on the pandemic then?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q971 **Chair:** Have you kept copies of those during that period?

Dominic Cummings: Not all but lots, yes.

Q972 **Chair:** Can you share those that are relevant to the response to covid during that period?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, I can.

Q973 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, on some of the meetings, Cobra is the principal emergency response apparatus of the Government. It met on 24 January, before the WHO had raised its international alert. It met another four times in the five weeks before the month of March. Did you go to those Cobra meetings?

Dominic Cummings: I'm not sure now if I attended the Cobra meetings. I don't think that I did. What I did was what I said before: I hired a guy to run data for No. 10.

Q974 **Chair:** Did you choose not to go or were you stopped from going?

Dominic Cummings: It was a question basically of dividing up different people's time. So, I sent Ben Warner, the data scientist, and Imran, who was the Prime Minister's personal secretary, who dealt with the NHS and

the whole covid thing. Mainly speaking, in February, those two attended Cobra meetings. Ben Warner—

Q975 **Chair:** The five meetings. Do you remember whether you attended any Cobra meeting in February?

Dominic Cummings: I don't remember.

Q976 **Chair:** Did you advise the Prime Minister that he should go to the Cobra meetings?

Dominic Cummings: No, I did not.

Q977 **Chair:** Why? Given that this is the principal body that brings all the security, health and intelligence people together. Why didn't you go and why didn't you advise the Prime Minister to go?

Dominic Cummings: As I said, I didn't go because it was a better use of everyone's time for Ben Warner and Imran to attend those meetings. I spoke and had briefings one to one with Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, and with Chris Whitty, about specific things. Lots of Cobra meetings are basically just going through PowerPoint slides and are not massively useful.

Q978 **Chair:** So, that was your take? That Cobra wasn't worth your time.

Dominic Cummings: No, it was not that Cobra wasn't worth my time. It was about what was the best use of everybody's time. Ben Warner was actually a scientist, so he attended the SAGE meetings in February on behalf of No. 10, for which there has been some criticism, but I think that was absolutely the right decision that I took to do that.

He and Imran attended the Cobra meetings. I was briefed one to one by Patrick, Chris and other people, where I could dig into a lot of other questions. Also, bear in mind that one of the huge problems we had throughout was things leaking and creating chaos in the media.

Chair: Leaking from Cobra?

Dominic Cummings: Leaking from Cobra; leaking from practically everything. So when I would have sensitive conversations that I did not want to see appear in the media, I did not have those conversations in Cobra—I had those conversations one-to-one.

Chair: Just pause on that. You are saying that the most secure meeting in Whitehall, literally named after a room, the Cabinet Office briefing room, where you have got to leave your phone outside, it is swept for bugs—that meeting was so insecure that you did not feel that you could speak candidly. As you said, you were concerned about leaks, that is presumably the implication?

Dominic Cummings: Certainly. You can just look at the record. The meetings of the XS Committee, supposedly the secret negotiation committee for Brexit, which operated out of the Cobra rooms from summer 2019 at my request, leaked like a sieve continually.

Q979 **Chair:** So you had Cobra, which was nominally the fulcrum of the response.

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Chair: But you didn't go; the Prime Minister didn't go. You said in one of your tweets this week that if we had had competent people in charge, we would probably have avoided lockdown 1. But you and the Prime Minister did not consider yourselves to be relevant to that meeting. Was there another meeting, or were you not the most competent, relevant people?

Dominic Cummings: As I said, I was having meetings about it, but I was having meetings with people like Patrick by myself, or with two or three other people, in a forum where I knew that they wouldn't leak. Lots of the Cobra meetings are quite formulaic. In terms of the Prime Minister, the basic thought was that in February, the Prime Minister regarded this as just a scare story. He described it as the new swine flu.

Q980 **Chair:** Did you tell him it wasn't?

Dominic Cummings: Certainly, but the view of various officials inside No. 10 was that if we have the Prime Minister chairing Cobra meetings and he just tells everyone, "It's swine flu, don't worry about it, I'm going to get Chris Whitty to inject me with coronavirus live on TV so everyone realises that it is nothing to be frightened of", that would not help actual, serious planning.

Chair: You talk about people at No. 10 and you described the dysfunctionality of Cobra. You are not just a person in No. 10, you are literally—your title was—the chief adviser.

Dominic Cummings: With respect, that actually was not my title: my title was assistant to the Prime Minister.

Q981 **Chair:** So you did not consider yourself to be the most senior person in No. 10?

Dominic Cummings: I was not the most senior person in No. 10. The Cabinet Secretary is most senior person, and the principal private secretary runs his office. Obviously, I had an influential role.

Q982 **Chair:** So you did not have the authority? You are right—and often persuasively—about the need to avoid tramlines and group-think, and you talked about a red team challenging the consensus.

Dominic Cummings: Yep.

Chair: When you noted that the Cobra meetings were not useful, didn't you have the authority in Downing Street to be able to point this out and call for change?

Dominic Cummings: No. My authority to change things in Downing Street is extremely limited. Bear in mind, at the beginning of January I tried extremely hard to have a huge office reorganisation. As you guys will know yourselves, the whole No. 10 building is completely hopeless in terms of a working environment. In January, I tried to get everybody to

move, to create a whole new office system so that we could actually be more effective, and I completely lost the argument. There are all sorts of things I tried to do, which, for better or worse, I did not win the argument on.

Q983 **Chair:** I see. In terms of the background, you have talked about Cobra. What about SAGE? SAGE met for the first time on 22 January 2020, then it met very frequently after that. Did you routinely attend the meetings of SAGE?

Dominic Cummings: I wouldn't say routinely. I attended some of them. I sent Ben Warner to attend all of them, and he did.

Q984 **Chair:** Did you have the right to attend? You delegated to Ben Warner, but could you have gone yourself if you wanted to?

Dominic Cummings: I could have done, yes. In a sense, it is slightly the opposite problem of Cobra. While lots of Cobra meetings are just reading out PowerPoints, quite a lot of the SAGE meetings involve technical questions and I am not a technical person. I am not a smart person. I could not understand a lot of the models and things like that that were being discussed. Ben Warner's technical training—

Q985 **Chair:** Anyone reading your blogs would say that you had a facility with technical terms and discussions.

Dominic Cummings: That is wrong. That is not a good description of me at all. I sent Ben, and I involved and brought in outsiders from the academic world and from business later on, precisely because I could not understand a lot of things that were being discussed and I could not understand the modelling that was being done. I thought that it was far better to have a PhD physicist there who could actually properly look at the documents and really understand what was being said. He had a lot more to contribute to that than I did. I listened to lots of the conversations in February and March, but a lot of it was over my head.

Q986 **Chair:** You write a lot about the dangers of group-think, people going on tramlines, and precisely experts talking to each other and insiders talking to each other. Didn't the fact that you consider yourself an outsider on that make it more important, from your own writings and perspective, to be there to make sure that they were not going wrong?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, that is exactly why I sent Ben from No. 10. It is exactly why I listened to some of the meetings and attended some of them myself. It is also why I brought in outsiders to the process later on.

Q987 **Chair:** We are going to come on to talk about the question of herd immunity, and whether or not that was the policy. Jeremy is going to ask some questions on that. I mentioned your blog and the fact that you have been thinking for some time specifically about virus escapes and the consequences of pandemics. Why did you change your 2019 blog between April and May 2020 to refer to coronaviruses?

Dominic Cummings: Well, there have been a lot of funny things written about this. Lots of media stories say that I changed what I wrote, but those stories are all false. Not a single letter of what I wrote in 2019 was ever changed. In 2019, I wrote a blog that said: "Here's a huge problem—these gain of function experiments being done all over the world. Here's this big piece in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* explaining it." I wrote a blog, I quoted a big chunk of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* thing, and then I wrote underneath: "Here's what I think about it, and this should be taken more seriously in Whitehall."

Not a single letter of what I wrote was changed. What happened was in, I think, May—sometime in the summer; it is not particularly important—after the first wave had happened, I was extremely confident, and turned out to be completely wrong, that the whole question about a lab leak would be shortly a massive issue, because I thought that Trump was going to make it a massive issue in the election against Biden, given that Obama's Administration had funded some of the gain of function experiments in Wuhan itself. I went back and looked at *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* piece that I had originally quoted and said that people should read. In that piece, it actually has a section on Wuhan itself and the BSL2, BSL3 and BSL4 facilities there.

I thought: "Jeez! I had half-remembered and half-forgotten the whole thing. It was about a year before. I am going to basically go back to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* piece and paste a much bigger section than I did originally back on my blog, because once Trump and everyone starts going on about this everyone is going to be asking about it and saying, 'Where did this argument come from?'" I wanted people to realise that this is not some weird thing that has just popped up—people were ringing alarm bells about this a year ago. Just to stress, not a single word of what I wrote was changed. All I did was paste over more from the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*.

Q988 **Chair:** So you changed the blog by adding to it things that you thought were of current interest.

Dominic Cummings: Correct.

Q989 **Chair:** That is clear. Do you remember when you did it? We know it was between April and May of 2020. Do you remember when it was?

Dominic Cummings: It was reasonably shortly after I had come back to work after being ill. I came back to work on 12 or 13 April. It was sometime over the next few weeks, because the issue was starting to bobble around and there were meetings about it inside No. 10.

Q990 **Chair:** So wasn't that a pretty intense period? Did you have the leisure to be adding to your blogpost of a previous year?

Dominic Cummings: Well, as I said, I thought wrongly that it was going to become a massive issue. I knew that everyone would start googling the whole thing and I wanted people to realise that people had been hitting the panic button about this a year earlier, and I thought it would be

useful. If you look back at everything that I have written over the last 10 years, I have written over and over again about problems like pandemics—natural or engineered—about crises, about the No. 10 system. It frankly never occurred to me, given that I wrote tens of thousands of words about it, that people would get so het up about the whole thing. I just thought it was very useful for people to realise.

As you have seen in the news recently, there is now all sorts of things starting to come out from classified American sources, suggesting that actually people were ill with covid in the Wuhan lab back in November, so I was completely wrong about the timing of this, but I do think it is a very important issue that needs to be addressed.

Q991 **Chair:** Absolutely. It is not to say that it is not interesting, but the tens of thousands of words that you wrote were not at a time when you were employed in public service to handle the most important emergency that the country has faced since the war.

Dominic Cummings: Sorry, I don't quite understand.

Chair: You say that the blog contains your reflections over the years. The tens of thousands of words that you wrote were written at times when you were not employed in the role that you had during that time. I am perhaps expressing surprise that you had the time to be able to think about adding to or updating your blog when there were, as we will probably come on to talking about, some pressing operational issues.

Dominic Cummings: I went back and re-read the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. Also, bear in mind that at the time this was an actual live issue. It was not just a sort of historical thing. When I went back to No. 10 after the 12th, there were meetings asking, "Is this engineered? Is it not engineered? Has it escaped from the lab or not? What are the implications of all of this?" So, there were meetings with the Prime Minister, the national security team and whatnot about that question. I obviously cannot go into any of the details about that, but it was a live issue, so I went back and re-read not just that piece, but lots of pieces. Pasting over text into a blog takes 90 seconds. It is not like that was something lengthy; it is literally something that takes a minute or so.

Q992 **Chair:** Okay. Let us move on to this question of the policy or not of herd immunity. Jeremy will lead the questioning on this, but before I hand over, will you just set out for us what you have referred to as being a crucial week, the week beginning Monday 9 March? Just give us a brief summary of what happened in terms of the key meetings that week, and then Jeremy will have some questions on that.

Dominic Cummings: Would it be useful if I explained the thinking about herd immunity now?

Chair: I will hand over to Jeremy now.

Jeremy Hunt: Yes—please go ahead.

Dominic Cummings: I think there is obviously lots of confusion in that the term can be used and is used differently by different people to mean different things. Essentially, the logic of the official plan from the Department of Health was that this disease is going to spread: vaccines are not going to be relevant in any way, shape or form over the relevant time period. We were told it was essentially a certainty that there would be no vaccines available in 2020—something else that turned out to be completely wrong because, as I think we will come on to, it actually turns out that we could have done vaccines much faster than happened and than we thought at the time. At the time, the whole plan was based on the assumption that it was a certainty that there would be no vaccines in 2020.

The logic was that if it is unconstrained, it will come in, there will be a sharp peak and it will completely swamp everything—a huge disaster. The logical approach, therefore, is to introduce measures which delay that peak arriving and which push it down below the capacity of the health system.

In response to the argument, "But, hang on a second—look at what they are doing in Wuhan; look at what they are doing in Taiwan; look at what they are doing in Singapore; look at what they are doing in South Korea," the entire assumption in Whitehall was, first of all, that will not work for them and they will all have second peaks later on and, secondly, it is inconceivable that the British public are going to accept Wuhan-style measures here. Even if we therefore suppress it completely, all that you are going to do is get a second peak in the winter when the NHS is already, every year, under pressure, so we only actually have a real choice between one peak and herd immunity by September—terrible, but then you are through it, by the time the next winter comes. If you try and flatten it now, the second peak comes up in wintertime and that is even worse than the summer. Horrific as the numbers look in the summer, the numbers will be even worse if it happens in October, November, December-time.

It is important to bear in mind, on the whole herd immunity point, obviously, no one is saying that they want this to happen—the point is it was seen as an inevitability: you will either have herd immunity by September after a single peak or you will have herd immunity by January, with a second peak. Those are the only two options that we have. That was the whole logic of all of the discussions in January and February and early March.

That is why in the week of the 9th, people from SAGE and elsewhere in the Government started to talk publicly about herd immunity. It is not that people are thinking, "This is a good thing" that we actively wanted. It was that it was a complete inevitability—the only real question is one of timing. It is either herd immunity by September or it is herd immunity by January, after a second peak. That was the assumption, up until Friday 13 March.

Q993 **Jeremy Hunt:** So when Matt Hancock said, on 15 March, we have a plan and herd immunity is not part of it, was that wrong?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, and saying it is not part of it is completely wrong. I think there is a sort of semantic problem now. I looked back through all of our WhatsApps between me and the Prime Minister and Hancock and Chris and Vallance and whatnot. Essentially, there is a sort of semantic question about, is the "goal" herd immunity? —do we want herd immunity? —versus, is that the basic plan?

Of course, no one wants this to happen—no one wanted any of it to happen—but the point was, herd immunity was regarded as an unavoidable fact. The only question that we practically had was one of timing.

We can go through the chronology of it, but after some SAGE members said on the 11th publicly, "Well, we are going to be shielding people and then, by the time they come out of shielding, the rest of the population will have herd immunity", that was the plan. I am completely baffled as to why No. 10 has tried to deny that, because that was the official plan. You can see it in the Cobra documents that I have brought along. Hancock himself and the chief scientist and the chief medical officer were all briefing senior journalists during the week of the 9th, "This is what the official plan is".

Q994 **Jeremy Hunt:** Let me ask you about the SAGE meeting on 5 March, which the minutes say you were at.

At that point on 5 March, it was five weeks since the WHO had said covid was a public health emergency of international concern and countries such as China, Taiwan, Korea, even Australia and New Zealand, were starting to lock their borders down, set up test-and-trace programmes, stop mass events. The minutes of that 5 March meeting say that the only measures recommended were shielding the vulnerable and elderly. At that point, on 5 March, did you advise the Prime Minister that SAGE was wrong?

Dominic Cummings: No, I didn't. I was ringing increasing alarm bells in the first half of March, but I had a sort of— My thought process was— I started getting people coming to me around the 25 February—very smart people—saying to me, "America is completely screwing this up. You should be really aggressive. Don't listen to all these people saying that there's no alternative to this. I personally am starting to take preparations. I'm buying things. We're going to have to lockdown, etc, etc." but the official view all the way through the first half of March, and actually into the week of 16 March, was that that would all be more dangerous.

My mindset was I was really torn about the whole thing, because in the first 10 days of March I was increasingly being told by people, "I think this is going wrong," but I was also really, really worried about smashing my hand down on a massive button marked: "Ditch the official plan. Stop listening to the official plan. I think that there's something going wrong." I did do that, as we will come on to, but around about the 5th I was still reluctant to do that, and we were exploring lots of different things that were going on.

Q995 **Jeremy Hunt:** Just to be clear, that was two weeks before the champions league event in Liverpool and the Cheltenham gold cup, and you did not at that point advise that those mass participation sports events should be cancelled.

Dominic Cummings: No. In fact, our official advice at the time was, and this shows the kind of logic at play, that doing that, first, won't really make much difference to transmission, which seems obviously bizarre in retrospect—the idea that we would keep having mass events going on through this whole thing—and, secondly, could be actively bad because you will just push people into pubs. Of course, no one in the official system in the Department of Health drew the obvious logical conclusion, which was: "Shouldn't we be shutting all the pubs as well?" At this point, around about the 5th, the logic was: "Obviously, given that we're not going to be closing pubs, closing retail, closing leisure and all of this, I sort of see the point of the official advice, because if you're not going to do those things, it does have a logic to it." Of course, the logic itself was completely flawed, but that is what the thinking was around 5 March.

Q996 **Jeremy Hunt:** Let's talk about the weekend when the plan did change. This morning you tweeted a picture of a whiteboard from the Prime Minister's study of what you call "Plan B". You said that you showed that to him on the morning of Saturday 14 March. Was that the moment you told him for the first time that the scientific consensus, as we saw in those earlier SAGE meetings, was wrong?

Dominic Cummings: No, it wasn't the first time. The data scientist Ben Warner was working in No. 10. His brother, coincidentally and thankfully, was working with the NHS to help the NHS with building a whole data system and data dashboard to deal with covid. He came to me on 7 March and he had been in various meetings about the official plan. He said to me, "I'm really, really worried about this. It seems to me that this plan could easily be mad. It could be incredibly destructive. Has this really been tested? Have you really thought it all through? Should I and some others start thinking about a plan B?"

Q997 **Jeremy Hunt:** But when did you tell the Prime Minister that we needed to change direction?

Dominic Cummings: On the morning of the 12th I said— Well, there are all sorts of different things that I could talk about—

Q998 **Jeremy Hunt:** The morning of the 12th—that was a Thursday, wasn't it? That was the first time you told the Prime Minister, "The scientific consensus is wrong. We need a plan B."

Dominic Cummings: On the night of the 11th, I texted the group with the Prime Minister and the chief scientific adviser, and I said: "People can see the trajectory and how social distancing will be needed to flatten the curve. Very sensible people, including former CDC officials, etc. and doctors are saying the risks of delay are much, much higher than the risks of going too soon. If we're not going to say tomorrow, starting social distancing today, we're waiting, and effectively just keep telling people to

wash hands, there's going to be massive pushback saying, 'Why wait five days? Why not move now? Why not flatten earlier?' Proposing tomorrow that we delay action until next week will require extremely clear justification with supporting data, models, etc. We would have to make it public for global scrutiny." This was on the night of the 11th, and this was why I and others had this kind of mounting panic about the whole thing.

Q999 **Jeremy Hunt:** Were there people in SAGE who shared your view that we were going in the wrong direction, or was there a group-think that was broadly shared by everyone?

Dominic Cummings: As far as I can tell, and as far as I remember, most people in SAGE thought— This fundamental logic was still operative on the 11th and the 12th in SAGE. This is the reason why I had been reluctant over the previous week to tell the Prime Minister, "I think the advice that we are getting is wrong." Even around the 11th and 12th, as far as I could tell from SAGE, and as far as the minutes show, the fundamental assumption remained that we can't do lockdown and we can't do suppression because it just means a second peak later.

On the night of the 11th, I warned— I sent that message and said, "If we're not going to"— On the 11th, it became clear—this became a running feature of the whole thing—that, contrary to our expectations, all sorts of things that we thought were in train actually were not in train. On the 11th, there was pushback from within the system against advising the following day—i.e. the 12th—to say, "Stay at home if you have got symptoms." Me and others were realising at this point that the system is basically delaying announcing all these things because there is not a proper plan in place. The justification is, "Oh, well, it doesn't really matter if it's now or in a week's time," but actually the whole logic doesn't work. Essentially, these things are being delayed simply because there hasn't been the planning and preparation made. I wanted us to announce on the 12th that individuals stay at home, and also to push through the household quarantine as well.

Q1000 **Jeremy Hunt:** Let me just ask you briefly, how do we stop that happening in the future? There was a consensus about the way to do things. We know now, with the benefit of hindsight, that that was wrong. How would you change the structures and systems to prevent that kind of thing from happening for a future pandemic?

Dominic Cummings: That is obviously a huge question. There is absolutely no doubt at all that the process by which SAGE was secret, and overall the whole thinking around the strategy was secret, was an absolutely catastrophic mistake, because it meant that there was not proper scrutiny of the assumptions and the underlying logic.

Actually, SAGE agreed about this. When I said on the 11th, "We're going to have to make all these models public and whatnot," there wasn't pushback from SAGE, and there wasn't pushback from Patrick Vallance either. Patrick actually agreed with me. When I said, "We should just publish the code for the models so people can play with it themselves and

see what the hell these models are," Patrick also agreed and said to SAGE that we should do that. The problem is that by the time we were doing this, it was fundamentally too late. By the 11th or the 12th, we had already gone terribly wrong. If you see this document here, in terms of your previous question, Jeremy—

Q1001 **Jeremy Hunt:** What is this evidence, please?

Dominic Cummings: This is from a COBRA document and a dashboard document. It actually was in various documents over this time period. I have put it on my Twitter feed. It has this graph here. This was the logic from SAGE, and this was the logic in the Department of Health at the time. The black line there is "do nothing", the blue line there is "do a little bit", and the green line is "do a Wuhan-style suppression"—not necessarily Wuhan, but in that direction. As it says, "Very stringent social and behavioural interventions (such as those in China) have the potential to prevent major epidemic establishing, but risks a large epidemic re-establishing… The advised approach seeks to avoid this possibility." This is actually after the crucial meetings on the 13th and the 14th. This graph kept appearing on the 15th, 16th and 17th. This remained the official logic for days.

Q1002 **Jeremy Hunt:** You have described the behavioural scientists who advised SAGE on SPI-B—I think it was—as charlatans and been very critical of the advice they got about how people would react to a lockdown. Did you at the time commission research to challenge that view?

Dominic Cummings: We definitely did challenge it. Just to correct that, I did not say that everybody involved with SPI-B were charlatans, and that is not the case. The problem is that in this field of behavioural science, there are a lot of charlatans. Anybody who has been involved with the political world knows that the whole field is riddled with duff studies and memes that people believe are true but are not true. There is no doubt whatsoever that this was a critical part of the false group-think.

One of the critical things that was completely wrong in the whole official thinking in SAGE and in the Department of Health in February/March was, first of all, the British public would not accept a lockdown and, secondly, the British public would not accept what was thought of as an east Asian-style track and trace-type system and the infringements of liberty around that. Those two assumptions were completely central to the official plan and were both, obviously, completely wrong. In the first half of March, this was raised—sometimes—in the Prime Minister's office, and me and others were literally pointing at the TV screen of Lombardy and saying, "Look at what's happening in Lombardy. We are getting text messages on our own phones from our own families saying, 'What's going on?' This assumption that the public basically aren't that frightened and don't want to have a lockdown is false and we should abandon it." But there is no doubt that that was an extremely important thing.

Q1003 **Jeremy Hunt:** Two final questions from me about that period. On

Monday 16 March the Prime Minister did announce a change of tack. People were advised to socially distance, but pubs and restaurants were not closed and mass sports events were not stopped. Did you advise that we should be going further at that point, or did you go along with that softer version of a lockdown?

Dominic Cummings: Can I backtrack? Because I think we need to understand the crucial period between Thursday 12th and the Sunday when things started to change. On the 12th, we started— It was a completely surreal day. I sent a message to the Prime Minister at 7.48 that morning—forgive the language this is expressed in, but I might as well say what I actually said—saying, "We've got big problems coming. The Cabinet Office is terrifyingly shit. No plans. Totally behind the pace. We must announce today, not next week, 'If you feel ill with cold or flu, stay home'. Some around the system want a delay because they haven't done the work. We must force the pace. We are looking at 100 to 500,000 deaths between optimistic and pessimistic scenarios. You've got to chair the daily meetings in the Cabinet Room, not Cobra"—because the Cobra system could not work; we could not get all the data in properly. It did not work for a kind of open thing.

That is how the day started off, with us thinking, "Okay, today is going to be all about covid and whether or not we are going to announce the household quarantine. We then got completely derailed because, in the morning of the 12th, suddenly the national security people came in and said, "Trump wants us to join a bombing campaign in the middle east tonight and we need to start having meetings about that through the day with Cobra as well." So everything to do with Cobra on covid that day was completely disrupted because you have these two parallel sets of meetings. You had the national security people running in and out talking about, "Are we going to bomb the middle east?" and we had the Cobra meeting being delayed and whatnot as we were trying to figure out what we were going to do with household quarantine.

Then, to add to that day—it sounds so surreal it couldn't possibly be true—*The Times* had run a huge story about the Prime Minister and his girlfriend and their dog, and the Prime Minister's girlfriend was going completely crackers about this story and demanding that the press office dealt with that.

So we had this completely insane situation in which part of the building was saying, "Are we going to bomb Iraq?"; part of the building was arguing about whether we are going to do quarantine or not do quarantine; the Prime Minister has his girlfriend going crackers about something completely trivial. You have all these meetings going on through the course the 12th.

In the end, we had the meeting on covid, and we decided to push ahead with household quarantine pretty quickly. Fortunately, thank God, the Attorney General persuaded the Prime Minister not to go along with the whole bombing campaign. At the end of all that, at roughly 9 o'clock that night, I then sat down with Ben Warner and Marc Warner. That is,

essentially, when they kind of hit the total panic button with me. They said, "We are looking at all this data; we are looking at all these graphs. We are heading for total and utter catastrophe. We need to have plan B." Ben then went off and spoke to Patrick Vallance about that on Friday the 13th.

On Friday the 13th, we then started to look through all the information and we started to pick apart all the different graphs. Ben spoke to Patrick; Patrick said, "I am also extremely concerned. It seems that something has gone fundamentally wrong in the wiring of the system. We have these graphs showing that even on the best-case scenario with the official plan, you are going to completely smash through the capacity of the NHS—not by a little bit but multiple times."

The evening of Friday the 13th, I am sitting with Ben Warner and the Prime Minister's Private Secretary in the Prime Minister's study. We were basically saying that we are going to have to sit down with the Prime Minister tomorrow and explain to him that we think that we are going to have to ditch the whole official plan, and we are heading for the biggest disaster this country has seen since 1940. This is the whiteboard—I put it on my Twitter account, and I have also sent it to some journalists, so hopefully you will be able to see on the internet, and you have got copies of it here. This has, essentially, plan B sketched on it. The timestamp is nine minutes past 8 on the Friday night.

Essentially, what is happening at this point is, we are thinking, "What do we do on this?" At this point, the second most powerful official in the country, Helen MacNamara—the Deputy Cabinet Secretary—walked into the office while we are looking at this whiteboard. She says, "I have just been talking to the official Mark Sweeney, who is in charge of co-ordinating with the Department for Health. He said 'I have been told for years that there is a whole plan for this. There is no plan. We are in huge trouble.' I have come through here to the Prime Minister's office to tell you all that I think we are absolutely fucked. I think this country is heading for a disaster. I think we are going to kill thousands of people. As soon as I have been told this, I have come through to see you. It seems from the conversation you are having that that is correct." I said, "I think you are right. I think it is a disaster. I am going to speak to the Prime Minister about it tomorrow. We are trying to sketch out here what plan B is."

Q1004 **Chair:** I just want to be clear. On the 14th you have that meeting, and things changed, but on the 16th, we did not close pubs or restaurants, or ban mass sports events for another week. Was your advice that we should go ahead and do all those things from the Monday, and that advice was rejected? Or did you not advise that?

Dominic Cummings: If you— This is the other whiteboard—

Chair: Could you just answer that question? Did you advise that those things should happen?

Dominic Cummings: Yes and no. On the Saturday, we had the official meeting in the morning in the Cabinet Room. After the official meeting ended, I got the Prime Minister into his study with me, Ben Warner, Marc Warner and the Prime Minister's Private Secretary for Health, and we showed him—

Q1005 **Chair:** Could we just get to the question? Did you or did you not advise that pubs and restaurants should be shut? Yes or no?

Dominic Cummings: As I say, yes, but it is more complicated than that. We showed him this graph. It has here "No mitigation", "Our plan". This is all the NHS broken. And here is an actual plan, which is lockdown.

Q1006 **Jeremy Hunt:** I am really sorry, but I just want to be clear. So you did advise him, he rejected that advice, and the pubs, restaurants and mass sports events carried on for another week. Is that correct?

Dominic Cummings: It is more complicated, as I said. We said on the 14th, "We are going to have to lock down. We are going to have to get there as soon as we possibly can." You are being shown—sorry, we will come back to the logic. The basic answer to your question is: yes, on the 14th we said to the Prime Minister, "You are going to have to lock down, but there is no lockdown plan. It doesn't exist. SAGE haven't modelled it. DH don't have a plan. We are going to have to figure out and hack together a lockdown plan over the next"—

Q1007 **Jeremy Hunt:** So it was not so much that he rejected your advice; it was just that we were not physically ready to proceed on that basis and we needed longer to work out how you would do things like that. Is that the broad picture?

Dominic Cummings: Sort of. Essentially, the Prime Minister quite reasonably—this is like a scene from "Independence Day", with Jeff Goldblum saying, "The aliens are here, and your whole plan is broken, and you need a new plan." That is what the scene was like that morning, with Ben Warner in the Jeff Goldblum role. He took the Prime Minister through all the graphs, and through the NHS graphs, and showed him, "The system is thinking that this is all weeks and weeks and weeks away. You are being shown all these graphs about time to peak of the epidemic, in June, but this is all completely wrong. The NHS is going to be smashed in weeks, and we have got days to act"—

Q1008 **Jeremy Hunt:** We understand that, thank you. I just want to ask a final question, because lots of colleagues want to come in. It is about your role. You are correct that your title was assistant to the Prime Minister, but you were really the most powerful person in Downing Street after the Prime Minister, because everyone knew that he listened to you more than he listened to any civil servant, and more than he listened, actually, to any Cabinet Minister. But you did not advise him, in your own words, to change tack, until the night of 11 March, and you did not have a meeting to discuss that until 14 March, six weeks after our first case, and six weeks after the World Health Organisation had raised the alarm. You did not advise him to cancel the Cheltenham Gold Cup or the Champions

League matches, or to lock down the borders—the things that could have prevented a lockdown. He would have thought, "I've not just got the scientific establishment telling me that I do not need to lock down. I've actually got Dom, who is really interested in science and even goes along to the SAGE meetings as well." Do you not recognise that it was a massive failure on your part, as his chief adviser, that you took so long to come to him with advice to change tack?

Dominic Cummings: I think that there is no doubt, in retrospect, that, yes, it was a huge failure of mine, and I bitterly regret that I didn't hit the emergency panic button earlier than I did—in retrospect, there's no doubt that I was wrong not to. All I can say is that my worry was—my mental state at the time was—that, on the one hand, you could sort of know from the last week of February that a whole bunch of things were wrong. It was clear through all the meetings with PHE and everybody that everything was going wrong; everything we pushed, everything we probed—everything was wrong, bad, terrible.

But I was incredibly frightened—I guess is the word—about the consequences of me kind of pulling a massive emergency string and saying, "The official plan is wrong, and it is going to kill everyone, and you've got to change path," because what if I'm wrong? What if I persuade him to change tack and that is a disaster? Everyone is telling me that if we go down this alternative path, it is going to be five times worse in the winter, and what if that is the consequence?

I think, in retrospect, it's clear that the official plan was wrong, it's clear that the whole advice was wrong, and I think it's clear that we obviously should have locked down, essentially, in the first week of March at the latest. We certainly should have been doing all of these things weeks earlier than we did. I think it is unarguable that that is the case.

I personally bitterly regret that is was not until round about the 11th or 12th that I started to do that. But, to be clear, on the 12th—on this crazy day of the 12th—we were sitting in the Prime Minister's office. The Cabinet were talking about the herd immunity plan. The Cabinet Secretary said, "Prime Minister, you should go on TV tomorrow and explain to people the herd immunity plan and that it is like the old chicken pox parties. We need people to get this disease, because that is how we get herd immunity by September." I said, "Mark, you've got to stop using this chicken pox analogy. It's not right." He said, "Why?", and Ben Warner said, "Because chicken pox is not spreading exponentially and killing hundreds of thousands of people." You could sense in the whole room that there was this kind of shock, and it was only really at that moment that we realised.

To stress, this was not some weird thing that the Cabinet Secretary had come up with. He was saying what the official advice to him from the Department of Health was. So it was a huge, big deal for me and for Ben Warner to say, "Basically, we think that this whole thing is wrong." Should we have done it earlier? In retrospect, I think, obviously, we should, and I am terribly, deeply sorry that I didn't, but hopefully people can realise why

I was also very fearful of doing that, because it did cause absolute carnage.

Once we did this on the 14th, and once we then started to push the Prime Minister to change path, lots of people did come to me and say, "What on earth are you doing? We are going to lock down. It's going to bounce back up. It's going to be worse. This is all going to be on you and the people who are trying to change path." I am terribly sorry that I didn't do it earlier, but it just seemed like such a massive thing.

It was almost surreal, the whole experience. Part of what me and Ben—on the Friday night, we were doing this. The next morning, when there was the Jeff Goldblum scene, with Ben explaining things, the whole thing just seemed like a kind of out-of-control movie. In retrospect, it is clear that we should have acted earlier, but at the time we just didn't.

Chair: We have quite a lot more ground to cover, as I think you would expect, so I am going to turn to my colleagues, starting with Mark Logan and then Rosie Cooper.

Q1009 **Mark Logan:** Mr Cummings, in British politics you are considered as extremely successful by many people. You took back control. You got Brexit done. But when it comes to this particular issue, why were you not able to nail an earlier lockdown?

Dominic Cummings: I didn't pay enough attention to it early enough, for sure. One of the other reasons why I finally had the confidence to say that I thought that the system had gone catastrophically wrong was that I also got in touch with a guy called Professor Tim Gowers at Cambridge, who is a Fields medallist. He is one of the smartest people on the planet. I got in touch with him, and I started sharing SAGE documents with him in, I think, the week of the 9th—I can't remember the exact date. People like him and then, shortly afterwards, Demis Hassabis at DeepMind, who I also started sharing documents with and talking to—they actually could understand these things. In the combination of Marc Warner, Hassabis and Tim Gowers, you had three incredibly able people, who could understand the technicalities in a way that I couldn't do, saying this to me. That gave me the confidence to say to the Prime Minister, "We should change." But it is obvious in retrospect that I just left this whole thing until far, far too late, and I am terribly sorry about that. I should have done this in January, is the reality of it. I think that was a big part of it.

You read about these things in history books. It was literally a classic historical example of group-think in action. The process was closed, and that is what happens in closed group-think bubbles: everyone just reinforced themselves. The more that people from the outside attacked, the more people internally said, "Well, they don't understand, and they haven't got access to all this information" and whatnot. It was this classic group-think bubble.

In the end, I think a lot of people will say I did the wrong thing by trying to bounce the system into a different path, and who knows? Whether that

was right or wrong, what is unarguably the case is that part of my job in situations like this was to challenge things. I did do it on other things, and although I did do it here, I obviously did not do it early enough. That is the heart of the thing.

If this process had been opened up to outside scientific scrutiny, and other smart people's scrutiny—remember, a lot of people who figured out the answer to this were quantitative people who were not epidemiologists or disease specialists; they were people like Hassabis, people like Gowers, people like Marc Warner—in January and we had put all of these assumptions out on the table, we'd have figured out at least six weeks earlier that there was an alternative plan, and this whole thing of, "Well, you've only got a choice between that peak, or delay and then that peak" is complete garbage. In fact, the plan that we put to the PM on the 14th, we could have that six weeks earlier, about supress and then build, and crash programmes for drugs and vaccines and everything else. So I failed, and I apologise for that.

Q1010 **Mark Logan:** On your earlier point about inertia, why do you think that was? I'll use a personal example: from mid to the end of January last year, my wife and child were sat about 500 miles east of Wuhan waiting to return to the UK, and they were saying to me, "This is very real." We had a meeting in Parliament—Chris Whitty chaired it—on 11 February; 650 MPs were invited to, and I think about 15, or at the most 20, attended. There was just a sense of inertia and, to your earlier point, a lack of urgency. What explains that? Is it people, is it the institutions, is it cultural?

Dominic Cummings: We obviously had the wrong people in all sorts of crucial things. I also think it is important to realise that, at this time, not just the Prime Minister but many other people thought that the real danger was not the health danger but the overreaction to it, and the economy. The Prime Minister said all the way through February and through the first half of March, "The real danger here isn't this new swine flu thing; it's that the reaction to it is going to cripple the economy."

To be fair to the Prime Minister, although I think he was completely wrong, lots of other senior people in Whitehall had the same view, that the real danger was the economic one. It was because of this group-think, and also the fact that all of these health graphs—about the lack of urgency, I think this is an incredibly important point, which I should have explained before—had time to peak 12 weeks away. When we are talking about meetings in the week of the 9th, when people like the Warners were saying, "Panic, panic. Advance," everyone was thinking, "We've got ages to think about this. The peak is not until June. We've got weeks to potentially make decisions about these things." There was a fundamental misunderstanding about how far this already was in the country and how fast it was spreading in the country. The lack of testing data was an absolutely critical disaster, because we didn't realise early enough how far it had already spread.

So all these graphs are like this, showing a peak in June, whereas the real graph was like that, and we were already much further up it. We didn't realise that, though, until after we had even locked down. Even a week after we locked down on 23 March, official graphs were still showing this thing going up and peaking in June, even though we already knew from the numbers inside the ICUs and deaths that the official graphs had to be completely wrong. Do you see what I mean? So part of the lack of urgency was that the testing data was wrong. The graphs that we were shown on the models were all wrong because they were all pushed out to the right, and that massively contributed to the whole lack of urgency.

Further, another critical thing was this: the reasonable worst-case scenario planning system. There is a guy called Phil Tetlock who wrote a book. In that book, he said, "You should not use words like 'reasonable', 'probable' and 'likely', because it confuses everybody." This was a classic example of how this happened, because the reasonable worst-case scenario originally seen at the end of February was basically: "This is the worst thing that could possibly happen, but, of course, it is not going to happen." In the first week of March, I was told, "Well, there is a 20% chance it could happen." On 2 March, I think, I was told, "Officially, there is a 20% chance that the reasonable worst-case scenario could happen."

By the time we get to 13 March, and I am waving around plan B, scientists are starting to come to No.10 saying, "Hang on a second. The reasonable worst-case scenario is now our central planning assumption." That's terrible, because the whole thing has suddenly crept up on us from literally 10 days earlier, when it was probably—no, definitely—very, very unlikely; to the first week of March—"Well, a 20% chance"; to literally a week later, when this was now our central planning assumption. On top of that, the graphs being all out to the right meant that the truth was even more bad than the reasonable worst-case scenario. Do you see what I mean?

Q1011 **Mark Logan:** Very briefly—this is my last question—during January, February and March time, how were the international experiences of the likes of China and Taiwan being fed into the system? Did we take serious note of them?

Dominic Cummings: It was essentially completely discarded by the system. I think that was another one of the tragic errors. It goes back to what, I think, Jeremy mentioned earlier on about some of the kind of behavioural assumptions. Fundamentally, in January, February, March and even after we got through to lockdown on the 23rd and in the immediate few days after that, the almost universal view was that it was inconceivable that we would be able to do a Taiwan-type thing.

I have got text messages from myself saying, "If Taiwan is doing this and if Singapore is doing this, and we're not going to this"—in Singapore, everything is in English; everyone can read what they are doing. It's not like it's in Chinese; everyone is going to be able to see a highly competent country operating, in English, a completely different approach. If we are not going to do that, we are going to have to have a really good

explanation, but the basic default mode was, "This country's is not east Asian, the people won't wear it and it's just impossible."

It was only after we started to push through the idea of plan B—this is why, for example, testing stopped. Remember, testing basically stopped, and the Government officially said, "Oh well, there's no point testing everyone any more." What obviously should have been happening is that in January we should have been ramping up testing massively. In January we should have been saying—

Chair: We will come on to testing in the next session.

Dominic Cummings: Well, hopefully that explains fundamentally this group-think. The group-think about, "There's no option apart from one peak or the second peak," was completely tied together with, "The east Asian approach is simply completely politically, technically, in every sense not viable in this country." That didn't change until after the weekend of the 14th and 15th, as we tried to push through plan B.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We will go to Rosie Cooper and then Rebecca Long Bailey.

Q1012 **Rosie Cooper:** Good morning, Mr Cummings. The Chair has asked you about the long delays in publishing SAGE papers, and you described, even more worryingly, Cobra meetings leaking. Why not gain the public trust and publish the papers? Were there political barriers to having those papers published?

Dominic Cummings: As I said, when I talked to Patrick Vallance about this, Patrick was completely supportive of it, as you would expect from a good scientist. He said, "I think that's correct. We should publish all of these things. We should publish the code for the models." So there was no pushback from Patrick at all, or from Chris Whitty. As far as I am aware, there was no pushback from SAGE either.

The problem was that by the time we had this conversation, we were sort of into a crisis, if you see what I mean. What should have happened is that we had that conversation in January and published everything then. That would have saved our bacon. We didn't really have the conversation about publishing things until the week of the 9th, when we were already dangling over the cliff.

Rosie Cooper: Well, okay. I think the public will be very, very disturbed to hear the chaotic picture you paint, with almost a pick-and-mix attitude to scientific evidence. There was talk of sending the virus packing in 12 weeks and chickenpox parties, and there is an alleged comment from the Prime Minister about bodies piling up in the streets—you might want to comment on that. But all the while, in its co-ordinating role, the Department of Health led specifically on PPE procurement and the design and set-up of Test and Trace. They did that on a largely outsourced business model, with no penalty clauses for bad performance. All we are hearing here is of incompetence and chaos. How would you rate the performance of the Department of Health and Social Care and the

Secretary of State? Outstanding? Good? Requires improvement? Or, inadequate, and why?

Dominic Cummings: I think there was some brilliance. Like in much of the Government system, there were many brilliant people at relatively junior and middle levels, who were terribly let down by senior leadership. The Secretary of State for Health should have been fired for at least 15 or 20 things, including lying to everybody on multiple occasions, in meeting after meeting in the Cabinet room, and publicly.

Q1013 **Rosie Cooper:** Oh dear! In that case, do you think people should be worried about facing corporate manslaughter charges?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know about that because I don't know what the laws and rules are. But, as I said in my opening statement, I think that there is no doubt that many senior people performed far, far—disastrously—below the standards that the country has a right to expect. The Secretary of State for Health is certainly one of those people. I said repeatedly to the Prime Minister that he should be fired, so did the Cabinet Secretary, so did many other senior people.

Q1014 **Rosie Cooper:** I understand that we are coming on to Test and Trace later, but on the evidence we have heard so far, could you comment on why the financial incentives for people with covid-19 to self-isolate were so fundamentally weak. They were fatally weak and that is a big problem for the spread of this disease.

Dominic Cummings: I think that is right. The Chancellor did an outstanding job on furlough, but I would point out that he had in his team some brilliant people: Mike Webb, Tim Leunig and Liam Booth-Smith. That team basically had to create the whole furlough scheme completely out of thin air, in just a few days. There wasn't any plan for furlough—nothing, zero, nada. They completely had to pull that out of nothing.

On the problem you are describing about the financial incentives on covid and isolation, you are obviously completely correct. There should have been a plan but, like on testing and shielding, there was no plan. When we got to that point and said, "Right, what are we going to do on financial incentives?" there wasn't any plan.

If you go back to the 3rd, the Government published a document on the 3rd, which was the "contain, mitigate, delay" thing. We had been told for weeks that we've got all these plans in place etc. When we got that document, we leafed through it and Ben Warner said, "This is the press release. Where is the actual plan?" "This is the plan." "No, this is the press release. Where is the actual plan? Where is the document like that, that has all the stuff on the things that you are talking about?" "Oh well, we don't know. We haven't got that. We don't know where it is."

On all those things, it turned out that we at No. 10 were operating on completely false assumptions. That is why I blame myself terribly for not digging into all of this before I did. We started to realise in the last week of February and the first week of March that that was the case.

On shielding, on 19 March, I pulled all the officials in on shielding, to say, "Where is the plan on shielding?" Not only was there not a plan, lots of people in the Cabinet Office said, "We shouldn't have a plan. We shouldn't put out a helpline for people to call, because it will all just be swamped, and we haven't got a system."

Thank God, a brilliant official in the Department of Health and Social Care worked with a guy called Oliver Lewis and they hacked together a team. But the shielding plan was literally hacked together in two all-nighters, after Thursday the 19th. There wasn't any plan for shielding. There wasn't even a helpline for shielding. There wasn't any plan for financial incentives. There wasn't any plan for almost anything in any kind of detail at all.

Q1015 **Rosie Cooper:** The picture you have described is absolutely terrifying. You have described the Department of Health as a "smoking ruin". What did you mean by that? Did you actually hear the Prime Minister say words to the effect, if the bodies pile up, so be it?

Dominic Cummings: Why did I describe the Department of Health as a smoking ruin? Well, because, as I said, there were lots of great people in it, but the procurement system which they were operating was just completely hopeless. It was not set up at all to do—there wasn't any system set up to deal with proper emergency procurement.

I will give you an example of this: on the day the Prime Minister tested positive, whatever that Friday was—the 27th, I think—in that meeting, we were told at the Cabinet table by officials that the Department of Health had been turning down ventilators because the price had been marked up. It completely beggars belief that that sort of thing was happening.

When I was having PPE meetings round the Cabinet Room table, we were told, "Oh well, the PPE is obviously not going to arrive for months." Why is it not going to arrive for months? "Because it takes that long to ship." Why are you shipping it? "We ship it, because it is what we always do."

Hang on—we are going to have a peak in the NHS roundabout mid-April and you are shipping things from China that are going to arrive in months' time, and all the airplanes are not flying. Leave this meeting, commandeer the planes, fly them to China, drop them at the nearest airfield, pick up our stuff, fly it back. At this point, we had Trump sending the CIA round trying to gazump everybody on PPE.

The whole system was just like wading through treacle, on all of these sorts of things. There wasn't an emergency fast-track process for people to deal with these kinds of things. That is why I described it as a "smoking ruin". And that is why the Cabinet Secretary quite rightly said, "We have got to basically divvy up the Secretary of State's job, because there are multiple huge things here that are all being dropped—testing, ventilators, PPE, vaccines, drugs, you name it." Because it was clear that the Department was just completely and utterly overwhelmed.

Q1016 **Chair:** Thank you, Rosie. I am going to go on to Rebecca Long Bailey,

but I just wanted to pick up something that you said, Mr Cummings. I think I heard you correctly in accusing the Health Secretary of having lied. Did I hear that correctly?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1017 **Chair:** That is obviously a serious charge. Can you provide the Committee with the evidence behind that assertion?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. There are numerous examples. In the summer, he said that everyone who needed treatment got the treatment that they required. He knew that that was a lie because he had been briefed by the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer himself about the first peak. We were told explicitly people did not get the treatment that they deserved. Many people were left to die in horrific circumstances.

Q1018 **Chair:** Is that the basis of your assertion or are there other pieces of evidence that you base that charge on?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. In mid-April, just before the Prime Minister and I were diagnosed with having covid ourselves, the Secretary of State for Health told us in the Cabinet Room, "Everything is fine on PPE. We have got it all covered," and so on. When I came back, almost the first meeting I had in the Cabinet Room was about the disaster over PPE and how we were actually completely short and hospitals all over the country were running out. The Secretary of State said in that meeting, "This is the fault of Simon Stevens; it is the fault of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is not my fault—they blocked approvals on all sorts of things." I said to the Cabinet Secretary, "Please investigate this and find out if it is true." The Cabinet Secretary came back to me and said, "It's completely untrue. I have lost confidence in the Secretary of State's honesty in these meetings."

Q1019 **Chair:** The Cabinet Secretary said that.

Dominic Cummings: The Cabinet Secretary said that to me and the Cabinet Secretary said that to the Prime Minister.

Q1020 **Chair:** Did you make a note of that at the time?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1021 **Chair:** Can you supply that to the Committee?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Chair: And to corroborate the accusation that you have made against the Health Secretary you have given orally some of what is in your mind when you make that charge. I would be grateful if you could write to the Committee to set it out, so we can consider it. Obviously, that is a very serious thing to say.

Q1022 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** Thank you, Mr Cummings for speaking to us today. Now, you have mentioned Whitehall dismissing the strict early measures taken in Taiwan and Wuhan, and you have also said that in Whitehall the real danger was viewed as the economic one rather than

the virus. Indeed, an article from the Institute for New Economic Thinking in November last year noted that the UK was one country of many that chose to limit pandemic response in favour of economic stimulus in the name of saving their economies at the expense of their citizens' lives.

So who was providing economic advice to the Government? What did it say? And who within Government was arguing against taking strict measures for economic reasons, both at the start of the pandemic and throughout? And ultimately, did anyone within Government actively attempt to trade off lives in favour of economic activity?

Dominic Cummings: I slightly missed some of that, but I think I got the gist of it. There were quite a few people around Whitehall who thought that the real danger here was the economy. The Prime Minister's view throughout January, February and March was, as he said in many meetings, the real danger here is not the disease—the real danger here is the measures that we take to deal with the disease and the economic destruction that that will cause. He had that view all the way through.

In fact, one of the reasons why it was so rocky getting from the 14th, when we suggested plan B to him, to actual lockdown was because he kept basically bouncing back to, "We don't really know how dangerous it is. We are going to completely destroy the economy by having lockdown. Maybe we shouldn't do it." And through the course of that period—16th, 17th, 18th and 19th—there was this constant sort of back and forth of, "Here's the hourly data coming in, showing that we are further ahead in the pandemic than we realised. The situation is worse. The NHS situation is worse. Everything is getting worse". And that kind of propelled things a bit towards lockdown. But it is also the case that fundamentally the Prime Minister just did not really think that this was the big danger.

Now, there have been lots of reports and accusations that the Chancellor was the person who was kind of trying to delay things in March. That is completely wrong. The Chancellor was totally supportive of me and of other people as we tried to make this transition from plan A to plan B. He got his team working on the furlough scheme.

However, it is the case that there were senior officials who worried that—it is not completely unreasonable either to say, "If you completely shut down the economy, you are definitely having huge, terrible effects on all sorts of people's lives. If you have a lockdown, you are definitely consigning some people to all kinds of suffering in various ways, and some of them might die because of the lockdown itself." So, I think there were reasonable arguments: it is not like just having the lockdown was the obvious thing to do. There were reasonable arguments to say, "We've got to kind of weigh up all the other destructive effects of what to do".

Now, me and others came to the conclusion that actually the logic was fundamentally false, because what we ended up arguing was that, in fact, if you try not to lock down and you try and optimise for the short-term economy, you will not actually even get that, because what will happen is that the public will lock themselves down, because they will realise that

there is not going to be any NHS for anybody. That was the reality. I think this point, even now, is constantly lost.

In the scenario that we were heading for, not only would you have had hundreds of thousands of deaths from covid—you would then have had absolutely no NHS at all for anybody. Your seven-year-old daughter falls over and needs A&E? There is no A&E for her. You've got cancer treatment? There is no cancer treatment. Nothing—nothing at all for anybody for three months. That is what we were facing.

Part of our argument was that once people realise that that is the situation we are heading for, they will be so terrified that they will stay at home, anyway. There will be some kind of lockdown whatever happens. Either we get ahead of this and we try and do it as intelligently and sensibly as we possibly can, or if we plough into this process where we basically just say, "Well, there's no alternative. We'll just have to get through it", you are going to have not only hundreds of thousands of people dead from covid and not only hundreds of thousands of people dead because there is no NHS for three months, you are then going to have a gigantic economic disaster on top of it all, anyway. Do you see what I mean?

Chair: Let's take some more questions from Rebecca.

Q1023 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** Sadly, not locking down hard enough or soon enough has arguably produced far more long-term adverse economic effects and has needlessly cost so many lives. That was a point made by the IMF some time ago. Did the Government commission official economic advice to sit alongside the scientific advice it was receiving? And when you moved towards that group-think on plan B, as you suggested earlier, was economic advice produced alongside that to show the outcome of such decisions being taken?

Dominic Cummings: I am absolutely sure that there was all sorts of economic advice going on and being written. I do not personally remember it—it was not my focus. I knew that Rishi and his team—the Chancellor and his team—were extremely competent and therefore I basically left them to deal with the economic stuff like furlough, because I had complete confidence that they would be able to do it. I was focusing my time and efforts on all the other things like shielding and the Department of Health, where it was clear that the system was broken. So I am afraid I am not—what I can definitely say is that there is not some kind of document floating around that says, "Here is the economic cost" and that everyone was looking at that, or that the Prime Minister was looking at that and said, "Well, looking at this document, maybe we shouldn't do this." That was not the case and that did not happen.

It was the case that the Bank of England, the senior officials in the Treasury and senior officials in the Cabinet Office were saying, "We have to think about the consequences. If we do this lockdown, we will have to borrow huge amounts of money. What if the bond markets suddenly spike, go crazy and refuse to lend to us? We will then have to find emergency powers to tell the Bank of England to buy the debt etc, etc." So there were

conversations going on at the time about that possible problem—what if we have a financial crisis, a bond market crisis and sterling crisis on top of the whole health crisis? There were conversations about that and meetings with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Cabinet Secretary and me to discuss it.

To stress, all the stories say that the Chancellor tried to stop this happening or tried to delay it. All of those stories are wrong. The Chancellor completely supported what me and Ben Warner and others—Patrick Vallance as well— were arguing for from the 14th about accelerating through to plan B.

Q1024 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** Point 24 of your recent Twitter thread on the Government's handling of the pandemic states: "The public inquiry will at no point ask: how does the deep institutional wiring of the parties/civil service program destructive behaviour by putting the wrong ppl in wrong jobs with destructive incentives?" In your view, who was destructive? What were their incentives, and were those incentives financial?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I think there is a very profound question about the nature of our political system that means that we got at the last election a choice between Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson. I think any system that ends up giving a choice between two people like that as the people to lead is obviously a system that has gone extremely, extremely badly wrong. There are so many thousands and thousands of wonderful people in this country who could provide better leadership than either of those two, and there is obviously something terribly wrong with the political parties if that is the best that they can do. It is also the case—I do not exclude myself from this—that in any sensible, rational Government, it is completely crazy that I should have been in such a senior position, in my personal opinion. I am not smart. I have not built great things in the world. It is completely crackers that someone like me should have been in there, just the same as it is crackers that Boris Johnson was in there and that the choice at the last election was Jeremy Corbyn.

It's completely crackers that someone like me should have been in there, just the same as it's crackers that Boris Johnson was in there and that the choice at the last election was Jeremy Corbyn.

It is also the case that there are wonderful people inside the civil service—there are brilliant officials all over the place—but the system tends to weed them out from senior management jobs. The problem in this crisis was very much lions led by donkeys, over and over again, with great people on the ground doing things—as I said, this brilliant young woman, Jen Allum, wasn't the top person in GDS. There were great people further down the hierarchy who did brilliant things, but the leadership, people like me and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health—we let down the people on the frontline and we let down those excellent officials as well.

We all should be asking, and you guys in the political parties need to ask yourselves: what is it about your parties that gives choices like Johnson

versus Corbyn? And we have to ask: what is it about Whitehall that promotes so many senior people who are completely out of their depth?

Q1025 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** The question was specifically about the very specific comment that you made. You implied that there were people with destructive incentives involved at a Government level throughout the pandemic. Who were those people, and what were those destructive incentives? It is a very specific statement to make, and the answer that you have given is very general and outside of the sphere of Government, unfortunately.

Dominic Cummings: You are asking about destructive incentives. I think you are implying: do I think that corruption was a big part of the problem? That is not at all what I meant by destructive incentives. What I meant was that politicians are incentivised to play to the media tomorrow in the headlines, and officials are incentivised to keep their heads down and to follow processes, even when things like that are going to kill thousands of people. The incentives are not programmed to say, "How do we get people who understand how to make decisions under uncertainty into key jobs?" They are not, "How do we get people with brilliant operational capability into key jobs?" The incentives are constantly pushing people away from rational behaviour and building what is needed at scale quickly. That is what I meant by destructive incentives.

Q1026 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Rebecca. Just before I turn to Laura Trott, Mr Cummings, you say that you are not smart enough to keep pace with the discussions in SAGE and all the rest of the things, but you do, I am sure, have an appreciation of good order in Government, and you told us earlier that Cobra was not a place in which you could have candid conversations, because it leaked. In other words, there were unauthorised briefings. Did you ever engage in unauthorised briefings?

Dominic Cummings: What do you mean by "unauthorised briefings"?

Chair: Briefings that were not authorised by the Prime Minister and those others in senior positions in Government.

Dominic Cummings: In general, my engagement with the media was very different before the election and after the election. Before the election, I had quite a lot of engagement with the media. After the election was called in October 2019, I actually had extremely little dealings with the media. One of the issues that happened is that in January I essentially stopped talking to almost all journalists almost all the time. In fact, during the course of 2020—one of the things that you read constantly—this basically drove the media mad, because nobody in my position had essentially stopped talking to the media, for decades. I was working, say roughly, 100-hour weeks. Of that time, less than an hour a week, for sure—much less than 1%—was spent talking to the media.

I did occasionally talk to people. The main person really, though, that I spoke to in the whole of 2020 was Laura Kuenssberg at the BBC, because the BBC has a special position in the country, obviously, during a crisis;

and because I was in the room for certain crucial things, I could give guidance to her on certain very big stories.

I will give you an example of the sort of thing I did. On Wednesday 18 March, huge rumours spread that there was going to be a London-only lockdown, and pictures started appearing in some of the media and websites about tanks encircling the M25 and cutting it off and whatnot. Laura Kuenssberg called me and said, "This story is happening. Is it true?" I said, "I can categorically tell you that it's definitely not true; you should definitely not report it. I absolutely 100% guarantee it." That meant that the BBC did not, as some of the media did, run the story. But that was really very occasional. I spoke to her maybe, on average, once every three or four weeks through the course of the year. But I spoke to the media close to zero in the course of 2020.

Your question was about unauthorised. Yes, I did talk to people unauthorised, in the sense that, actually, pretty rarely did I speak to the Prime Minister before I spoke to any journalists. I just got on with things, because my view was that the Prime Minister is already about 1,000 times far too obsessed with the media, in a way that undermined him doing his own job, so the last thing I wanted to do was involve him in further conversations about the media. In fact, I did everything I could to limit the conversations that the Prime Minister had regarding the media.

Chair: I understand that.

Dominic Cummings: So, unauthorised in that sense, yes.

Q1027 **Chair:** In an hour a week, you can convey quite a lot of information, whether it is a Laura Kuenssberg or anyone else. You said that Cobra became dysfunctional because you could not rely on its confidentiality. You have also said that, in the context of SAGE, there was too much secrecy, that things should be much more in the public domain so that people can interrogate it. In that spirit, will you publish the texts and emails that you sent to members of the media during the period from January to the summer?

Dominic Cummings: I think there are two different things. The SAGE stuff should have been published—scientific advice should be published, unless there are very specific national security reasons for it not to be. You can imagine some crises where it would be different from covid—

Chair: But not your briefings.

Dominic Cummings: I will come on to that. The Cobra process, I think, is different. The problem there is that the Government should be much more transparent, but the answer to that is not Ministers, Spads and officials just leaving the room, picking up the phone and randomly calling whoever they feel like, often to get a favour from someone—that is not proper transparency; it is not good Government. What that does is sow absolute chaos through the whole system.

What is the case on Cobra is that the whole workings of the process around Cobra should have been much more open, but done in an orderly way, where it is like, "Right, here we are, on the record, here is logic, here are the workings of how we got to it." If people had been able to see more of the back and forth and the logic, both in SAGE and in Cobra, it would have enormously helped, because outside experts would have been able to see—"Well, that's not right" or, "We can contribute to this"—but that culture just doesn't exist.

Q1028 **Chair:** But doesn't that apply completely to your briefings to the media? To make sure that they are accurate and authoritative, it would be helpful for them to be in the public domain, in the way that you described for the communications from Cobra and the proceedings of SAGE.

Dominic Cummings: Obviously, on the rare occasions when I spoke to the media myself and tried to explain things, I am trying to explain what is happening with official Government policy. They are official briefings—

Chair: For good, high-minded reasons, I am sure.

Dominic Cummings: It is not in any sense normal for everybody just to publish every conversation they have with the media. It is hard to see how that would work.

Q1029 **Chair:** If that was their intended purpose, to give an accurate and fair reflection and to correct misapprehensions—possibly, as you say, you cited a story that would be wrong—what is the problem with publishing that so that people can see?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I would be happy to talk to you about it further. I think there are huge lessons—

Q1030 **Chair:** We're talking now. Can you make a commitment? You have committed to publish other messages—for example, with the Prime Minister, the Health Secretary and others. Given that these were, as you say, briefings designed to be clear and helpful, in that same spirit, will you share them with the Committee?

Dominic Cummings: Almost all of these things are conversations, first of all—

Chair: First of all, but some are texts and messages—

Dominic Cummings: First of all, there is nothing to share. Secondly, having a system in which all written communication between everybody in Government and all journalists is published is a very serious change to how the media operates in this country. There are all sorts of ways in which you could improve the system. There are all sorts of ways in which you could have greater transparency. I am not sure that it is possible in a free society to say that we are going to have everybody in Government—I mean, would you, for example, say that you would publish all of your WhatsApp messages with all journalists over the last 12 months?

Q1031 **Chair:** I haven't made the commitment that you have today to

transparency, to the point that you published a picture of a whiteboard in Downing Street. Presumably, that was in a private circumstance. You did it, I am sure, to be able to put into the public domain helpful information. Will you share with the Committee, clearly on the basis that they would be helpful, the briefings that you gave and such texts as you have retained? Will you share them?

Dominic Cummings: First of all, I think there is almost nothing that I have got like that, which could contribute very much—

Chair: It might be very little, which makes it easier.

Dominic Cummings: Secondly, what I certainly would do is look back at my texts with various journalists and see whether there are things among these that I think have a kind of— What I would say is this: anything that I think has a kind of direct bearing on the decisions that were made and the mistakes that were made, I would be happy to share those—

Q1032 **Chair:** Can we be the judge of that, so that we can understand what you were briefing to—

Dominic Cummings: With great respect, Chairman, I am not going to say to you that I am going to hand over my private phone and let you just scroll through everything and decide what it is you think deserves or does not deserve to be in the public domain.

I will certainly look through what I have sent to various journalists and, as I said, anything that I think is significant to how decisions were made—in particular, mistakes that were made, including by me—then I will share those. But once you get into that sort of thing, you are into difficult territory, because you are also sharing things that journalists themselves are assuming are going to be private, so it requires a lot of careful thought before we go down such a path.

Chair: I understand.

Dominic Cummings: In principle, I am in favour of maximum transparency on this whole process.

Q1033 **Chair:** Everyone understands that and there is no one on the Committee, least of all me, who wants to have access to your mobile phone. Perhaps we can rely on your candour in selecting those messages.

Dominic Cummings: I will certainly have to go through things anyway for the public inquiry, so as I go through the process for the public inquiry—

Q1034 **Chair:** We are keen to learn lessons on the way and it would help if we had it now.

Dominic Cummings: Exactly. The point is that I am going to have to go through that process anyway for the public inquiry, so as I go through that process, if there are things I think are relevant to this Committee, then I will speak to some people involved and see what might be done.

Chair: Laura Trott, and then Katherine Fletcher.

Q1035 **Laura Trott:** Thank you, Chair. Hi Dom. Did anyone mention a pandemic plan or a risk register to you before 2020?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1036 **Laura Trott:** In what circumstance did they do that?

Dominic Cummings: I had conversations with various people in the Cabinet Office between July 2019 and the general election in 2019 about the risk register in general and also some specific national security risk register issues. Also, in my time in government, I had various specific meetings with people about the question of bioterrorism, which obviously overlaps with pandemic planning.

Q1037 **Laura Trott:** Did you have any view on the quality of the pandemic plan that you were shown at that point?

Dominic Cummings: I thought that many of the plans seemed to me to fall very far short of what is actually needed. A lot of things are just kind of PowerPoints and they lack detail, but, most importantly, I think the process around them, as with the pandemic plan, is not open. There is not a culture of talking to outside experts.

I will give you a recent example. I was talking to some people who said to me, "Did you ever go and read the plan on solar flares?" I said "No" and they said, "Well, if you will get some expert advice on that, you will see that the current Government plan on that is just completely hopeless. If that happens, then we are all going to be in a worse situation than covid."

One thing that I did say to the Cabinet Secretary last year in the summer, and which I ardently hope is actually happening, is that there ought to be an absolutely thorough total review of all such risk register programmes. There ought to be an assumption of making this whole process open. It should be open by default and only closed for specific things.

For example, one of the other things very high on the risk register is the anthrax plan—for what happens if terrorists attack with anthrax. Personally, I would be extremely concerned that that plan is as robust as it should be. I cannot go into any details of it, but I think that there is no doubt that everything like that needs the most incredibly careful thought. This country spends tens of billions of pounds on national security issues, but we do not spend anything like the right amount of money or engage the right kind of people involved.

Bear in mind that, on this, as soon as people like Marc Warner, Demis Hassabis and Tim Gowers looked at what was being planned, they could say straightaway, "This is wrong; your logic is wrong here; your logic is wrong there." I am absolutely sure that if you opened up this kind of process—not to people like me, who frankly wouldn't have good questions to ask—there is definitely a way in which that process could be improved.

Q1038 **Laura Trott:** Did you make those comments at the time in 2019? You

said you made those comments to the Cabinet Secretary in the summer of 2020. Did you make those comments in 2019?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. In 2019 we kicked off a whole process around what became known as the integrated review, but there were all sorts of conversations in the second half of 2019, which I was involved in, about rethinking the whole way in which we look at national security questions like this.

Q1039 **Laura Trott:** Was anything done on the pandemic plan specifically as a result of the questions that you raised in 2019, do you know?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know and I can't remember now. I asked No. 10 before I came today if I could go and review my official diary and my official emails for that whole time, so that I could try to help this Committee as much as I possibly could, but they declined to let me do that, so I am afraid I don't have all the records for that.

Q1040 **Laura Trott:** Who to your knowledge is responsible for monitoring future threats?

Dominic Cummings: It very much depends. What kind of threats do you mean?

Laura Trott: If we are thinking about a pandemic, who is responsible within Government for monitoring those future threats, to your understanding? Is it the Civil Contingencies Secretariat?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I think a fundamental problem with this whole business, and a fundamental problem that was exposed in covid, is that there are multiple responsibilities. No one has an answer to your question. That is part of the problem. In one sense, you could say that the Cabinet Secretary is responsible because he is responsible for the whole civil service, but that is only really nominal. He would say, quite reasonably, "I'm not a pandemic expert. I'm not a blah-blah expert. You'll have to speak to so-and-so. The chief scientific adviser signs off this, and so-and-so signs off that."

One of the fundamental problems that you find in this whole thing—it is a general problem in Whitehall but it was very, very clear and disastrous during covid—is that you have this system where, on the one hand, Ministers are nominally responsible in various ways for A, B, C, but Ministers cannot actually hire and fire anybody in the Department. The officials are actually in charge of hiring and firing A, B, C, so as soon as you have some kind of major problem you have— Do you know that Spiderman meme with both the Spidermans pointing at each other? It is like that, but with everybody. So you have Hancock pointing at the permanent secretary, and you have the permanent secretary pointing at Hancock. They are both pointing at the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Office is pointing back at them, and all the different Spidermans are all pointing at each other saying, "You're responsible."

The problem is that everyone is right, and everyone is unhappy. Everyone kind of has a point about it. It is not clear, and this was critical. In a well-

run entity what would have happened here is essentially, in my opinion, you would have had a kind of dictator in charge of this. If I had been Prime Minister, the way I would have handled this is that I would have said, "Marc Warner is in charge of this whole thing. He speaks with my authority. He has as close to kingly authority as the state has legally to do stuff, and pushing the barriers of legality. He is in charge of everyone, and he can fire anybody, he can move anybody, and he can jiggle the whole thing around."

That way you actually have clear responsibility. One of the terrible problems that we had through April, May and June, as we were trying to build plan B, was that we in No. 10 could say, "Right, we've got to build testing. We've got to do this and that, and we've got to do the other." The Cabinet Secretary quite rightly was saying, "Hancock is responsible," but everybody else was saying, "Hancock is completely incapable of doing the job, so he can't be responsible," so no one got to grips with who was actually in charge.

Q1041 **Laura Trott:** I guess my questions are more around the monitoring of the risk. Who is raising that alarm, and who is the person that is responsible for trying to make sure that we have a plan ready for the pandemic? Who were you having the conversations with, in 2019, about the risk register?

Dominic Cummings: It's a diffuse set of people; it's not clear. Again, this is the problem. In one sense, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat inside the Cabinet Office has a sort of co-ordinating role, but I will give you a classic example of that. On Monday 16 March, we asked, "What is the view of the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat on the various pandemic plans that have been given? Because as far as we can tell from our meetings, and as far as I can tell from our meetings, some of them don't exist, and the ones that do exist have got gaping holes." To which we were given the answer, "These plans are not held centrally by the Cabinet Office." So we are all clutching our heads—this is 16 March, and we are suddenly told that. We are all assuming that the Cabinet Office has had scrutiny of these things for six to eight weeks. We only find out on 16 March that not only have they not been scrutinising, testing and red teaming them, they haven't even seen them, and they are only beginning, in the week of the 16th, to actually get hold of these things.

Q1042 **Laura Trott:** And you would assume that is the core competency of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

Dominic Cummings: The Civil Contingencies Secretariat completely collapsed under the pressure of this. They didn't have the people. They didn't have the skills. They didn't have the data. They didn't have the data architecture to collect all the data across Whitehall. All of that basically imploded and had to be reconstructed in the course of April, May and June.

Q1043 **Laura Trott:** When you said on 12 March, and I will paraphrase you, that the Cabinet Office is terrifyingly awful, was that what you were referring

to—the failure, in that respect, of just not having any contingency planning and not holding that purpose centrally?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, that was a big part of it. Again, I stress that there are lots of great officials in there, but this is part of the problem. Systems can make people smarter in various ways, and they can also make people dumber. The problem in the Cabinet Office was that, like all over Whitehall, you had some great, great people, but it was clear that the wiring was wrong. The wiring of responsibilities was wrong. The wiring of incentives was wrong.

Q1044 **Laura Trott:** You have spoken about the fact that you think a central person should have been responsible for the pandemic response once it was actually going. But in terms of the preparedness and monitoring of future threats, is it just that the Civil Contingencies Secretariat should do their job better, or should there be a different organisation that provides that function?

Dominic Cummings: Essentially, the whole wiring of how the Cabinet Office does national security issues in general needs to be radically changed. I started to work with the Cabinet Secretary on this process from summer last year. The overlapping Venn diagram touches on the civil contingencies, but it also touches on lots of other things. It also goes back to the way in which the Cobra system could not work.

The Cobra system, as some people will know, is what is called a STRAP environment. That means that it is an environment where you don't have phones. You cannot just take in laptops. It is kept in a certain way, so that the intelligence services know that Russia, China, North Korea or whoever cannot smuggle things in. That kind of system is completely hopeless for a pandemic. This is why we all moved out of Cobra. We had to end up doing it literally in the Cabinet Room and just gerrymander iPads, TV screens and stuff in there, because you could not get the people with the laptops, the internet connections and the data that we needed to look at into the Cobra room, because the Cobra room is a STRAP 3 and above environment, which does not allow such things in. The whole wiring of how the Cabinet Office is set up to deal with this kind of crisis just fundamentally didn't work.

The last Cobra meeting I can even remember downstairs in the Cobra room was essentially a Potemkin meeting, because it was with the DAs. What happened was that, as soon as we had these meetings, Nicola Sturgeon would just go straight out and announce what she wanted straight afterwards. Again, you have these completely Potemkin meetings, without anyone actually digging into the reality and the detail, because everybody thought that as soon as the meeting has finished, everybody is going to just pop up on TV and start babbling. So that whole structure inside the Cabinet Office needs to be completely changed.

The good news is that the Cabinet Secretary knows that. The Cabinet Secretary himself saw—as did a lot of other people last year—how the whole thing fell apart, and there is a plan to build a whole new system for

dealing with this kind of thing. Or certainly there was a plan, and I was working on it with some great officials before I left, so I hope that that is all still being done.

Laura Trott: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Laura. We will go to Katherine Fletcher, who is very obviously a Lancashire MP.

Q1045 **Katherine Fletcher:** Thank you, Chair. We are scientists, and this is a hearing of the Science and Technology Committee along with colleagues from Health. Science is driven by actualities and not speculation, and I want to return to the data and the raw numbers you had to inform your decision making in the period between, say, January and April/May last year. What is your assessment of the data? We have heard concerns from others.

Dominic Cummings: Concerns—it is like saying, "We've got concerns about the situation" in May 1940. The whole thing was just completely—

Katherine Fletcher: Let's stay on the data.

Dominic Cummings: In all sorts of ways it did not exist. The data system on Monday 16 March was the following. It was me wheeling in that whiteboard you have seen from the photo and Simon Stevens reading out, from scraps of paper, numbers from the ICUs. I would write them down on the left-hand side, and I would get my iPhone out and go x2, x2, x2. Then I would write another column and say, "So, if it's doubling every five days, these are the numbers we're going to be looking at." Everyone would look at the whiteboard and go, "Jesus—can that possibly be correct?" There was no functioning data system, and that was connected with there being no proper testing data. Because we did not have testing, all we could really do was look at people arriving in hospital. So the whole thing, therefore, is weeks and weeks out of date. Once you are looking at ICU numbers as your leading indicator, you know that you are in a world of trouble.

Now, fortunately, one of the things that actually worked incredibly well was that there was a brilliant official at the NHS called Nin, and she worked with a great British tech start-up and they essentially built, in about four or six weeks, a whole new NHS dashboard system. So the situation—

Q1046 **Katherine Fletcher:** When was that between?

Dominic Cummings: They started working on it, I think, in the first week of March. In the week around 16 March or 24 March, it was still me scribbling things on a whiteboard and hitting x2 x2 on my iPhone. But by the time I came back from being ill, which was Tuesday 13 April, they basically then had an absolutely brilliant data system. So then you had all the NHS bed data, ventilator data and ICU data. They were then starting to build models and predictions of where the NHS was going. That made a huge difference. It actually made a huge difference to the whole data

agenda across Government, because senior people actually got to see, on a massive epic crisis, the difference between a completely non-existent data system and a world-class, really brilliant data system. It completely transformed decision making over about a four-month period.

Q1047 **Katherine Fletcher:** Thanks. There are probably two things I want to pursue. Firstly, let's nail this down: there was a recognition that the data was poor, and work was commissioned in February, to start in March, to create an entirely new pandemic data dashboard to support what we were going to need to do to make decisions within the pandemic.

Dominic Cummings: Correct. So, actually what happened—

Q1048 **Katherine Fletcher:** Okay. Given that that came to emerge six to eight weeks after the WHO declared the emergency, that is a reasonably quick response, wouldn't you say?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, although we got lucky in the sense that there was a brilliant company that was actually already working with Simon Stevens and the NHS on AI. They were trying to build a kind of AI lab for the NHS as a long-term project. Because they were working there already with the NHS data people and the NHSX team, what happened is that, in the first week of March, they essentially spoke to this brilliant official Nin and Simon Stevens, and basically said, "Right, drop all of the long-term AI lab stuff. Let's just throw all of our resources into building this dashboard." Roughly speaking, they were working on it from the 3rd or the 5th, or something like that.

Q1049 **Katherine Fletcher:** Brilliant. This brings me to my second line of questioning. I was fortunate enough to start talking to colleagues about covid back at the end of January, and attended the briefing from Professor Chris Whitty in early February time that my colleague Mark Logan mentioned earlier. What was apparent were the set ratios—the maths—with which this disease travelled, so rough transmissibility rates and a range estimate of likely mortality rate across the whole population. As a fellow studier of data, you will know that those things are relatively fixed, and while they become narrower in their range of certainties, you can make predictions from those things, which I know were available in February. To what extent were you taking account of this expertise with your whiteboard in mid-March when these ratios and disease proliferation and death rates were known six weeks before?

Dominic Cummings: So the problem was— I think what you're saying is half right. You're right that a lot of the key numbers we knew roughly, or at least we knew within some kind of confidence intervals, and you could make predictions about those. Where this went wrong, however, was that we now know from various data that covid had spread faster and further in January and February than we had realised at the time. So you're right that we knew a lot of these parameters, and you could draw graphs from them, but part of the whole point was at the meeting on 14th in the Prime Minister's office—the "Independence Day" Jeff Goldblum meeting—

Katherine Fletcher: Let's stick to data, shall we.

Dominic Cummings: He was saying, "These curves are all wrong." Yes, the pattern, as you say, is clear but they are all stretched out towards a peak in June. It is not going to peak—that's not relevant. The graph is actually going up like that.

Katherine Fletcher: So new data emerged—

Dominic Cummings: It was very confused at that—

Q1050 **Katherine Fletcher:** Final question from me: I am really interested in understanding how the actual data tied in with the prediction data within the models. To what extent you, leading the charge here, were able to put your calculations of the actual data into the scientific modellers to allow us to shift from predictions, which inevitably are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, into modelling the real world and making life or death decisions off the back of it. When did that happen?

Dominic Cummings: That didn't really happen properly, I would say, until April. At the time when we were making these huge judgements around 13, 14 and 15 March, there were models but, as the graph that I showed you earlier on showed, when we got the updated graph—

Katherine Fletcher: It's all right; I won't be able to see it. I don't think you shared it in advance.

Dominic Cummings: In a nutshell, all these graphs that I have shown you, and the SAGE graphs at the time, have these terrifying curves like that, but they are peaking in June. What Ben Warner, Patrick Vallance and others said around about the 13th or 14th was, "Actually, we think from patchy data that is coming in, including the IOCU data, that we are further along this curve. We are not back here at week 2 with 10 weeks to go."

Katherine Fletcher: Understood.

Dominic Cummings: So we are up at there on the curve, do you see what I mean? But officially—

Q1051 **Katherine Fletcher:** So for our scientists, new data emerged and we reframed our hypothesis.

Dominic Cummings: Yes, exactly. We realised in the week of the 16th.

Katherine Fletcher: I am dead conscious that there are lots of other colleagues that want to come in.

Chair: Thank you very much, Katherine. Finally, in this section, Aaron Bell.

Q1052 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you for coming, Mr Cummings. I'd like to return to Mr Hunt's earlier line of questioning about the planning. You gave us the quote from Helen MacNamara on 13 March, "There is no plan." However, it is reported in late February 2020 that you said, "I've seen the plan, and I'm afraid it is not a plan at all; it's just a plan to have a plan at some stage." There was a fortnight or so between those, and obviously

hundreds of seeding events coming into the country. That quote, by the way, was from your wife in *The Spectator*. What were you doing in those two weeks, given that you already knew that there was not a meaningful plan in those first two weeks of March?

Dominic Cummings: I was having a meeting after meeting with people, trying to figure out where we were on the planning system. That quote referred to the document I mentioned earlier—the contain, mitigate, delay thing. That was the document, which was officially touted as a plan, but as you can see, is not actually a plan at all. What I was doing from around about the 25th, when people were hitting the panic button with me, was having meeting after meeting with people around Whitehall on issue after issue—shielding, this, that and the other, testing etc.—to try to figure out, "Okay. Who has got a plan around here? Who is actually doing what around here?"

There were all sorts of people doing all sorts of great things, but it was also clear that, overall, there was not a coherent plan. In particular, that reference on the night of the 13th from Helen MacNamara and Mark Sweeney was particularly about the NHS: it was about this mismatch of, where is the NHS plan to deal with the numbers? There isn't one, because the NHS capacity is going to be maxed by a factor of times 10. On the night of the 13th, one of the things that Mark Sweeney was talking about was that there is not even a plan to bury all the bodies.

Q1053 **Aaron Bell:** There was a period where we were saying we were four weeks behind Italy, and then very suddenly it became two weeks behind Italy, when we realised where we were.

Dominic Cummings: Exactly.

Aaron Bell: That was because of the multitude of seeding events that took place, we now know. We got data later about that. Was there any thought given to those seeding events during that early March period? Obviously, quarantine would potentially have delayed it and given us a little bit more time. Was there any thought given to that at all?

Dominic Cummings: Essentially, no. It is connected with what I said earlier. The official view was that it was inevitably going to spread. In retrospect, obviously, we should have had individual isolation in February. We should have had household isolation in February. Obviously, in retrospect, we should have had the Taiwan system: we should have closed the borders; we should have ramped up testing; we should have had masks as compulsory; we should have had compulsory quarantine properly enforced. All those things should have been out in January.

Q1054 **Aaron Bell:** That was flawed scientific advice. Our Committee heard from Patrick Vallance on 25 March last year that, basically, Government were entirely following scientific advice through this period, more or less. We were ranked second for pandemic preparedness on the international comparisons, which are obviously based on utterly flawed criteria—this is all group-think again. In your view, were all Ministers, from the Prime Minister downwards, badly advised in that period before the first

lockdown by the people who should have been looking out for them—the civil servants and scientific advisers?

Dominic Cummings: I think all senior people involved with that process—me, the Cabinet Secretary, the CSA, the CMO—would say we got a lot of things wrong in that period. I have been critical of the Prime Minister, but if you dropped Bill Gates or someone like that—the most competent people in the world you could possibly find—into that job on 1 March, any of them would have had a complete nightmare. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister made some very bad misjudgments and got some very serious things wrong. It is also the case that there is no doubt that he was extremely badly let down by the whole system. It was a system failure, and I include myself in that as well. I also failed.

Q1055 **Aaron Bell:** Understood. I wanted to close the session by asking about why you are here. Your previous attitude towards Select Committees of this House has been, quite literally, contempt. You have decided not to give evidence to Select Committees. Are you here today to help us learn lessons, or are you here to help settle scores for yourself?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I was invited to come and try to explain the truth about what happened. As I said, I think the families of all the thousands of people who died unnecessarily deserve the truth. That is why I am here. I could go into the reasons why I did not attend meetings about the referendum if you'd like, but I am not sure if anyone wants to get into that.

Q1056 **Aaron Bell:** No, I don't want to do that now. I was just trying to get to the bottom of this. You have made some fairly major swipes at some fairly major political figures in the last few hours. That leads me to ask: what was your actual motivation in working for the Prime Minister? Was it to get your ideas into Government? The fact that the covid derailed that, is that a source of regret to you?

Dominic Cummings: I went in because in summer 2019 it seemed to me that the choice the country faced was either to sort out what was essentially a constitutional crisis, respect the referendum and have the country move on with a new agenda, or have Jeremy Corbyn and a second referendum, which I thought would be absolutely catastrophic for the country. That is why I got involved with it in the summer: I thought that I could help solve that problem.

I do think there is one way in which this could have been even worse than it was. If you imagine that hung Parliament of 2019 colliding with this disaster in January 2020, God only knows what would have happened. This is not a comment at all on Brexit—reasonable people can agree or disagree about Brexit, and it is perfectly reasonable to have a view that remain should have won and whatnot. I do not want to get into that whole thing. If that broken Parliament had limped on into 2020 and confronted this crisis, frankly I think the whole system would have melted down and fallen apart.

Q1057 **Aaron Bell:** Did covid prevent what you wanted to achieve from

happening? Is that a fair assessment? You obviously had a lot of designs on reforming Whitehall and No. 10 itself.

Dominic Cummings: It is hard to say. In some ways, the covid stuff accelerated a lot of the things that I wanted to do. One of the big arguments I made was that the civil service has to reform and does not have the right skills in place—that is now obvious. I said that science and technology should be the centre of the agenda for the British state in the future, and I think that things like the vaccine taskforce show, both in a defensive and positive building sense, what a science and technology agenda could do.

It is a very big question, your hypothetical about how the world could have worked out differently. I am not sure to what extent the Committee wants me to get into broader comments about the political scene. I would be happy to come back in the future to talk to you about broader questions.

Aaron Bell: Thank you, Mr Cummings.

Q1058 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Aaron. It has been a long first section, but we have covered a lot of ground. I think we have learned a lot, and I am sure that in the further sections we can be a bit brisker.

One of the things we have learned—as you just said, Mr Cummings—is that everyone, wherever they were in the world, was looking through a glass darkly at that phase of the pandemic. Whether we call it "flattening the curve" or "herd immunity"—as you said, that is a semantic question—we were embarked on a policy that does not require fancy modelling. Just looking at the figures, if you have an adult population of 60 million people and two thirds of it get covid, and 1% of the people who get it die, then 400,000 are going to die. That logic was there from the beginning—it did not require the Imperial model to be published—yet for six weeks from the beginning of the pandemic until these events of 13 and 14 March, SAGE was recommending the strategy of, let's call it "flattening the curve". That was not changed until a kind of epiphany on that weekend.

Now, either that was because there was a group-think in SAGE and among the advisers that you were a part of, which is ironic because you have been a great critic of group-think, or you knew what was going on but felt too junior—notwithstanding the fact that, if not the chief adviser, you were a very senior person—to call it out. Which of those two is it, or is it a combination of both?

Dominic Cummings: It is a mix, as I have said. There is no doubt that in SAGE, the Department of Health, and the Cabinet Office, there was a general group-think problem, which was that there was no alternative to either a single peak and herd immunity by September, or to trying to act now, which probably will not work, but even if it does, will lead to a second peak in the winter, which will be even more catastrophic. You are completely correct: the basic numbers of it were obvious, and it was obviously going to be terrible. But the argument was, terrible as that looks, it is better than the alternative, because if you have the second wave in the middle of an NHS crisis in the winter, then it could be twice as

bad as that, or three times as bad as that. The fundamental group-think problem was being trapped in the idea that there was only a choice between herd immunity by September or herd immunity by January, whereas in fact the right way of looking at it was, we can avoid both.

That is what that stupid graph I drew on the 13th, on the whiteboard in the Prime Minister's office, was trying to do. You push up the line on NHS capacity by build, build, build and all sorts and you manage a kind of wiggly line along below. But until we started to discuss that, around about the 12th or 13th, nobody in Government thought that anything like that was possible. Bear in mind, even on the 18th and 19th, after the SAGE meeting on the 18th—bear in mind that in the SAGE meeting on the 18th, it was not unanimous in SAGE then that we should lock down.

When Demis Hassabis came in at my request—I asked Patrick Vallance to bring him in—Hassabis laid out his numbers. He is one of the top data science AI people on the planet, if not the top one. People in SAGE argued with him and said, "You are being too simplistic about all of this." Then Tim Gowers, the Fields medalist at Cambridge, said, "No, that's not correct. Demis is right about this." To be fair to the PM, the scientists were still arguing about that at SAGE on the 18th. After that meeting, very senior officials at the Department of Health said, "We don't understand what people are now talking about with this possible plan B because, after we come out of lockdown in a month's time, this will come straight back up again and we are back to square one. Why the hell would we do that?"

Q1059 **Chair:** But you were a person of significant influence. You, late on, began to realise the consequences of this—

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Chair: What you describe, you were like a whistleblower, in effect, but did you forget to blow the whistle?

Dominic Cummings: I wouldn't describe myself as a whistleblower. That is not the right term. It is true that I hit the panic button and said, "We've got to ditch the official plan." It is true that I helped to try to create what an official plan was. It is also true that, in retrospect, my own personal view—the people who think we should have stuck with the original plan will say that it was a disaster that I interfered with it—is that it was a disaster that I acted too late.

The fundamental reason was that I was really frightened of acting. If you have an official plan, all the SAGE advice and the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Secretary and everyone saying, "We've got to do this and if we don't do it and we try to do something different, to stop it now, it is going to be many times worse in the winter", I was asking myself in that two-week period, "If I hit the panic button and persuade the Prime Minister to shift, then it all goes completely wrong, I am going to have killed God knows how many hundreds of thousands of people." That is why, essentially. I do not know if I did the right thing or not in the end.

It was a combination of Warner, Gowers and Hassabis—each of whom is 1,000 times smarter than me—looking at the official documents and just saying, "Everyone has completely lost the wood for the trees in this whole thing. It is not complicated, Dominic. Forget all these complicated models. Do everything you can to bounce or pull the system to act as soon as possible. It is actually just that simple. That is what you should do." I only had the confidence to do that once I knew that people who were much smarter than me had looked at it and said, basically, "The SAGE group-think is wrong, the DH group-think is wrong. We have got to change course."

As I say, I apologise for not acting earlier. If I had acted earlier, then lots of people might still be alive.

Q1060 **Chair:** I don't want to diminish at all the contribution of those people you listed, who are brilliant people and performed important public service, but isn't it the case that the person who did summon up the courage to press the emergency stop button was actually a long-serving civil servant, Helen MacNamara? She did what you had tried for.

Dominic Cummings: Well, I would not put it quite like that. I mean, it is true that as soon as Helen MacNamara was alerted, that she thought that the thing had gone completely wrong on the 13th, she literally walked straight through the security doors from the Cabinet Office to find me and the Prime Minister. She walked into the PM's office. I definitely think she deserves enormous credit for that—she came straight to us, she didn't try and hide it, and she said, "I think something has gone catastrophically wrong. I have come here to tell you and the Prime Minister that." That was, roughly speaking, at 7 pm or 8 pm on Friday the 13th. She deserves huge credit for that.

That was another thing that gave me the confidence the next morning to say to the Prime Minister, "Something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. I don't know what, or how exactly this has happened, but it is clear that something has gone wrong in the wiring of the system."

Chair: Thank you very much. It has been a fascinating session. We will adjourn now for 15 minutes. We will resume with Jeremy Hunt in the Chair for the next session.

Sitting suspended.

Jeremy Hunt *took the Chair*

Q1061 **Chair:** We are going to resume the session now, and we are going to take two sessions together of our four sessions: the session where we look at the lockdown measures that we adopted and how we tried to contain the pandemic after 16 March, and then we are going to look at the vaccine programme. I want to start, if I may, Mr Cummings, by looking at the Test and Trace programme. The WHO, as we all know, was talking about, "Test, test, test." South Korea and Taiwan, as you talked about earlier, were using test and trace to avoid national lockdowns, but on 12 March we stopped community testing in this country. That was

following very clear SAGE advice that when there was sustained community transmission contact tracing will no longer be useful. You talked before at length about how there were problems—mistakes—in the scientific consensus up until the weekend of 14-15 March, but SAGE did not even model Korean-style test and tracing until May, so why was there such a long delay even after that March inflection point?

Dominic Cummings: Fundamentally, it goes back to what we talked about at length in the previous session. The logic was, if you are going for the optimal single peak strategy and herd immunity by September, in the same way that you don't take vaccines as an urgent priority you don't take testing as an urgent priority. That is why the Department of Health said in that week, "We don't need to test everyone anymore," because the view was simply: "Well, 60% or 70% of the country or something are going to get it. That is going to happen for sure. Why would you even bother testing all those different people, because we are not going to have a test, track, isolate quarantine system, because we are going for herd immunity by September?"

No one challenged really that idea strongly until we challenged it as part of the whole shift to plan B. There were conversations about it. I asked Patrick and Chris about it, but even in late March PHE said officially on the record—possibly even to this Committee; I cannot remember now—"There's obviously just no way that this country is going to do test, track and trace like they are doing it in east Asia." That was just the completely common assumption.

I and others, including Patrick Vallance, started to push back against that and say, "Hang on a second. If we're going to ditch plan A and then try to accelerate as fast as possible towards lockdown in the coming days, the whole point of that is that you're then buying time. Then of course you have got to deal with the fundamental argument that you have got a second wave coming in the autumn, so of course you are then going to have to build a test, track and trace system from essentially ground zero, pretty much." But those conversations did not really properly happen until after that weekend, and after I started talking to people about plan B.

Q1062 **Chair:** I am curious about why it took so long, because SAGE, as far as I can tell, did not actually model test and trace as a containment strategy for two months after that, and we did not actually set up Test and Trace until the end of May. That is a very long time. So you have realised that plan A is wrong. You changed direction. Why did it take another two months before we got into gear with South Korean-style test and trace?

Dominic Cummings: Essentially because—remember that, in lots of ways, the whole core of Government fundamentally fell apart on Friday the 20th—the day that the Prime Minister—so, we have the lockdown on 23 March. Slightly backtracking, over the weekend of Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th, one of that things that I did was I called a brilliant official who had been working on the Brexit no-deal preparations, a guy called Tom Shinner. I said to him, "Total meltdown—we need all great people. Will you quit your job on Monday and come in?" He did.

He then went to a whole bunch of people who he had worked with on the Brexit preparations, a guy called Alex Cooper, who was a brilliant guy. Alex Cooper was then essentially drafted in to build a team to start building factories on the ground, to start trying to take this—you had PHE, this entity that was doing very few tests and had no plan for how to expand it and didn't think it was possible, for all the reasons we have discussed. Alex Cooper was then basically given the job to build the team and then start going around and building factories so that we can scale this whole thing up.

However, then, basically, the core of the Government kind of collapsed when the Prime Minister got ill himself, because he has suddenly gone and then people are literally thinking that he might die. By the time I came back on I think it was 13 April, we had this terrible situation where Alex Cooper and his team were trying to build the foundations for a whole new test and trace system for mass testing to PCR—the whole thing—and, of course, bear in mind, at the time, we also had the classic problem that all the supply chains were collapsing because we could not buy all the stuff that we needed abroad, because everybody was kind of impounding things on the airfields or whatnot. So we had to do all of this domestically and build the domestic manufacturing up.

In my opinion, disastrously, the Secretary of State had made, while the Prime Minister was on his near-death bed, this pledge to do 100,000 by the end of April. This was an incredibly stupid thing to do, because we had already had that goal internally. We had already had conversations 10 days earlier to say, instead of cancelling testing, we should be ramping up testing and it should not just be 100,000, we should be heading for a million tests a day and more, but that means building the kind of architecture and foundations to do all this properly.

What then happened when I came back around the 13th was I started getting calls and No. 10 were getting calls saying, "Hancock is interfering with the building of the test and trace system because he is telling everybody what to do to maximise his chances of hitting his stupid target by the end of the month." So we had half the Government with me in No. 10 calling round frantically saying, "Do not do what Hancock says: build the thing properly for the medium term." We had Hancock, calling them all saying, "Down tools on this—do this, hold tests back, so that I can hit my target."

Now, in my opinion, he should have been fired for that thing alone. That itself meant that the whole of April was hugely disrupted by different parts of Whitehall fundamentally trying to operate in different ways, completely because Hancock wanted to be able to go on TV and say, "Look at me and my 100k target!" It was criminal, disgraceful behaviour that caused serious harm.

One of the consequences of it was—we will get on to that with the vaccine programme—that was one of the reasons why the Cabinet Secretary and I agreed that we had to essentially take testing away from Hancock and put it in a separate agency, so we could say, "Here is a separate person

responsible directly to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary," that Hancock could not interfere with, theoretically.

So there was all this bureaucratic in-fighting in April. Remember, the Prime Minister was not back then either. Dominic Raab was doing a brilliant job chairing the meetings, but this was a huge call and very difficult for him to start carving up the Department of Health in April.

Dominic Raab was doing a brilliant job chairing the meetings, but this was a huge call and very difficult for him to start carving up the Department of Health and Social Care in April. Essentially, we never got to grips with it until the Prime Minister was back in the office, and the Cabinet Secretary and I could say to him, "We've got to do the track and trace thing in a completely different way."

Q1063 **Chair:** Would it be right to say that you had what you described as the meltdown weekend, when we went into the first lockdown and moved to plan B, but that was not actually the point when, as a country and as a Government, we said we were going to go South Korean?

Dominic Cummings: Correct.

Q1064 **Chair:** We were basically saying that it was time to save the NHS and take these emergency measures. What was the point at which we said, "We are going to do it the South Korean way."?

Dominic Cummings: Well, it was an emerging thing. After meltdown weekend, the week of the 16th, you had part of the system still operating. All the graphs of the time, which I can share with you, show that the official Cabinet Office DH system was still showing all the graphs as if we were still going along towards herd immunity in September.

The same week, I and others were trying to bounce the system into locking down, to racing through everything as soon as possible, and hacking together what plan B would look like. But it was extremely disjointed and confused. There are texts from me to people saying, "We have got to have a plan for 100,000; we have got to have a plan for 1 million tests. Instead of closing it down, we should be ramping up."

We didn't even have a plan for lockdown. We were trying to get to lockdown, and also to get other people working on what the South Korean thing would look like. Then the Prime Minister goes down and nearly dies. It was really only when I came back in the second half of April that I talked to Tom Shinner and the Cabinet Secretary. Both of them were tearing their hair out about the situation of the 100K target, completely correctly, saying to me, "We've got to do something about this, and we've got to get a grip of Hancock."

It was really only when the PM came back that we sat down and said, "Look. We've got to set up a separate agency. We've got to rejig the whole Whitehall paraphernalia around this. We've got to build the testing system but also the whole data system and, potentially, another whole set of tools as well."

What I wanted to do was essentially the same as had happened in South Korea and Taiwan and such places, where you start using bank data; you start using mobile phone data to triangulate where people are—you use the data coming off cell phone towers and things like that. It wasn't just the testing system that we had to get built up; it was the whole data architecture.

And, of course, we had huge legal problems, because we had a whole bunch of people in the legal system coming back and saying that, first, EU data law on GDPR basically means all this stuff is illegal, medium term. Secondly, there was a whole bunch of things around the European convention on human rights, such as right to privacy etc. We had to build this testing and this data and then think about all the complexities on the legal side.

At the end of February, I had got the Cabinet Office to call the ICO and basically put out a notice that just said, "If you are working on covid, assume that what you are doing is legal, in terms of GDPR." That was a completely extraordinary thing; no one even knew if that itself was legal—it almost definitely wasn't. We were otherwise faced with the fact that, if someone, somewhere, in the system didn't say, "Ignore GDPR," thousands of people were going to die because no one could even connect up all these databases anywhere.

All those problems were happening in parallel, and they only got properly discussed in detail in May: what were the technical, operational, legal, everything else things that you need?

Q1065 **Chair:** At the end of May, NHS Test and Trace was finally set up and Baroness Harding was appointed. Can I put it to you that, by that stage, our infections had got up to 2,000 a day? That was just too high to have an effective test and trace system. Nowhere in the world has got test and trace going South Korean style at that level of daily infection. A lot of the problems that we had, and a lot of the reason why Test and Trace didn't succeed in preventing later lockdowns, was because we left it too late and the daily infections were too high. That was just literally too many people to track down and ask to isolate.

Dominic Cummings: I think you're about 98% correct. How effective we could have made it, whether you are exactly right in terms of the 2,000 threshold, and whether or not we could have coped with that, is a complicated question. But conceptually, what you are saying is fundamentally correct. It took too long to get set up. The system was hugely distracted in April by the Hancock pledge. But fundamentally, this should have been happening from January. That is the central thing. The problem is that between January and roughly mid-March, everyone was thinking, "Well, given that we are doing one single peak, with herd immunity by September, there is no point building up this whole thing," apart from the second bit of the group-think, which was, "The country won't stand for it."

My argument, and that of Patrick Vallance and other people, said, "Actually, in the same way that everyone was wrong about the country accepting lockdown, we think that everyone in Whitehall who is arguing against the track and trace thing is wrong; people will accept this kind of infringement on civil liberties, because what is the alternative?" Fundamentally, the only alternatives are that you do a herd immunity strategy at some point in 2020, with hundreds of thousands of people dead, or you lock everybody down and bankrupt the country until you have managed to get vaccines going, or you try to get some sort of test and trace system going and enforce it, and then potentially have local lockdowns as well. For all those people saying we cannot do it, it has been left too late and everything else, my argument was, "Well, what the hell else are we going to do? Are we going to go back to plan A?"

Q1066 **Chair:** You did have one of the most powerful positions in the Government: you were the Prime Minister's principal advisor. Understandably, you were ill for part of that period, but do you blame yourself for the fact that it took another two months after that incredibly challenging March weekend to actually get SAGE to model Test and Trace and to get the thing set up?

Dominic Cummings: I blame myself for many, many, many, many things in this whole crisis, but one thing I can say completely honestly is that, on this, I said repeatedly from February/March, "If we don't fire the Secretary of State, and if we don't get the testing into someone else's hands, we are going to kill people and it is going to be a catastrophe." I was not the only one telling the Prime Minister that. I made lots and lots of mistakes, but I honestly don't think I could have been any more explicit with anybody at this time about this, and I actually went with the Cabinet Secretary to the Prime Minister directly.

Remember that, in April, we had this terrible pledge, which was hugely distorting the whole system. We also had constant, repeated lying about PPE. The Cabinet Secretary said to the Prime Minister in almost the first meeting when he came back, "Prime Minister, the British system is not set up to deal with a Secretary of State who repeatedly lies in meetings. We can't operate like that."

Chair: You have made that point, Mr Cummings. We have the Secretary of State—

Dominic Cummings: My point is that we could not get to grips with Test and Trace until we got it out of DH's hands and into a separate agency.

Q1067 **Chair:** Those are very serious allegations said under parliamentary privilege, and we have Mr Hancock coming here in two weeks' time to respond to those. But as Greg Clark said, we would be very grateful for any evidence that you have to back up those assertions before Mr Hancock comes to this Committee.

I have one last question on Test and Trace, and then I will go to my colleague Dawn Butler. One of the issues with Test and Trace, with a longer-term horizon, is the fact that such a low proportion of people who

were asked to isolate by the NHS Test and Trace system actually isolated. What is your analysis of the main reason why it is that, according to Dido Harding when she was in front of the Health and Social Care Committee, between 20% and 40% of people were not actually isolating at one point, despite the fact that they had been near someone with covid? What do you think is the flaw in the system that meant that happened?

Dominic Cummings: I think a huge problem was that—it's a slightly complicated thing to explain. I think that one of the problems that we had from the beginning, which was critical at that time and actually still is critical, is that senior people did not understand well enough the problem of asymptomatic transmission and it being airborne—this combination. That is why the masks were all wrong as well.

One of the fundamental reasons why people were not isolating is that we, the Government, failed terribly to explain to people that, point one, a lot of people are being infected asymptomatically and, point two, it is airborne. Even now—even today—the Government communications are still over-stressing "Wash your hands" and under-stressing airborne. That was a big problem. Lots of people were not isolating because they didn't understand this basic point. It wasn't their fault; it was our failure to explain to people.

Q1068 **Chair:** Was it not just much more practical, in that we never made a straightforward promise that we would make up any salary you lost from not being able to go to work because you had been asked to isolate?

Dominic Cummings: That was going to be my second point. Correct. It was both sides: we didn't explain the danger properly, and then we didn't provide the incentive properly. This was discussed at the time. I had meetings where I got people to literally print out the documents from South Korea and places that said, "Here is the South Korean system."

That system is a combination of stick and carrot. It is much stricter in terms of legal things—you'll be put in jail if you break the quarantine—but we will also provide food to your door, we will pay you so that you are not financially disadvantaged, etc. Like a lot of things, if we had just cut and pasted what they were doing in Singapore, Taiwan or wherever, and just said, "That's our policy," everything would have been better. There is just no doubt about that at all.

Chair: Thank you. Dawn Butler.

Q1069 **Dawn Butler:** Thank you, Mr Cummings, for coming to the Committee today. From a lot of what you are saying, and from the evidence that we have taken in the Science and Technology Committee, it is now making sense about why it wasn't done. After the election, it seemed like your job and the amount of work you had to do went through the roof. Did you have time to prepare for that or did you just jump straight in?

Dominic Cummings: In terms of January?

Dawn Butler: After the election.

Dominic Cummings: I basically didn't have a day off. Christmas day 2019 was a partial day off. I basically didn't have a day off between 24 July 2019 and the day I left Downing Street in November 2020.

Q1070 **Dawn Butler:** You were talking about data, GDPR and Track and Trace. In terms of Faculty, the AI company that you know very well, and Palantir, the data harvesting company, was it your brainchild to get them working in the NHS?

Dominic Cummings: No. As I referred to earlier on, the NHS hired Faculty, although I am not sure when. I am 90% to 95% sure that it was in 2019, before the election, that Simon Stevens hired Faculty, but that was not really to do with core NHS data stuff; it was very specifically to do with building an AI lab for the future. It was about how we can use data science and AI techniques over the next 10 years on things like genomic data and all kinds of NHS data.

What then happened was a complete fluke—just good luck. They were already working in the NHS with NHSX, a particular division of the NHS. When we really started to hit the crisis on covid, Simon Stevens spoke to Marc Warner and said, "Look, ditch the long-term AI stuff. Can you help us with the immediate data problems?" So Marc then brought his team in. That was partly down to a very fortuitous chain of circumstances, and why he then started telling me on 5 March, "I am in these meetings about the plan. This plan seems insane. Is this really right?" So we kind of got lucky.

Palantir were brought in after that, essentially because Marc Warner and Faculty, as I referred to earlier, talked to this outstanding official Nin, who was working in the NHS. They were essentially looking through all the things they needed to do. I can't remember now, but they basically agreed that Microsoft will do this part of it, Palantir will do this part of it, some cloud service will do this part of it, and Faculty will do the kind of very sophisticated AI stuff. So Marc and Nin basically worked with a team of people to combine the best of the official system with getting help from companies, because some of these companies essentially had stuff that you could just use off the shelf. That was the thing, because by 5 March we didn't have time to go around and start building a whole bunch of things from scratch. So what Marc and Nin did was that they basically went around different tech companies and said, "Right, can we pinch that from you, that from you, that from you, and that from you?", and then kind of hacked it together in the NHS.

Q1071 **Dawn Butler:** Do you have any concerns around Faculty AI and Palantir at all?

Dominic Cummings: I don't really know very much about Palantir. I know that Marc Warner is one of the smartest and most ethical people I have ever met in my life. I think that, without him, thousands of people would be dead, and I know that his involvement in it has come at a lot of personal cost for himself and for his company. He and his company have actually suffered in various ways from having got involved with the Government and having helped.

Q1072 **Dawn Butler:** In what way have they suffered?

Dominic Cummings: Well, just sort of huge conspiracy theories everywhere, and all kinds of claims. Faculty were getting blamed, for the app, which they had absolutely nothing to do with whatsoever. It all became part of this conspiracy of Cummings, Facebook, the referendum, data: "Cummings is building the app—

Q1073 **Dawn Butler:** You mean they were getting blamed for the app that got scrapped.

Dominic Cummings: Exactly—all sorts of things like that, which were reputationally damaging and which they had literally zero to do with.

Q1074 **Dawn Butler:** Was that because within the data protection within the app that got scrapped, there was something that said that people's data would be kept for 20 years? Was it because of that that they were being blamed? Obviously, their job is genome sequencing, so having data for 20 years would really help.

Dominic Cummings: First of all, Faculty don't do genome sequencing. Secondly, they had literally zero involvement, as far as I'm aware, in anything to do with the app. Why exactly the first app failed—I was not greatly involved with this; my understanding is that it failed because, fundamentally, Apple and Google insisted on certain kinds of controls about how the data would be used.

Q1075 **Dawn Butler:** Yes, but we knew at the beginning, before it even started, that the Bluetooth wasn't going to work, right?

Dominic Cummings: With respect, I think it was actually really complicated. There were all kinds of complicated discussions about technically what was possible, and I think—

Dawn Butler: But there was only one other country that was trying to use the same sort of technology, using Bluetooth, and they had to scrap it. But I don't want to get into that.

Dominic Cummings: Sure.

Q1076 **Dawn Butler:** Can I read you what Amnesty has said? Amnesty has said that Palantir is a "data-mining company" and said: "Over the course of the coronavirus pandemic, the UK Government has quietly granted access to millions of UK health data records to Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Palantir to build a Covid-19 'datastore'." So Amnesty has expressed some concerns about who has the data and what they are going to do with it, and it stresses that the public need transparency. Do you agree with Amnesty?

Dominic Cummings: Well, I completely agree that the public need transparency, but, from what you have read out, I think that there is a fundamental misunderstanding in what Amnesty is saying. I would be gobsmacked if non-anonymised patient data is being shared with companies like that. I would bet a lot of money that that is not the case. I think that the data is anonymised, certainly all the—

Q1077 **Dawn Butler:** Well, online, when you sign up—I went to order lateral flow tests to my home, and it actually says: "Your information "may…be used for different purposes that are not directly related to your health and care" and it may not be anonymised. It actually says that when you sign up. In the end, I didn't sign up and I just went and picked them up from the local pharmacy.

Dominic Cummings: Sorry, are you talking about the NHS Test and Trace system?

Dawn Butler: This is the NHS when you are ordering. You say it is very unlikely that any of these companies would be given data that is not anonymised, and I am saying to you that, actually, it is not that unlikely, because it actually says in black and white that your data may be given to companies and it may not be anonymised.

Dominic Cummings: Well, I'm not an expert on all of this and exactly which companies—I know that it's incredibly complicated. What I am sure of is that Faculty does not have personalised data at all. They don't operate like that. Any data which they use is all anonymised. Personal data is no use to Faculty.

Q1078 **Dawn Butler:** Palantir is more interested in personal data, right? Faculty is more artificial intelligence.

Dominic Cummings: It all depends. I do not know to what extent Palantir—my only real engagement on the Palantir question was on the NHS bed, ICU capacity, ventilator and so on data, all of which, obviously, is not patient data at all, so there is no question about personal records. That was my only engagement with the stuff. My engagement with the whole project was the data dashboard that Palantir was working with the NHS on for decision making. All of that was nothing to do with personal medical records of any description. Whether or not Palantir was also working on a separate thing involving personal records, I've no idea, I'm afraid—I don't know.

Chair: We probably need to move on from this, but did you have any more questions, Dawn?

Q1079 **Dawn Butler:** Yes, just a quick couple of questions. Can you tell us a little about the Joint Biosecurity Centre, because we do not know that much about it, like who attends? Have you ever attended a meeting? Who is on it?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. It was created partly as an attempt to, as Jeremy said—"How do we make this transition from plan A to plan Bill?" A big part of it is Test and Trace and the whole data side. Obviously, the senior management of PHE—the whole thing had not worked, is putting it politely. Everybody, in April, came to me, including the CSA and the CMO, and said, "You cannot trust PHE with what needs to be built." So the new JBC was essentially part of the Whitehall rejigging of the machinery: "Right, we've got to strip Test and Trace out of DH. We've got to create a new surveillance function that can integrate all of this different data."

At this point, I was getting the analytical private office of No. 10 built up, and they were looking at all these different things across the world. There were things like sewage data. You could have all these different kinds of stuff coming in, but you needed to have an entity that could look at all of this different stuff and then—

Q1080 **Dawn Butler:** I understand. Who else was on it?

Dominic Cummings: On it in what sense?

Dawn Butler: Who else attended the meetings?

Dominic Cummings: With me and the JBC? Just senior officials. If you mean were there private companies involved, no.

Q1081 **Dawn Butler:** I have a final question. I am confused about Amazon. What role has Amazon played in all of this?

Dominic Cummings: All I can remember about Amazon is that Amazon came to us in March and offered help in various way, and said, "Look, we've obviously got a huge distribution network in various ways. If there are ways in which we can use that to help you, then we will." I've got a vague idea that we did ask them for some help on something, but I'm afraid I cannot remember any details.

Dawn Butler: Thank you so much. Thank you, Chair.

Q1082 **Graham Stringer:** Thanks very much for coming this afternoon, Dominic. It has been a fascinating, if incendiary, session. You have described the Secretary of State as a serial liar, stupid, criminal, disgraceful. Can you give us any insight into why he is still the Secretary of State and why the Prime Minister did not take your advice?

Dominic Cummings: He came close to removing him in April, but, fundamentally, just wouldn't do it. It wasn't just me saying this; lots of people said it to him. The Cabinet Secretary said it him. Pretty much every senior person around No. 10 said to him, "We can't go into the autumn with the same system in place; otherwise we are going to have another catastrophe on our hands."

Q1083 **Graham Stringer:** Can you give us any reasons that the Prime Minister gave for keeping him in position?

Dominic Cummings: That would be speculation on my part. There's certainly no good reason for keeping him.

Q1084 **Graham Stringer:** This joint inquiry by the two Committees and the eventual major inquiry into this next year are looking at history. You were living this on a day-by-day basis. You were with a Secretary of State with an enormous amount of influence who you told us is messing things up, having made mistakes which you have been very open about in the first part. When it came to the second lockdown—the Chair will come to that later—similar mistakes seem to have been made. I know from working with you in a different context that you are a man of principle. Could you not have changed things by threatening to resign, or

actually resigning, in order to stop some of this bad practice?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, I could have done, and I thought about it. I thought about it in March. If the Prime Minister had not—if we had not successfully bounced things in the week of 16 March, I had talked to various people during that week about saying to him that I will resign and hold a press conference and say, "The Government is going to kill hundreds of thousands of people." But we managed to bounce things through and therefore I didn't do it. I had similar conversations with people in September, which I think we are going to come on to later.

I had a conversation with the Prime Minister, as has been reported. The that the Prime Minister became the Prime Minister, I was supposed to have an operation. I delayed it in order to go into No. 10. Then it got delayed because of Brexit, and it got delayed because of covid. At the end of July, I went to see him the night before my operation. I said, "I'm going for this operation tomorrow and I am reflecting on things. You need to know that I am going to leave at the latest by Friday 18 December. It is best if you and I part ways." He said, "Why?", and I said, "Because this whole system is chaos. This building is chaos. You know perfectly well from having worked with me that I can get great teams together and manage them, but you are more frightened of me having the power to stop the chaos than you are of the chaos, and this is a completely unsustainable position for us both to be in. I am not prepared to work with people like Hancock any more. I have told you umpteen times that you have got to remove him. You won't. It's going to be a disaster in the autumn, and therefore it's time that I should go." The Prime Minister, which I think says a lot, laughed and said, "You're right: I am more frightened of you having the power to stop the chaos than I am of the chaos. Chaos isn't that bad. Chaos means that everyone has to look to me to see who is in charge." That was just a fundamental problem. It was a fundamental problem in our relationship and it was a fundamental problem in how No. 10 was governed, and it was one of the reasons why I said in July that I was going to leave.

In all sorts of ways, I probably should have left then, in the summer. The only reason why I didn't was because people said to me, "We're going to have another disaster in the autumn and you should stay, because maybe you can persuade the Prime Minister of what to do. Maybe he will listen to you." But from a personal point of view, it would have been far better for me to go then. Arguably, it would have been better for the country as well.

Q1085 **Graham Stringer:** Thanks, that is very good. Can I just move on to Test and Trace? You have explained that Alex Cooper was brought in to set up the Test and Trace system and that you had to get it out of the clutches of the Department of Health to set up a South Korean system. The South Korean system—I cannot remember the figure off the top of my head—was pretty decentralised. I think there were probably about 155 laboratories set up—a lot more than were set up in this country. Were you involved with Alex Cooper in deciding that it would be much more centralised than the South Korean system, or was that his decision? Why

was the decision taken to centralise it?

Dominic Cummings: I think there are two separate things in there. There is centralisation in the sense of labs, but there is then centralisation in the sense of the actual contact tracing. I don't know how the trade-offs operate in terms of centralising a lot of the lab capability. It could well be that that actually was the sensible thing to do in various ways, at least in the short term, because if you have got to ramp up this huge capability, arguably what you do is you build a few really big labs that can take the bulk of stuff.

What also should have happened, and one huge problem that we had all the way through was that we could not open up Whitehall to say, "Here are contracts for all kinds of relatively smaller companies that can contribute." Back in the days of February, March, when PHE was massively short of tests, we had companies banging on the door saying, "We can help. We can help. We can help," and because of the whole procurement fiasco, we could not quickly integrate them and bring them in. When you have a national crisis like that, what should have happened is the Government says, "Right, we're going to build a bunch of things, but we're also going to open up the system so that whoever can contribute and build—you know, smaller companies—can."

Secondly though—your point about decentralisation on the tracing—my understanding is that you are correct that in places like South Korea and Taiwan one of the things that they do is they have very strong local forces that are actually on the ground. One of the problems with how things worked here in the summer was that a system was built that, in terms of the contract tracing, was too centralised, and too much of it was trying to be done from very big hubs.

I stress I am not an expert on this, and I did not go into a lot of the details, but I did hear that criticism from a lot of people at the time. I stress, though, that Alex Cooper himself and the people who got involved did an outstanding job within the remit that they had—but remember that they were not senior officials in charge of this; they were people taking orders.

Q1086 **Graham Stringer:** When the National Audit Office did a report on Test and Trace, and however many billions had been spent on it, they said that it was of only marginal benefit. One of the reasons was that the communication between the central laboratories and the local public health teams was either too slow or non-existent. People in the second level of testing were not passing the information on to local people. I understand what you were saying about smaller laboratories and the contracts, but there were people like Paul Nurse, a man of huge distinction, and university laboratories and public health laboratories all offering to do it within their remits. Can you tell us why those were turned down, and why the system between the central laboratories and the local public health teams did not work, so that there was only a marginal benefit from all that expenditure?

Dominic Cummings: As I say, I think it was just part of the general procurement horror in DH that people like Paul Nurse—we had companies beating our doors down in No. 10 saying, "We can't get people on the phone. We've got these tests. We could have them verified at Porton Down," etc, etc. That was certainly a huge problem.

Also bear in mind that another whole part of this, which I think has not really been appreciated so far, is that it turned out that, actually, there was a brilliant young woman, whose name now escapes me, who basically proved in March that this technology called LAMP could work for fast tests. There was also other work done in March showing that lateral flow tests would work. Various people put together a plan for how to scale up all of this stuff in March.

In retrospect, the whole of autumn could have been completely different if this had been absorbed properly by the system on testing. Definitely, without any shadow of a doubt, we should have been able to have tests on the order of 1 million, or 2 million or 5 million a day available by the first week of September—absolutely zero doubt about it. The problem on that was for reasons which I never really quite understood.

The first I was made aware of this was just a couple of days before my operation, so it must have been, roughly speaking, I think, 20 July. A special adviser inside No. 10 who I had brought in, who was a scientist himself, called James Phillips, came to me and said, "I've been talking to a whole bunch of scientists who have been working on this testing stuff. They're basically being blocked by every part of the system on doing mass testing. They haven't been able to get the money. They haven't been able to get the manufacturing and distribution of everything set up, but this could be a huge game changer while we wait for the vaccines."

Now, we in No. 10 then got to grips with it. I organised a meeting with Patrick Vallance and people like John Bell at Oxford, and they both said straightaway, "Yes, we should be doing this. Yes, it could be a game changer. Yes, we have dropped another massive ball by not working on this for the last three months." Essentially, in one sense, all of this should have happened from January. But once we made the decision in late March to go with plan B and say, "Plan B involves testing. Plan B involves all of these different things. Plan B involves a vaccine taskforce," at that point we should have been putting money into this whole lateral flow and LAMP stuff—in March, April. If we had done that, September would have been completely different, because we would have been able to have literally millions of tests and fast results—immediate 10-minute or 20-minute results. Because we only realised that DH and other parts of the system had completely dropped the ball again in July—late July, essentially, and I only had the first meeting on it, roughly speaking, around 20, 25 July—all of that time, again, was wasted. So then we were massively playing catch-up—August, September, October—to try and build all these things that should have already been in place before September.

Graham Stringer: Thank you. If I may, one last question.

Chair: Yes, last one.

Q1087 **Graham Stringer:** One of the reasons why the English death figures were very high at the start of the epidemic was the fact that untested people were sent back into care homes. They themselves got poorly and infected other people in those care homes, and very large numbers of people died. Do you have any insight into how that decision was taken? Was No. 10 involved in that decision, or was it entirely a Health Department decision?

Dominic Cummings: That was one of the other things that we found shocking. When we realised in April that this had happened, the Prime Minister said a less polite version of, "What on earth are you telling me?"—when he came back after being ill—"What on earth has happened with all these people in care homes? Hancock told us in the Cabinet room that people were going to be tested before they went back to care homes. What the hell happened?"

Q1088 **Graham Stringer:** So he actually said, in Cabinet, that—

Dominic Cummings: Not in Cabinet—in the Cabinet room.

Q1089 **Graham Stringer:** Oh, sorry. Not in Cabinet, but directly to the Prime Minister.

Dominic Cummings: Yes. We were told categorically in March that people would be tested before they went back to care homes. We only subsequently found out that that had not happened. Now, all the Government rhetoric was, "We have put a shield around care homes" and blah, blah, blah. It was complete nonsense. Quite the opposite of putting a shield around them, we sent people with covid back to the care homes.

Graham Stringer: Thank you. That is extraordinary.

Chair: We now have Anum Qaisar-Javed. She did her maiden speech last week, and it is her very first Select Committee. Welcome to you. Your questions.

Q1090 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** Thank you, Chair. I hope they are all as exciting and engaging as that one. Thank you, Mr Cummings, for joining us today. You have referred to failures, and you have made apologies. However, is it fair, and a fair assessment, to say that there has been a wealth of expert knowledge available—whether that is from SAGE, the CMO or even university papers that have researched covid—and that SAGE discussed travel restrictions in early February and noted that "direct flights from China are not the only route for infected individuals to enter the UK"? With hindsight, we have seen that to be true, and we now know that most cases were in fact from Europe. So we have got this expert advice. However, as you will be aware, quarantine measures for overseas travellers were not introduced until June time, and there were still exempted countries and exempted people. Who was advising the Prime Minister and Government not to close the borders, and on what basis?

Q1091 ***Dominic Cummings:*** Essentially, there were two phases to this: before

April, and then from April. Before April, the advice was completely—I heard this discussed several times with the Prime Minister in No. 10. He was told, and we were all told repeatedly, that the advice is not to close the borders, because essentially it would have no effect. At this time, another group-think thing was that it was basically racist to call for closing the borders and blaming China, the whole Chinese new year thing and everything else. In retrospect, I think that was just obviously completely wrong. However, in the same way as for lots of things, you cannot blame the Prime Minister directly. That was the official advice. The official advice was, categorically, that closing the borders will have no effect. I inquired into it. I said explicitly, "If we are not going to do it like Singapore and Taiwan, we are going to have to have a bloody good explanation to the public, because they are going to be asking, 'Why on earth are we under these restrictions but the borders are open?'"

After April, though, it is a completely different story. Once we had switched to plan B: "Right, we are going to build, we are going to do Test and Trace, we are going to do vaccines, we are going to try to stop a second wave and so on." Fundamentally, there was no proper border policy, because the Prime Minister never wanted a proper border policy. Repeatedly in meeting after meeting, I and others said, "All we have to do is download the Singapore or Taiwan documents in English and impose them here. We are imposing all of these restrictions on people domestically, but people can see that everyone is just coming in from infected areas. It is madness. It is undermining the whole message that we should take it seriously."

At that point, he was back to, "Lockdown was all a terrible mistake. I should have been the mayor in 'Jaws'. We should never have done lockdown 1. The travel industry will all be destroyed if we bring in a serious border policy." To which, of course, some of us said, "There's not going to be a tourism industry in the autumn if we have a second wave. The whole logic is completely wrong. If we don't bring in a proper border policy now, and a bunch of other things, we are going to have a second wave in the autumn and everything is going to be shut—forget just tourism." But he had *The Daily Telegraph*, with their stupid campaign on the whole subject. He had Tory MPs going crackers about it at the same time. Essentially, at that point, he was in, "We should never have done lockdown. I should have been the mayor in 'Jaws'. Now I am going to be. Open everything up and get on with it." Me and others just could not win that argument. We never won the argument. As of today—look at the whole thing about variants—we still do not have a proper border policy in my opinion.

Q1092 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** Is it a fair assessment to say that the economy, and finance, was prioritised over people's lives when you think about a border policy to encourage people to travel into this country in order to spend money and to rejuvenate the economy? Was that prioritised over people's health?

Dominic Cummings: Again, I would say you have to distinguish. It would not be fair to blame the Prime Minister for what happened before March,

because all the scientific advice from SAGE and the DH was to do that. He definitely was not prioritising tourism over the economy in January/February. I heard him say specifically to the science advisors and the Department of Health, "Hang on, aren't a lot of people going to think we are mad for not closing the borders?" The Prime Minister did push on that in January/February, and it would be wrong and unfair to say that he prioritised the economy at that point. However, after April, it is a different story. At that point, yes, he was prioritising the economy.

Q1093 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** I find this really interesting. Prior to my election, I was a secondary school teacher. I taught modern studies and politics, and I specifically remember a lesson in early January 2020, when the first outbreak happened. I remember that we were discussing it in class, and I was explaining to the pupils that there is an area called Wuhan in China and that this is happening here. We were linking it to what I teach. In order to develop their critical thinking skills, we spoke about what steps they would be taking if they were the Prime Minister or a Government adviser. My 13-year-old bairns understood the concept of closing the borders or stopping people entering or leaving the country. If 13-year-old kids from Edinburgh could understand that, is it fair to say that they were thinking more critically than the Government?

Dominic Cummings: Correct. I think there is no—my perspective on it is that huge parts of the public health. If you just look at the—this is part of a general issue. Huge parts of the public health administrations in Britain and America were captured by memes, which were obviously ludicrous. They said, "Don't wear masks. Masks could be dangerous," which turned out to be complete nonsense. They said, "Don't close the borders"—it is, as you say, common sense—which was obvious nonsense.

In my opinion, it is unarguable. Obviously, we should have shut the borders in January. We should have done exactly what Taiwan did on whatever it was, new year's eve or whatever. We should have said, "Dunk…that's it." Yes, that has some disruption, but the kind of cost-benefit ratio is massively, massively out of whack, and at least it is worth a try, like lots of things. At least you try it. What is the worst that will happen? If it doesn't work, you still have the whole nightmare to deal with, anyway.

As it was, we were dealing with the whole nightmare, so there was just no fundamentally good logic to not shutting the borders in January, in my opinion. And there was never any logic to it after April. To begin with, the Prime Minister was confused. Everyone was. Everything, as I described, was a nightmare. But from the summer, fundamentally the view was that we are past it now, covid is history, etc, etc, which was obviously a terrible, terrible mistake.

Q1094 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** Leading on from that, during this point the devolved regions were calling for tighter restrictions in terms of border controls. You and the Government had responsibility for achieving a four nations agreement on this.

Dominic Cummings: Essentially, the Prime Minister had responsibility for it, and there were numerous meetings in the Cabinet Room where it kind of percolated up through the system. The Department for Transport was not keen on doing it, either, because they were all worried about the effects on tourism. Fundamentally, that decision was made repeatedly in the Cabinet Room at No. 10.

Q1095 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** Are you of the opinion that the views of the leaders of the devolved nations were listened to during this, specifically when thinking about the border policy?

Dominic Cummings: I cannot really say if they were listened to or not, to be honest. I cannot really remember what they were saying, and I cannot really remember much of the discussion around that question, I'm afraid.

Q1096 **Anum Qaisar-Javed:** As I said, I am a teacher. We have school inspections. With Ofsted you have four grades: grade 1 is outstanding; grade 2 is good; grade 3 is requires improvement; and grade 4 is inadequate. How would you rate the Government response?

Dominic Cummings: I would say some individual brilliant performances. Overall system: total failure.

Anum Qaisar-Javed: So you would give it a grade 4: inadequate.

Q1097 **Barbara Keeley:** Mr Cummings, what you have told us so far about social care is astonishing. I would like to ask some more questions about it because, clearly, what we are talking about is hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people in care homes. There were 1.5 million care staff—we are talking about February/March into April—without PPE and testing. You said on social media that "one of the worst failings" was "the almost total absence of a serious plan for shielding/social care" last March, and "there was widespread delusion we HAD a great plan. It turned out to barely exist." Why didn't No. 10 move quickly to protect care homes, which everyone knew would be vulnerable in an infectious outbreak?

Dominic Cummings: So, it was discussed and we were told that people would be sent back to care homes after they had been tested for covid, and we were told that there was a plan for shielding. It turned out that neither of those things were correct. We did not really understand the catastrophe around people being sent back to care homes, who were already covid-infected, until April. We realised the lack of a shielding plan in, roughly speaking, the week of the 9th.

I organised a meeting on it in Downing Street on Thursday the 19th. We looked at it then and essentially realised that, yet again, as soon as you poked holes in things, there was nothing there. What happened then was that some officials said, "There's basically nothing we can do. We haven't built the tools in advance. We can't get all these databases to communicate and whatnot." That was when we were in this ludicrous situation that we were going to send out the shielding letters without putting in the helpline number, because the helpline number was not set up and had not got a call centre to answer, and everything else.

I and others said, "What the hell are all these people going to do? We're telling them they have got to stay at home and that someone is going to help them. They have got to stay at home, otherwise they are going to die, but we are not giving them even a number to call to say that they need food, medicines and other help. What is going to happen to all these people?" Essentially, there was a lot of shrugging.

Thank goodness, a group of officials, led by this great woman called Jen Allum, who worked at the Government Digital Service, working with a guy called Oliver Lewis, basically got a team together between the Cabinet Office, the Digital Service and CLG. There was a brilliant Spad in CLG called Olivia who got some people from CLG together.

They jiggled together a team and said, "Right." Then they got a company involved and said, "Can you basically make all these databases talk to each other, so that we can put the helpline out, then people call up, we take their details and can get food delivered to them?" It was similar to the data between Faculty and the NHS. Similarly, a company that I think was called Newton—but I might have got that wrong—worked with the team with Jen Allum and figured out a way to bodge together the databases so that they could start to do it. It was all done in literal all-nighters over the night of Thursday the 19th and over the next few days, to try to get that ready.

Q1098 **Barbara Keeley:** That is shielding, but the comment you made, which I read out to you, was about social care, as well. It doesn't appear that there was any plan for social care. There might have been no plan for shielding; there was no plan for social care.

Dominic Cummings: Fundamentally, yes.

Q1099 **Barbara Keeley:** It was reported in the media in March that you outlined the Government's strategy in February. It was said to be, "Herd immunity, protect the economy and if that means some pensioners die, too bad." Was that the view held in Government about the deaths of older people from covid?

Dominic Cummings: No. I never said that. That story in *The Sunday Times* had an invented meeting on 12 March, which never occurred, as you can see from the SAGE documents. It had an invented story about me in general and why I changed my mind, and where I had changed my mind and everything else. It had this fake quote in it. It actually caused huge trouble. I had people at my house threatening to kill me, as a consequence of it. The journalist involved said afterwards that it was the worst professional mistake of his career, but the damage was done, and it created this terrible impression that we didn't care about people. It was not true.

Q1100 **Barbara Keeley:** We didn't care enough to have a plan for all those people needing care. We didn't care enough to have a plan for people in care homes or receiving care at home, who necessarily had to have people coming into their homes, or necessarily had to live in homes that are not generally suited for infection control. This was an infectious

outbreak and people come in out of care homes where they work and there are visitors.

Dominic Cummings: It is not just my view. I spoke to people who work in the Cabinet Office today, who said, "When I look back, one of the biggest things that was just terrible was the lack of a plan for that."

Q1101 **Barbara Keeley:** Let us just examine what happened then. You talked about what happened on discharge. On 17 March last year, NHS England wrote to hospital trusts telling them they could maximise their capacity by discharging every patient they could safely discharge. Now, at that point there was hardly any testing of those people. I think you have said there was an intention to test, or it was said there was an intention to test, but it wasn't possible to test.

On that major policy change of discharge, was that change discussed at meetings between NHS England, Ministers and advisers? What were the views around at the time of the risks? Surely somebody weighed the risks.

Dominic Cummings: Yes, it was discussed. It was discussed in the Cabinet Room in front of me and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, Matt Hancock, and other senior officials.

Q1102 **Barbara Keeley:** What were the views of the risks that were being taken by doing that?

Dominic Cummings: As I said before, we were told that the people were going to be tested. We obviously discussed the risk. We were thinking, "Hang on—this sounds really dangerous. Are we sure?" There was a kind of, well, there is no alternative. Because the whole original plan had gone so badly wrong, the view was, we have got to try and free up beds in the NHS to deal with the wave that was coming. So the view was there is no alternative, but secondly, we were assured that the people who were being sent out would be tested. Yet, as I said, it was only in April after the Prime Minister and I had both ourselves been ill, that we realised that what we were told would happen never did happen, or only happened very partially and sporadically.

I mean, I am sure some people were tested, but obviously many, many people who should have been tested were not tested, and then went back to care homes and then infected people, and then it spread like wildfire inside the care homes. Also, the care homes did not have the PPE that they needed to deal with it and they didn't have the testing for the staff, so you had this kind of cascading series of crises, like domino effect, rippling out through the system.

Q1103 **Barbara Keeley:** I think that probably wasn't seen until September—that it would be staff too.

In those discussions between NHS England and Ministers or advisers—you said it was discussed in the Cabinet Room—what estimates were made of the impact of discharging positive cases? There must have been some estimates given, because, clearly, in a hospital setting—I think it

was understood that NHS staff were infecting each other in hospital—so there was going to be a level of infection. What estimates were given on the risks of that discharge?

Dominic Cummings: I never saw any estimates about it. In the conversations I saw, essentially the issue was just never properly analysed or discussed in front of the Prime Minister, me or the Cabinet Secretary.

Q1104 **Barbara Keeley:** So that major change on discharge from hospital was made without evidence of the potential risks and the potential numbers that may already be infected?

Dominic Cummings: Well, it was made without a serious plan or capability to cope with the consequences, for sure.

Q1105 **Barbara Keeley:** Why do you think nobody commissioned evidence on that topic? You have said various things about the Secretary of State and the state of the Department. Is that the cause?

Dominic Cummings: That is my assumption.

Q1106 **Barbara Keeley:** Would you have expected them to have commissioned evidence on that before they took that decision—before they put that decision out there?

Dominic Cummings: Yeah. Everything is connected. It goes back to the whole disaster over testing. We did not have enough testing. We did not have enough PPE. Because we did not have enough testing and enough PPE, it was not provided to care homes.

My impression, looking back, was that in the same way no one thought about how to produce the details of what to do on shielding, and therefore, I had this terrible meeting on the 19th on shielding, just the whole thing around care homes was the same. Just fundamentally, it had never been properly dug into. What happened was, in the crisis environment of complete chaos in that week around the 16th, as we were heading towards lockdown, people just said, "Well, we have got no alternative to doing this." Why on earth Hancock told us that everyone was going to be tested, I have absolutely no idea, but we all now know that it definitely did not happen.

Q1107 **Barbara Keeley:** Who was there when he told you that?

Dominic Cummings: I cannot remember everyone, but it was a formal—like all of those meetings. We stopped doing the meetings in Cobra and from the week of the 9th, the daily covid meetings were all in the Cabinet Room. Don't get confused—Cabinet was essentially not really relevant to any of these things in the March period. When I say the Cabinet Room, I am not referring to Cabinet meetings at all. Often, the only people there were the Prime Minister, Hancock and occasional other Ministers that were relevant to that specific thing. This meeting was the PM, Hancock, Cabinet Secretary, me, a bunch of No. 10 staff, some DH staff, other people on Zoom, possibly Simon Stevens there, possibly not—I don't remember now.

Q1108 **Barbara Keeley:** Looking back at the whole thing, after covid was

seeded into care homes, do you think the Government, including SAGE, was taking that risk of transmission into care home settings as seriously as it should have? I want to look at that in the context of what you have said since. Was it the start of the thinking by the Prime Minister that has been reported as covid is "only killing 80-year-olds"? Was there a sense that it didn't matter because they were people at the end of their lives?

Dominic Cummings: So, there are two different questions there. You first question is essentially: was this taken seriously, properly and everything else, by No. 10, etc? The answer is, obviously, no. It was not thought through properly. There wasn't any kind of proper plan. It is clear in retrospect that a completely catastrophic situation happened, with people being sent back untested and then seeding it in care homes. There is no other way to describe it than that.

Like all these things, it wasn't deliberate. It was a function of the overall fact that the system was just completely overwhelmed. The Prime Minister's views on covid and who it had killed were relevant but that was relevant in September/October; it wasn't relevant at this point, no.

Barbara Keeley: Okay. Thank you.

Q1109 **Dr Evans:** One thing we do have control over in an emergency is the way in which we communicate. Arguably, that is your strongest suit, given your track record with Brexit. What score would you give the Government, out of 10, for its communication both to the NHS and to the public—10 being gold standard and zero being that the lesson learned is that we should never do this again?

Dominic Cummings: Some of the people working on the communications were some of the best people in the world. One of the great myths about the whole thing is, "Oh, the reason for all these problems was bad communications." Fundamentally, the reason for all these problems was bad policy, bad decisions, bad planning and bad operational capability. It doesn't matter that you have great people doing communications if the Prime Minister changes his mind 10 times a day, and then calls up the media and contradicts his own policy, day after day after day. You are going to have a communications disaster zone. Few things are discussed more inaccurately than communications.

Inevitably, there were certainly mistakes made on communications, for sure. There are all the big things that people think, "Why did that go wrong?" For example, on the whole thing with Rashford, the Director of Communications said twice to the Prime Minister, "Do not pick a fight with Rashford. Obviously, we should do this instead." The Prime Minister decided to pick a fight and then surrendered twice. After that, everyone says, "Your communications are stupid." No, what is stupid is picking a fight with Rashford over school meals. What should have happened is getting the school meals policy right. It is easy to blame communications for bad policy and bad decision making.

Q1110 **Dr Evans:** Let me pick you up on that. No plan stands the test of time when it hits the enemy. This was a novel virus. But the benefit you have

in communications is that we went into a second lockdown. What were the lessons learnt from communicating in the first lockdown that came out to play in the second lockdown? Looking at that, there was a third one, which you weren't involved in, but I would be interested in your lessons learnt, because that is the essence of this inquiry.

Dominic Cummings: I think the same thing happened in the autumn as happened in January: it was bad policy and bad decisions. The problems in the autumn were not fundamentally communications problems; they were that the Prime Minister made some terrible decisions and got things wrong, and then constantly U-turned on everything. That is not a communications failure. Everyone in the outside world sees it as a communications failure, but the reality is that it is much more fundamental. The autumn disasters were fundamentally not communications problems. The communications problems were a consequence of bad decisions and bad management.

Q1111 **Dr Evans:** Were you in charge of the communications at this point? Are you saying, "This isn't my problem, guv; it was what I was given"?

Dominic Cummings: No. As I said earlier, the only time between the election and me leaving No. 10 that I was really engaged with communications at all was the period from late February until me and the Prime Minister became ill—sorry, tested positive—on the Friday, so that three to four-week period. Both before and after that, I was very little involved with communications, because I fundamentally disagreed with the Prime Minister on what is good communications, how to do communications, how it should be structured, and how to approach the media. On pretty much every single major thing, he and I completely disagreed, so I tried to use my time where I thought it could be better spent. For example, in the autumn I spent literally near zero time on communications, and huge amounts on mass testing, the defence review, the economy, the procurement review, etc.

Q1112 **Dr Evans:** How involved were you in the drawing up of the lockdown measures, and what was your understanding of them?

Dominic Cummings: Which one are you talking about? In March or—

Dr Evans: The first one.

Dominic Cummings: I was heavily involved—are you talking about communicating the lockdown measures between trying to formulate plan B on 13th and then actually doing lockdown 10 days later? Do you mean then?

Q1113 **Dr Evans:** Well, I mean the understanding for the public, when the measures came out, over what was involved, what you can do, why we keep 2 metres apart, who can go to what, when we can go to school. What understanding did you have of where we can travel?

Dominic Cummings: I was heavily involved in that, but again the problem was that I had all the communications people screaming, "We haven't got anything to explain to the public properly, or what we have got

is all contradictory, because we haven't got an actual plan." The problem wasn't in the communications team; the problem was what they were being given.

Q1114 **Dr Evans:** Okay. Moving on to a second point to pick up all the evidence that you gave at the start. At 11.09, you said to the Member for Salford and Eccles, "It's completely crazy that I should be in such a senior position." You then said that you realised this was a massive problem, and yet you didn't take action. Why didn't you resign straightaway? You had the power to hire, why did you not hire your replacement? Did you say to the PM that you did not feel you were competent?

Dominic Cummings: I did hire various people into No. 10 to try to raise the quality of the team there, including myself. For example, I brought in people like Tom Shinner, and we built the analytical private office in there. There were lots of different people I brought in, to try to provide expertise and skills that I didn't have and that did not exist in No. 10. That did actually help. In January, I did that blog saying, "No. 10 doesn't have these skills and we need to hire people", and by September we had built that team and it made a huge difference. I think we will come on to the September decisions. Terrible decisions were made, but they were made for completely different reasons from those made in March. By then, there was a different set of skills and people.

In terms of whether I should have resigned, as I have said, arguably I should have resigned in March, and arguably I should have resigned in May. And I should definitely have resigned in September.

Q1115 **Dr Evans:** I just wonder where you draw the line on your personal responsibility for the decisions that were made? You said that you didn't speak up because you were worried that you might be getting it wrong and people may die. There was a certain infamous trip and that had huge influence on how people perceived the lockdown. Again, you said it was the problem of the policy, not the way it was messaged across. Where do you draw the line for you having personal responsibility for the decisions, both in Government and about the way you conducted yourself?

Dominic Cummings: So I think I should probably explain some things about this that were not put into the public domain at the time in the rose garden, because that whole episode was definitely a major disaster for the Government and for the covid policy. I will explain something about it and why we got things so wrong.

In autumn 2019, I had to move out of my house for about six weeks because of security threats. On 28 February, when I was dealing with the covid problem, on the Friday night I was down at Westminster, and my wife called to say that there was a gang of people outside saying that they were going to break into the house and kill everybody inside. She was alone in the house at the time, with our then three-year-old.

After that, I spoke to the PM and the deputy Cabinet Secretary, Helen MacNamara, about the situation. It was suggested that possibly I either move my family into Government accommodation or move them off to

family. On 22 March, the story happened that the lady mentioned earlier about that fake quote from me, basically implying that I was happy for everyone to die, which led to further problems.

After that weekend, I said to my wife, "Right, we've been discussing it for a month. We've got to get out of here on Friday." Before the whole thing happened, with the Prime Minister being sick, my wife calling up on the Friday and everything else, it had already been decided that I was going to move my family out of London, regardless of the covid rules. That was discussed with people in the Cabinet Office and the private office.

What happened was, because of that, we kept the whole thing very quiet. Almost nobody in No. 10 knew about it, for obvious reasons, because I didn't want the same problems to pop up at my parents' house in Durham. When the story came out, the Prime Minister and I agreed. When the first story came out about me, much of the story was completely wrong. It suggested that the police had spoken to me about my behaviour because of the lockdown rules and whatnot, which was completely false. The police had only spoken to me about security issues, but the media presented it as if I had been talked to by the police for breaking lockdown rules. The whole story was crazy.

The Prime Minister and I agreed that, because of the security things, we would basically just stonewall the story and not say anything about it. I was extremely mindful of the problem that, when you talk about these things, you cause more trouble for yourself. I had already put my wife and child in the firing line on it. I said, "I am not talking about this. We should shut our mouths about it. Loads of the media stories are wrong. We'll ignore it."

The Prime Minister agreed. Then, on the Monday, he was under so much political pressure and media pressure that he said, "This line won't hold. We're going to have to do something about it." At that point, I made a terrible, terrible, terrible mistake, which I am extremely sorry about. What I should have done, in retrospect, is call my wife and say, "You and our boy are going to have to get out of London again. I am going to have to explain the truth about this whole thing. Get out of London. We'll hold a press conference."

Instead of that, we had a chaotic situation at No. 10, where the Prime Minister said, "We're going to have to do something. You're going to have to explain something." I said, "I am not explaining these security things. Otherwise, I am going to have mobs back outside my house." So I ended up giving the whole rose garden thing, where what I said was true, but we left out a crucial part of it all. The whole thing was a complete disaster. It undermined public confidence in the whole thing.

The truth is that when the Prime Minister said on the Monday that we can't hold this line and we are going to have to explain things, if I had just sent my family back out of London, and said, "Here's the truth," to the public, I think people would have understood the situation. It was a terrible misjudgment not to do that. The Prime Minister got that wrong. I got that

wrong. We both made a terrible Horlicks of it in a very odd circumstance on the Monday.

That hopefully explains that situation and makes it clear that I know my misjudgment on it caused huge trouble. I deeply apologise for it.

Q1116 **Dr Evans:** Thank you, Mr Cummings. I am sorry that you felt threats to your family, and indeed to yourself and your safety. No one should feel that. However, this is about lessons learnt. One lesson is about coming forward and giving the truth. Secondly, with regards to that, where do you see your personal responsibility on this, the media's responsibility on it and Government's responsibility for looking after the people who are being representative and making these tough decisions in a world emergency?

Dominic Cummings: Do you mean specifically on this particular episode, or do you mean in general?

Dr Evans: This particular episode, because we don't want something like this to happen again, which undermines public confidence. If there is ever another pandemic, we need to learn the lessons, so that these situations are avoided.

Dominic Cummings: I think a fundamental lesson of it is the same as the fundamental lesson on SAGE and so many things, which is that openness is better. Essentially, we took the decision because of the security problem, and I didn't want to go through the whole thing of moving my family again and everything else. And I felt guilty about the whole thing as well, with my wife. Fundamentally, that was a terrible, terrible mistake. It would have been much better just to have come clean on the whole thing and tell the truth about it at the time. Then, I think, it would not have been the fiasco that it became.

I guess the fundamental lesson is that the default on everything should be openness. If we had defaulted to that on this, it would have been harder for me in some ways but it would have been better for the country, and that is what we should have done.

Dr Evans: Thank you, Chair.

Q1117 **Chair:** Obviously, it is totally and utterly unacceptable that you and your family faced threats. But there is one thing that I don't quite understand in your narrative. If you were moving your family out of London for security reasons, why did you move them back?

Dominic Cummings: Because essentially during that time and the next two weeks, I had been lying there thinking that I might die. I was extremely ill. On the 12th, the day before we came back to London, I could still hardly walk 50 metres. If it had been up to me, frankly, I would have left my wife and child behind, but she was extremely worried about me. She was worried about what would happen if I just collapsed at home, because I was by myself, and who knew what state I was in. The medical advice was basically that I should not be rushing back to work and that I should stay and rest. But the Prime Minister had literally nearly just died. I

was getting all these messages from everybody saying that the Government is in freefall, and if you can get back, you should go back. So I went back. She was worried about me, and therefore she made the decision, "I'm going to come back with you." We all had to make very difficult decisions at this time. If I could have done, I would have left them in Durham, frankly.

Q1118 **Dean Russell:** If you don't mind, I would like to explore the Durham trip a little bit more. I also echo the comments about the awfulness of having a security risk to your family, which is just never acceptable. A lot of the issues were about trust in the messaging from the Government, trust in you and in officials, and in particular around behaviour change. Most of the messaging during that time consisted of three-word statements—"stay at home", "protect the NHS" and, more recently, "hands, face, space". I think the nation just wanted to hear one three-word statement from you: "I am sorry." I just want to understand, Mr Cummings, why you didn't just apologise when you were in the rose garden.

Dominic Cummings: Well, as I think I have tried to explain, there were multiple things going on in my head about it all. I couldn't really tell the whole story about it, or I felt I couldn't. I should have done at the time, but I just didn't. For the reasons I have described, I think that my behaviour in leaving London at the time was perfectly reasonable, and other people in the Cabinet Office, and the Prime Minister and everyone, agreed with me that it was reasonable for me to move my family to Durham. I was caught in this thing of, "Are you going to apologise and say that it was terrible mistake?" The truth at the time was no, I wasn't sorry about moving them out of London, and I didn't think it was a terrible mistake. I thought that it was completely the right thing to do, but the problem was that we were trapped in a situation where I was only telling part of the story, so the whole thing was just a complete disaster.

Obviously, I am extremely sorry about the way the whole thing worked out, because the reality is that I had all the security problems again afterwards. Twice further, I had to move my family out of the house again, because of the problems at the house, despite the covid rules.

I stress, for all the journalists watching, that the further stories about me going back are false. It is true that I moved my wife and child back out of London, despite the covid rules, but that was in discussion with the police. I did not leave London, and all of these stories about me being elsewhere or me going off or whatever—those stories are all categorically false. But it is true that I moved my family out again.

The truth is that I had all these problems again anyway. I didn't dodge them. That is why it would have been better just to explain it all at the time. I am extremely sorry that I didn't.

Q1119 **Dean Russell:** Why has it taken until today, though? I can really sympathise with the issues for your family and so on—I appreciate that—but why has it taken until this Committee to hear you actually apologise, in hindsight, given the fact that I think an apology at that time would

have lifted a lot of the pressure?

The nation's back was up over it, because they felt, rightly or wrongly, that you had sort of done it and said, "Look, that was the right thing to do—move on," while everyone else in the country was following the guidance and not getting to go to funerals, not seeing their families, not hugging their family and friends, and were worried about their lives. The presumption, especially in the press, was that you had sort of done it and didn't really have an apology to give.

Dominic Cummings: Well, I did understand at the time and I do understand at the time that people were talking about being very upset, and their relatives. When I was in bed with covid, my own uncle died in hospital of covid, because of this whole problem about hospitals and infection in hospitals and whatnot, so I very much did understand people's anger about it.

All I can say is, after the complete debacle around the whole thing, it just did not seem like coming out and then trying to explain it all, while I was still in government, was a sensible thing to do. Then, after I had left, the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to the whole thing—to my house and everything else—again.

As it is, again I have had to move my family out of our house now for this whole public thing. The whole street has got cameras and everything else around it, but I figured that today is the day for just getting the whole terrible story on everything out, so everyone knows the reality.

Hopefully, this is a case study of how not to handle something like this. As I said, it is clear in retrospect that once it was clear that the Prime Minister wasn't prepared to hold the line, I should just have said, "Right, family out— I will explain the whole facts and that's it." I think most of the country would have understood it, but we kind of just did the worst of all possible worlds.

Q1120 **Dean Russell:** With regard to that, did everyone in Government and in No. 10 appreciate the real, sheer emotion of the country at the time? We had 1,000 emails in my constituency mailbox from people who were really angry about this. Was there a realisation of that disconnect?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. As soon as the whole thing had happened, we knew—I knew that the whole thing was a complete disaster.

Q1121 **Dean Russell:** Do you feel that you were unfairly targeted by the media? It felt to me that during that time there were quite a few cases of high-profile individuals breaking the rules in various forms—whether it was at the blurry edge or completely. Why do you think you were targeted so much by the media over a sustained period of time?

Dominic Cummings: I have never complained about the media. I have never threatened to sue the media. I think if you are someone like me who is in the public eye and you say, as often as I have over the last 20 years, as many critical things as I have about the media and how they

cover important stories, then they are going to throw things back at you when they have got a chance to.

Also, fundamentally, a lot of the media realised that there was a kind of tension in No. 10 between me and some of my team that wanted to try and change the culture of No. 10 away from what it has been for 30 years, which is essentially a press-answering service, where everything is dedicated to the media, day in, day out. I regarded this as a disaster and I wanted to try and move the whole culture of governing away from that.

There was huge tension, because the Prime Minister's view is literally—you couldn't get a more diametrically opposed perspective on it. For him, he just gets up, reads the papers, says, "Right, what are they doing today?" and then cannons around. The media realised that there was this tension going on and that I was essentially trying to massively diminish their influence, and therefore they wanted rid of me—from their point of view, rationally.

Q1122 **Dean Russell:** Thank you for that.

In relation to the rose garden Downing Street press conference, you have made some very, very big allegations today, and we are yet to see the evidence in the emails and so on. You have raised on several occasions that around that time, and prior to that time, actually—March, February—you had very serious concerns.

You had the UK's media in front of you—in fact, some of the world's media. Why didn't you raise some of those concerns then, given the fact that you knew in your mind, from what you have said today, that many lives were at risk?

Dominic Cummings: Do you mean why didn't I speak to the media and say, "I think the Government's plan might be disastrous"?

Q1123 **Dean Russell:** Yes, or variations of that—because you are making those suggestions now, a year later, after the horse has bolted, if that is the case. Why didn't you use that platform at that time to say, "I've got grave concerns. We need to change direction"?

Dominic Cummings: Because I thought that the right thing to do was to try to make the arguments internally and change the Prime Minister's mind and change the official plan, and shift it from plan A to plan B. As I started having meetings with people in the week of the 9th on "Plan A is a disaster; we've got to shift to plan B", if I had then started calling everyone in the media and saying—

Q1124 **Dean Russell:** Sorry—not calling. You were in the Downing Street garden. You had what I felt was a bit of a witch hunt approach of one journalist after the other asking you question after question, but there was a platform there for you to say, "I'm really concerned that lives are at risk. We should be changing things." What was behind your decision to not raise that in public at that time, given that you are now saying that you had major concerns?

Dominic Cummings: It is a constant problem that people like me have to wrestle with all the time, and that other people in this room will have wrestled with. It is the tension between: if you threaten to resign, you have got to be serious about it, otherwise your bluff is called; if you leave, then you lose basically all control, unless you are going to put a gun to someone's head publicly; and if you stay, then you have a chance to try to influence things.

As I said, I thought very, very seriously about resigning in the summer. I was dissuaded from doing so by the Cabinet Secretary and other senior people who said, "Please stay. Don't do it." You have that tension, and I don't know quite what—I think in retrospect I was probably right not to resign in March; I think in retrospect I was definitely wrong not to resign in September. Whether I should have gone in the summer or not, I don't know.

Q1125 **Dean Russell:** You mentioned tensions between decisions. What we have heard this morning is that you have said that you had no real power, yet you took the test and vaccination programme off the Secretary of State. You had major concerns a year ago but did not raise them in front of the media when you had an opportunity. You were concerned about making decisions that would put people's lives at risk, yet you took a trip to Durham, which I appreciate you have explained in more detail now.

Do you get that, listening to this for the past three or four hours, there is sort of a "You didn't have any power. You didn't have any control. You had the ear of the Prime Minister but didn't really use it"; yet on the flipside, you were able to make things change. From a perspective of decision making, something doesn't connect there for me.

Dominic Cummings: People all over Westminster exaggerated. Arguably, they underestimated the influence that I had between July and December 2019. They massively exaggerated the influence that I had after the election.

The whole idea that I was the second most powerful person in the country and all of that, and I could just click my fingers and do this, that and the other was just completely wrong. If I could have clicked my fingers and done things, there would have been a serious border policy. Masks would have been compulsory. Hancock would have been fired. We would have done dozens and dozens and dozens of things.

What happened is that fundamentally the Prime Minister and I did not agree about covid. We did not agree about covid after March. After March, he thought that the lesson to be learned is: "We shouldn't have done a lockdown. We should have focused on the economy. It was all a disaster. I should have been the mayor in 'Jaws'."

I thought that perspective was completely mad. I had very little influence on covid stuff. I mean, I tried: I made arguments—but as you can see, on pretty much all the major arguments I basically lost. I did not win.

What I therefore did in the summer was to bring in Simon Case to be permanent secretary at No. 10 because I thought, "The Prime Minister's not listening to me on this whole subject, our relations are getting worse and worse, and his girlfriend is desperate to get rid of me and all my team. If I bring in someone official to try to take over on covid, that will (a) make things better and (b) maybe he will listen better to Simon Case than he does to me."

To some extent, that did happen, and then I spent a lot of my time in May, June and July not on covid, but on defence, science and technology, procurement reform, planning regulations, the economy, productivity, innovation, data, civil service reform—all those sorts of things. I tried to use what influence I had on those things, where either the Prime Minister agreed with me or he did not really care, in which case I could push things on. But it was not really useful for me to just sit in meeting after meeting on things like quarantine, where he just did not agree.

Q1126 **Dean Russell:** My final question—sorry for the time I am taking, Chair. For lessons learnt moving forward, it sounds like you were perceived to be the chief adviser—whatever the title may be—to the Prime Minister, but your advice was not being taken. Was that due to the fact that you did not bring people along with you to agree with your advice and then get the Prime Minister to listen? What was the reason for that?

The bit that comes to my mind is that if we go into another pandemic in a few years' time, how would we set up the structures, according to what you are saying today, to make sure that advice is listened to? Ultimately, should you not be, effectively, the canary in the mine who is able to say, "Actually, there's stuff coming down the line that we need to do something about"? From what you are saying, it sounds like your advice was not taken on board, rightly or wrongly.

Dominic Cummings: It is hard to generalise about some of these things. With lots of stuff on covid, actually, there was a centre of gravity in No. 10 with the same view, which agreed with me, but the Prime Minister just wouldn't do it. On many, many issues, me, the Cabinet Secretary, the Chancellor and other senior people agreed, but the PM just would not do what we advised.

The problem was not necessarily—I could not persuade other people on lots of things. Everybody was screaming on quarantine, "Have a policy, set it out clearly and stick to it. You cannot keep changing your mind every time *The Telegraph* writes an editorial on the subject." Everybody agreed with me about that regardless, almost, of what they thought the real policy should be, but nobody could find a way around the problem of the Prime Minister just, like a shopping trolley, smashing from one side of the aisle into the other.

Dean Russell: I would be interested to see the evidence. Thank you.

Q1127 **Chair:** Just before we move on from this, with respect to Barnard Castle, one of the things that really upset people was not you taking your family out of London, but that trip when you were up there that you said was to

test your eyes, but which others said was actually a birthday trip for your wife. Do you stand by that account?

Dominic Cummings: If I was going to make up a story, I'd have come up with a hell of a lot better story than that one, right? It's such a weird story.

The truth is that only a few days before then, I'd been sitting in bed writing a will—what to do if I die. I then was thinking about coming down on the 12th, the Sunday, but I was basically too ill to do that. My wife said, "Look, you're in a state. You can barely walk. Are you sure you're okay to go back to work?"—this whole thing.

I don't know; I tried to explain this all at the time. It seemed to me that, okay, if you're going to drive 300 miles to go back to work the next day, pottering down the road for 30 miles and back to see how you feel, after you've just come off what you thought might be your deathbed, didn't seem crazy to me at the time.

Q1128 **Chair:** Did it not seem crazy to do that test with your wife and child in the car with you?

Dominic Cummings: No, it didn't. It didn't seem crazy.

Q1129 **Chair:** Does it not seem a bit crazy now—that you were testing your eyesight with your wife and child in the car with you?

Dominic Cummings: It didn't seem crazy at the time; it seemed just like, "Okay, let's get in the car and drive up and down the road. If I feel bad, come home, and see how I feel as I get going."

Chair: Okay.

Dominic Cummings: But I can completely understand why people think the whole thing was weird. Obviously, I wish I'd never heard of Barnard Castle, I wish I'd never gone and I wish the whole nightmare had never happened. But even if people do not agree, hopefully they can understand. I can only apologise for the whole debacle.

Q1130 **Chair:** Okay. We have talked a lot so far about things that went wrong, but I think we should spend some time on the big thing that went right: the vaccine programme. Three colleagues want to ask you about that, but let me open by asking: what is it that you think we got right on the vaccine that was so different from some of the other things we have been talking about today?

Dominic Cummings: I think, fundamentally, on vaccines, there was clear responsibility. There was someone who was actually in charge of it—Kate Bingham. She was working with Patrick Vallance; she built a team of people who understood what they were doing. She had the strength of character not to be pushed around.

We had a kind of formal thing which was, "You're in charge of it. You report basically directly to the PM. You don't report to the Department of Health." So she knew who her boss was on it. She built a great team, and

we also said to her, "Treat this like a wartime thing. Ignore rules. If lawyers get in your way, come to us and we'll find ways of bulldozing them out of your way."

Clear accountability, and people who really understood what they were doing. Relative to almost everything else in Whitehall, it was extremely low friction, and there was some great technical help. Those things, when you put them together, meant that it worked better than pretty much anything else.

This is not in any sense a comment on Kate, but I think the fact that it worked out relatively well to the rest of the world, though, should not blind us to the fact that we only really got that going—I think my first conversations about the idea of it with anybody were in March. Patrick Vallance texted me on, roughly, 24 March I think it was—something like that; I have got the exact date. Like lots of other things, though, there is no doubt that we could actually have done this faster than we did.

The conventional wisdom was that we were not going to be able to have any vaccines in 2020. In March, I started getting calls from various people saying, "These new MRNA vaccines could well smash the conventional wisdom, and don't necessarily stick to it." People like Bill Gates and that kind of network were saying that.

Essentially, what happened is that there was a network of Bill Gates-type people who were saying, "Completely re-think the whole paradigm of how you do this. Build in parallel—here is the science thing; here is the manufacturing thing; here's the distribution; here's the supply; here's the logistics; here's the data."

The normal thing is that you do those sequentially. What Bill Gates and people like that said to me and others at No. 10 was, "You need to think of this much more like some of the classic programmes of the past—the Manhattan project in world war two or the Apollo programme—and build it all in parallel. In normal Government accounting terms, that is completely crazy, because if nothing works out you have spent literally billions building all these things up, and the end result is nothing—you get zero for it, it's all waste.

What Bill Gates and people and Patrick Vallance and his team were saying was that the actual expected return on this is so high that even if it does turn out to be all wasted billions, it is still a good gamble in the end. All the conventional Whitehall accountancy systems for that cannot basically cope with it, and you have to throw them all down the toilet. That is, essentially, what we did.

Patrick came to me and said, "I want to do this. We must take it out of the Department of Health." Bear in mind that this was the time we were having all the conversations about PPE, testing, shielding and all the things we have gone through today already, with all these different things being wrong. Patrick said, "Take it out of the Department of Health. Will you support me on that with the PM?" I said, "Absolutely—damn true I

will." I spoke to the Cabinet Secretary and he completely agreed because, also, he was watching all of these meetings in April about all the problems the DH had. So weirdly, this was one of the things that actually had almost no real formal meetings and actually very little discussion. Patrick, me and the Cabinet Secretary all basically went to the Prime Minister when he came back from being ill and said, "There's just no alternative. We've got to do it like this. It's inconceivable we can leave it in DH. Here's the structure," and the Prime Minister just decided in 90 seconds: "Fine. Do it." That was it, and there was basically not really any formal structure. There was a little bit of whingeing here and there. There was a little bit of pushback in some quarters, saying, "This is extremely risky. If you don't go down the EU approach and that works, and we do it ourselves and it doesn't work, you guys are all going to be in a huge political hole."

Q1131 **Chair:** But you have to take risks.

Dominic Cummings: You have to take risks, and when we looked at the EU plan, not just me but all the people that really understood vaccines and some procurement experts that we asked to look at it all said, "The EU plan looks like the classic EU Brussels thing. It will be completely bogged down in bureaucracy. They will not be able to take the right financing decisions. They will not do this parallelism approach of building everything and subsidising everything as you go along." So it seemed at the time like that was just clearly the right thing to do, and, thank goodness, that was one of the few things that we got right.

Chair: Thank you. Let me bring in my colleague Zarah Sultana.

Q1132 **Zarah Sultana:** Thank you, Chair. I was meant to come in earlier, but I had a PMQ, so I will not go entirely into vaccines at the beginning. I just want to pick up on some points, Mr Cummings, that you made earlier regarding herd immunity. You said that it was an "unavoidable fact" and that it was the "official plan" of the Government. Did the Prime Minister specifically acknowledge that pursuing this would result in an excess of 500,000 deaths, and was he okay with that death toll, or a death toll of that margin?

Dominic Cummings: The Prime Minister was definitely aware that, as I said earlier on, herd immunity by September in a single wave was the official plan A. That is on the Cobra document that I shared with you—as it is described, the optimal single-peak strategy. On the 12th, the Prime Minister, like me, heard in the conversation about chickenpox parties and the interviews that a few people gave about herd immunity. The Prime Minister, like me, started to think, "Hang on a second. This sounds at best extremely frightening. Is this really what we are going to do?" As I said, up until— When we had the meeting on the 14th, the whole point of that meeting was: here are the real numbers on what the herd immunity by September strategy really means. It is, on the best case, 260,000 people dead on the DH's own thing. We can't do that. We just can't do it. We've got to gamble on an alternative plan. But at that point, remember, the conventional wisdom was: if you do gamble on an alternative plan, it is not going to be 260,000 people dead. It might be two, three or four times

worse than that in the autumn, and that was the whole argument that played out between the night of the 13th and when we decided to lock down by the weekend of the—the back end of the following week.

It's completely bizarre. Everybody knows that the Secretary of State for Health, the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer were all briefing Laura Kuenssberg, Robert Peston and all the key media people in the week of the 9th on the single-peak herd immunity by September plan. It's totally bizarre and incomprehensible to me that the Government would— that No. 10 would now be trying to deny that, when it was officially described. It's on all the official documents. The CSA, etc, and people from SAGE all said it on TV, and the Cabinet Secretary described it as the chickenpox parties thing on the 12th. So I am completely baffled as to why No. 10 is now trying to deny that that was the plan. The whole point is: that was the original plan, but we realised what the consequences of it were going to be, and we decided that it was intolerable and we had to try something else.

Q1133 **Zarah Sultana:** This issue and the issue of whether the Prime Minister's inactions have led to deaths was asked at PMQs, and the Prime Minister said that all of these matters would be reviewed in the course of a public inquiry, which will start next spring. You have already said that that would be too narrow in scope. Do you support the calls of bereaved families for a statutory public inquiry that is independent and led by a judge?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know about being led by a judge, because the history is that often these judge-led things don't really get to the bottom of it, but the principle of it—yes.

I think the idea that any kind of serious inquiry and lessons learnt doesn't start until next year is completely terrible. The families of all— Tens of thousands of people died who didn't need to die. There is absolutely no excuse for delaying that, because a lot of the reasons for why that happened are still in place now. Look at the whole debate about variants and whatnot. This has to be honestly explained.

If the Government—if No. 10 today won't tell the truth about the official plan, which they briefed the media about, and described on TV a year ago, what on earth else is going on in there now?

So yes, I do. I also think—this is not about dragging Brexit into anything—if you go back two years, if MPs could seize control of the legislative programme and say, "We are in charge, not No. 10," when it came to Brexit and the second referendum, why on earth can MPs now not take control and say it is intolerable that this can be delayed? The elected representatives of the families of people who died who didn't need to die must get to grips with this now. There is absolutely no excuse for delaying it, and the longer it is delayed, the more people will rewrite memories, the more documents will go astray, the more the whole thing will just become cancerous.

Q1134 **Zarah Sultana:** One of the issues has been the Prime Minister's reluctance to actually meet the bereaved families. Why do you think the Prime Minister is running away from meeting them?

Dominic Cummings: I can't imagine why.

Q1135 **Zarah Sultana:** Okay. I will move on to my question about contracts. The *Byline Times* and the Citizens overview of contracts awarded reveals that a year after the first covid lockdown, almost £1 billion in Government contracts has been awarded to 15 firms that are linked to Conservative donors. They have more research that continues showing this trend. During your time at Downing Street, was there concern about the contracts process—that it wasn't fair or transparent? Was anything done to address this?

Dominic Cummings: Initially, in kind of February, March, no. All of our concern was just this disaster coming at us. My concern was all the kind of blocks in the procurement system and us not being able to do things like sign fast contracts with testing companies to get testing ramped up when PHE didn't have the capability, and stuff like that, and PPE. I would say, in January, February, March, my concerns and most of the concerns in No. 10 were really about capability and speed and buying what we needed and getting PPE to the front line and things like that.

Later on, there were concerns, yes—because various stories started to come out into the media about what was happening and then we suddenly started reading things about VIP channels and whatnot, and what were these VIP channels and who was in charge of them, and how had that all been done. But that didn't really cross my radar until—I can't really remember; I guess probably something like May or something. Not in the first phase, for sure.

Q1136 **Zarah Sultana:** There was a contract with a jeweller, worth £70 million, for sterile gowns, almost all of which couldn't be used, because the contract didn't request double packaging. There was another contract for face masks, which were completely unusable, because they had the wrong type of fitting.

On some of these mistakes, the Government have said they were in a panic situation and just had to order things. What kind of processes do we need to make sure that we are not throwing millions if not billions of pounds essentially down the toilet for the wrong items?

Dominic Cummings: I won't bore everybody by going back through the history of this, but I have said many times before that the procurement system is completely unfit for its purposes in Whitehall. Ironically, in January and February, when I should have been paying far more attention to covid, one of the big issues I was dealing with was this procurement thing. All the media stuff about culture wars and whatnot, I had literally zero to do with any of that nonsense.

On the procurement thing, I was bringing in outside experts, such as a guy at Oxford with a very hard to pronounce name—Bent Flyvbjerg—to address the problem of how to get a serious procurement system. The

problem is that we just didn't have time to sort this out before the crisis hit. The fundamental thing is that there needs to be a legal, proper, emergency fast-track process. There need to be people with the skills to execute that at speed and at scale.

The fundamental problem that you had in February, March, April, was a legal structure with a whole bunch of horrific EU laws, and then you had a whole bunch of horrific Whitehall gold plating on top of that. Then you had a set of officials who had only ever worked inside that system. Then you had this completely unprecedented crisis and people like me shouting, "Call the airlines. Tell them we're taking their planes and flying to China. Find the nearest airfield. Throw the PPE in the back and fly in back now." There was no system for doing anything like that. Everyone was saying, "Can we do that? Is it legal? What happens if we do it and then everyone starts suing us?"

The obvious lesson—and one of the things I spent my time on in the summer and autumn—was a combination of changing the legal framework and the kind of recruitment, skills and training so that you have got a set of people in place who can just do that. There should be a trigger point where either Parliament votes on something or the Prime Minister presses a button marked "panic". When that is done, you move to "Here's the normal process where it is fine to take six or 12 months over something, whatever it might be, but here's the emergency system, where people are authorised to go, 'Right. We've got to smash this. We've got to execute at scale. We've got to do it all fast'." If that means just calling people up and doing handshakes over the phone and, "We'll get the money to you. Take off now," then that's what's got to happen. That approach just did not exist.

Chair: Is this the last question?

Q1137 **Zarah Sultana:** My final question is about vaccines, just bringing it back to the top. You mentioned Bill Gates, Mr Cummings, who has vocally opposed IP waivers. We know that vaccine production globally is throttled for many reasons, such as the control of vaccine supplies by wealthier countries and the hoarding of vaccines. If you were advising the Prime Minister, would you also support President Biden's move to support lifting patent protection? What is your opinion on vaccine IP?

Dominic Cummings: I don't really have an opinion on it. I strongly, strongly suspect that Bill Gates knows far more about this than President Biden does. If Bill Gates is saying that this is a big mistake on vaccine production, then my prior view would be that he is almost definitely right, and we should at the very least take his opinion extremely seriously.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Greg Clark.

Q1138 **Greg Clark:** On vaccines, you have said that it was Sir Patrick Vallance's idea to set up the vaccine taskforce. Is that right?

Dominic Cummings: Certainly, Patrick Vallance had the idea. Like lots of good ideas, there are a few different people thinking about similar things

at the same time. I have got a text from Patrick Vallance, when he texted me directly on, I think, 24 March—I can confirm that if it is thought relevant—where he says explicitly, "I want to set up a vaccine taskforce, and do it outside the Department of Health and Social Care." Correct. I and some other people were having parallel conversations with others about the same time. Essentially, both Patrick and I spoke to the Cabinet Secretary about it.

Q1139 **Greg Clark:** The deal between Oxford-AstraZeneca and the Government was done before the vaccine taskforce was set up. Do you recall who was instrumental in bringing that to bear?

Dominic Cummings: My memory is that Patrick Vallance was instrumental in that.

Q1140 **Greg Clark:** So he was involved in both of those initiatives.

Dominic Cummings: Patrick, before coming into Government, had worked in the private sector, working literally on vaccines, so he understood this and actually knew a lot of the key players involved. Certainly, my conversations on the AZ vaccine were with Patrick. At one point there was a terrible fright that the Department of Health was about to sign what was basically a duff contract on AZ that would not have given us the rights to the vaccine, or would have left them questionable. Patrick intervened and sorted it out, and made sure that the contract worked out properly, thank goodness.

Patrick deserves absolutely massive, enormous credit for his role in the vaccine taskforce—there is no doubt about it. As far as I am aware, he was the first senior official who came up with the idea. The other people I know who were talking about it were outside government. He was the first official to come up with the idea. He pushed it—he came to me; he came to the Cabinet Secretary; he made the case to the PM. I think he deserves enormous credit from the country for his role in it.

Q1141 **Greg Clark:** So in terms of lessons learnt, that is clearly a very strong positive. I think you referred earlier to the idea that perhaps things might have been done even quicker, triumph though it was. I think you were referring to starting human challenge trials earlier. Was that contemplated? Tell us about the history of that suggestion.

Dominic Cummings: To stress, this is not my idea; it is not something that I have come up with and think is a good idea. Essentially, the idea is this. Normally, for any kind of vaccine, obviously you have a whole testing process, which takes quite a lot of time to go through, because if you have a disease that is killing, say, 1% to 2% of the population, then you have to make sure that you don't have a vaccine that kills more than that.

However, for something like this, from the point of view of how human civilisation overall could have done better, I think it is unarguable what should have happened. The companies doing mRNA vaccines basically created the vaccine itself in literally hours in January. Governments, such as America's and ours, should have gone to those companies and said,

"Right, we are going to take your idea, and we are now going to have human challenge trials." We would pay 5,000 people, or 10,000 people, to be injected with covid. We would then have some kind of control system so that some of you get the vaccine and some of you don't, so everyone takes their chances. If you die, your family will get 1 million quid or whatever—something like that. That obviously would have been the best thing to do. If we had done that, we could have hugely cut the time for doing this. We could definitely have got vaccines into people's arms by September.

The reason that is important is this. Imagine we suddenly have another situation like this, but not with something like covid; it is something like smallpox or Ebola, which kills one in three people. We have to be able to have a system that does not just go, "Oh well, tens of millions of people are going to die, but there is really nothing we can do, because we have to go through the safety challenge process." We have got to think now, and this is why I am so aggressive—I suppose "aggressive" is the word—about having the lessons learnt now. We have to have a system in place whereby we go, "Holy Lord, there's a new Ebola. Right, mRNA companies, Pfizer, where is the vaccine? Right, 10,000 people, what is the price it pays?"

Q1142 **Greg Clark:** This is one of the reasons why we are conducting this inquiry: so that we can get on with lessons that can be learnt. Just to understand it, was the fact that we did not do that—as I have said, it is no criticism of the fact that this was done at remarkable pace—because we were constrained by regulation, or by a kind of distaste for the risk involved in injecting healthy people with covid?

Dominic Cummings: I think there are definitely issues that need to be sorted out, but fundamentally, like lots of things, a kind of group-think mentality meant that, just in general, it was never properly explored. A few people did suggest it, and it was talked about.

Q1143 **Greg Clark:** Who suggested it?

Dominic Cummings: I actually can't remember now who suggested it. I know that there were conversations about it. I got emails from some people, saying you should be doing this. It was one of the many things that I should have pushed harder and tried to force a conversation about and didn't do enough on. As far as I am aware, it was just never really properly discussed, but obviously should have been.

Q1144 **Greg Clark:** Just a couple more areas. You have raised concerns about the plan for vaccination, or the adjustment of vaccines to new variants, and I think I sense from some of your recent tweets that you think that is not as sound as you think it should be. Have I got that right?

Dominic Cummings: Yeah, obviously I am not in government any more, but I talk to people who are involved with it, and people have just expressed concern to me that since Kate Bingham left, the normal entropy process of Whitehall has got its fingers on the thinking and the operations around this. There hasn't been the kind of very aggressive approach that

some inside government want about thinking through the danger of variants and how to make sure that the vaccine taskforce is ahead of the game on the whole thing. I can't go into any details because I am not aware of them, but I have had senior people express this concern to me, yes.

Q1145 **Greg Clark:** Is that a personnel or an organisational concern? What's happening? Is the forest creeping back into the clearing?

Dominic Cummings: I think it is a combination of both, yes. I think there has been a shift in personnel, as far as I understand it, and concerns about the organisational set-up.

Q1146 **Greg Clark:** You have spoken very positively about Kate Bingham's role in this, as well as that of Sir Patrick and others. She went through a difficult time in the autumn when she was being criticised roundly from a lot of quarters, and some of that briefing was alleged to come from No. 10. Were you aware of that at the time? Did you pick up that this was a problem?

Dominic Cummings: I was aware that there was briefing against her. I was told at the time by officials that they thought that most of this had come from DH, but like most of these things, one never really got to the bottom of it. Certainly, nobody who you could describe as being part of my core team obviously was involved with that, and I asked all of them "Do you know where this is coming from? What's going on?" The closest we got to was essentially people in the system kind of feeling either their noses put out of joint, or jealous about her profile or whatnot.

One of the bad things that happened was that lots of insiders who came in to volunteer to help—the same thing happened in terms of Test and Trace. People who dropped massively lucrative careers to come and help Test and Trace also got trashed in the press by parts of Whitehall, which I thought was terrible. Kate, I think, got caught in that sort of crossfire.

Q1147 **Greg Clark:** So you are not aware of any particular briefing against her from No.10? Conversely, there was radio silence from No. 10 in terms of defending her, and my understanding is that she had to threaten to go on a broadcast round personally before there was a response from No. 10. Again, were you aware of that?

Dominic Cummings: As I said to you earlier on, I tried to stay far away from day-to-day media things. I have a vague recollection of a time when there was some kind of problem, and her call—I think she might have called the PM directly or something, and said essentially "I'm very unhappy about what's going on, and I want some support from No. 10." But I wasn't part of that conversation, and I don't really know what happened, I'm afraid.

Q1148 **Greg Clark:** But given the significance of her role, and the praise that you have quite rightly lavished on her, did you not feel observing, even as a reader of the newspapers and the blogs, "Hold on. We should be backing the work that she is doing"?

Dominic Cummings: Yeah, as far as I was concerned we were; we obviously supported the work of the vaccine taskforce.

Q1149 **Greg Clark:** But in terms of Kate Bingham's role in that?

Dominic Cummings: As far as I was concerned, and as far as I was aware, No. 10 was always supportive of the vaccine taskforce, and supportive of Kate Bingham. As I said, I tried to escape—I tried to keep out of the way of lots of conversations with the Prime Minister about briefing and leaks and all that sort of thing, so I'm not the person to speak to about it. All I basically remember is there was some briefing against her. I asked at a couple of meetings, where do we think this is coming from? The best guess of people in No. 10 was parts of Whitehall have had their noses put out of joint.

I also vaguely remember some *Sunday Times* story about her, but I can't remember what that was. I don't think I can add anything very useful for a discussion.

Q1150 **Greg Clark:** Finally, looking back and thinking of the system, when you appeared before the Science and Technology Committee, you talked about the deal that you did with the Prime Minister when you came to be his adviser in Downing Street. You said that there were four components of it. One was to get Brexit done, the second was to double the science budget and the third was to create a new research agency modelled on DARPA or ARPA. The fourth was to change the way that Whitehall works.

Again, you have talked about this a lot. In your blog in 2019, you talked about turning "government institutions responsible for decisions about billions of lives and trillions of dollars from hopeless to high performance." So, this was one of the things you thought about and you brought into Whitehall. Looking back, as we are and as you can now, some of the failures have been organisational and operational—the fact that we had to stop testing in the community because we didn't have enough tests; the fact that we ran out of tests in September. When something was such a priority and was part of the deal for you being in Downing Street, why was it not possible to have made good progress on it during the nine months that you were there, say from July to the spring of 2020?

Dominic Cummings: Well, July 2019 to the election was essentially just completely dominated by the constitutional crisis over Brexit, and we did not really— We didn't have the bandwidth or the real authority to start trying to change all sorts of things in terms of Whitehall. We had to be very focused on what it was that we were trying to change, so for example, we did change the whole decision-making structure around the negotiations and around Brexit. We did change radically and effectively.

I started work on things like the procurement reform, but it's also the case that the situation was so overwhelming, particularly after the prorogation and the Supreme Court judgment, that, you know— In September 2019, I had senior officials come to me and say, "The system's creaking and very shortly senior people are just going to stop obeying orders from this Prime

Minister and are going to regard it as not a legitimate Government." So, it was a really, really weird time. That wasn't an environment in which you could suddenly start saying, "Right, we're going to have all these huge shifts in the basic wiring of Downing Street and Whitehall." Once we came back in January, I did begin a lot of this process. I talked to the Cabinet Secretary about making various changes to the civil service HR system. As I have said, I started a whole process from the beginning of January in terms of trying to change the procurement system and other parts of it, and the data side. The problem was that we basically only had six weeks—we were back the first week of Jan to covid completely overtaking everything from mid-February—to change things.

Now, one of the things that did happen, which was relevant to the September decision, was building what's known as the analytical private office in No. 10, which I think will be a permanent institution and will become a permanent part of how every subsequent Prime Minister works. I think no one in their right mind would possibly get rid of it, and everybody involved with it knows it's been a great success. So, I think that shows, you know— If you read the media, you'd think that this was all some huge row between me and all the officials, and everyone hating it and everyone screaming at each other, but the truth is pretty much all the good senior officials completely supported me on it and helped me do it. It was a joint enterprise. It wasn't Cummings against the system. It was— All sensible people realised that this was a huge gap in Whitehall capabilities, and we had to try and change it, both structurally and in terms of the specific skills.

Q1151 **Dr Davies:** Thank you, Mr Cummings, in what I think is your sixth hour in front of the Committee.

Dominic Cummings: It feels like five or eight minutes.

Dr Davies: You have talked about the success of the vaccine taskforce. Are there lessons to be learned from that that can be applied across Government?

Dominic Cummings: Certainly. As I said, some of the core principles are who is actually responsible for the team. Jeremy knows and Greg knows that the British state is set up, almost by design, to create a dysfunctional system, because you have to go out and potentially resign over things that have been done, but you cannot fire a single person apart from your Spads in the Department. Literally nothing that works well in the real world ever works like that—it is a completely crazy system. So you have a system in which responsibility is, by design, diffused, and no one knows who is really in charge.

One of the key things with the vaccine taskforce was that we tried to keep things very simple: knowing how really good things work and who the boss is—it is her team. Kate is going to pick the people and Patrick will give scientific advice, and if it turns out that Kate Bingham is no good, we will get rid of her like that—with a click of the fingers—and put in someone else who is responsible. That was the whole reason for the approach. She

picked the team—she did a good job of picking the team—and everyone knew that they were working for her. They weren't working for Hancock, the Permanent Secretary in DH, or the Cabinet Secretary. Those very simple principles are the core of the difference between well-run organisations and badly run ones.

There are obvious lessons to learn. The problem is that, in much of Whitehall, it kind of suits everybody to be in the Spider-Man meme of everyone pointing at each other and saying, "Well it's him; no, it's him; no it's him." Changing that, even after a disaster on the scale that we have seen, is going to be a really big job. It means having conversations like, "Is the Secretary of State actually in charge of this? Can they really do that?" A lot of people have criticised the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, but he was perfectly within his rights to say to the Prime Minister, "Matt Hancock is the Minister responsible." He was correct, but we were also correct to say, "But so-and-so is in charge of this and so-and-so is in charge of that, and I can't fire them." Fundamentally, the only person who could fire them was the Cabinet Secretary, and the only way that happens is if the Prime Minister tells the Cabinet Secretary to fire them. The whole thing doesn't work if it's like that.

Q1152 **Dr Davies:** Okay. Moving on to covid therapeutics, there is obviously success in that field, but you have said previously that funding bureaucracy held back progress. Can you tell us more about that and how those issues were overcome?

Dominic Cummings: In February, March, various scientists and entities came to Patrick Vallance and me and basically just said, "A standard scientific funding process takes a long time to get through, but we are in a wartime situation, so can you bulldoze some of the rules out of the way and speak to UKRI and so on?" We did do: both Patrick and I talked to UKRI and other parts of the system, saying, "Here's what the blocks are—A, B, C, D. Can you try to scupper these and basically create a fast-track process so that if people like Paul Nurse call up and say, 'We can do blah,' we can just go, 'Right; how much? £10 million—done; £20 million—done.'?" It certainly wasn't perfect, but it did change quite dramatically in February to April.

Q1153 **Dr Davies:** The Recovery trial has been respected around the world for its success. What do you put that down to?

Dominic Cummings: Similar sorts of principles: clear responsibility and some great people in charge—a guy called Jeremy Farrar played a critical role. Part of my job is that I know far more about the things that went wrong, if you know what I mean, rather than about things that went right. If things seemed to be going right, and people were saying that's okay, I had so many other things to deal with that I kind of didn't really go into it. So, I don't really know much about the Recovery trials because people just said, "This seems to be going well." I only got involved with Jeremy Farrar if he called me up and said, "I've hit the following problem"; otherwise I just let people get on with it.

Dr Davies: Okay. These are UK-wide endeavours. One of the criticisms has been the disjointed approach across the UK with the devolved Administrations in particular. What do you recall of discussions over using public health legislation in comparison with civil contingencies legislation?

Dominic Cummings: Again, my memory is pretty hazy, but fundamentally the Cabinet Secretary says the Civil Contingencies Act is essentially useless. It was drafted back in the '70s; it has had a few tweaks, but it is completely unfit for its job. If we try to rely on lots of its powers, we face a problem that various people who don't like it will go to the courts and we will suddenly be bogged down in judicial reviews at a time when we haven't got three weeks to go to a court, even on a fast-track process. So that was the big problem, and basically why we introduced the emergency coronavirus Bill.

Again, one of the reasons why I think now you guys are right to be having this inquiry is that upgrading the whole Civil Contingencies Act is a critical thing. One very simple example of that is the whole question of enforcement. One constant problem that we had all the way through the spring and summer and into the winter was, "Well, the police say their powers are unclear; we can't do this; the courts won't uphold that; blah, blah, blah; and the emergency powers are unclear in various ways." We found ourselves in the situation of people arguing for greater and greater restrictions on certain law-abiding people because they felt that we could not actually enforce certain rules against non-law-abiding people, which was a terrible ratchet to get into. That is another thing. I am afraid that I am not at all knowledgeable about that side of it, but I do think that is an important question.

Dr Davies: Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to adjourn. That concludes the section on vaccines; we have one more section to do on the run-up to the November lockdown. We will reconvene at five past 3, just to give people a slightly longer break.

Sitting suspended.

Q1154 **Chair:** The Committee is back in session. We are now going to move to our final section, where we are going to consider some of the decisions made in the autumn and the winter of this year around lockdowns.

Perhaps I can start by asking Mr Cummings to give us a brief summary of the key decisions taken during the autumn.

Dominic Cummings: Well, I guess the most significant was that, mid-September, SAGE and Patrick Vallance advised that we take rapid action and do some kind of short, sharp burst because of where the numbers were going. The Prime Minister decided not to do that. We then went round the houses on that decision, and then ended up doing it on 31 October. In the meantime, the Government kind of careered around all over the shop, trying to do these local lockdowns and other things, but, in

the end, it didn't work. Is it useful if I kind of spell out what the actual meetings were, and when, so you can—

Chair: That would be helpful and then Jeremy Hunt is going to follow up.

Dominic Cummings: Essentially, what happened is that in the week of, or round about, 15 September— I think the 18th was the Friday? I think so—Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty came to No. 10 and they said, "We and SAGE think that we need to consider a kind of two-week, or possibly longer, lockdown." Bear in mind that, back in the summer, when we were discussing the whole reopening plan, I asked Chris Whitty, "What do you think the chances are that we will have R over 1 again by September and back to problems?" He said, "I think that, before the schools go back, probably R will be below 1, but it's over 50% likely that R will be over 1 if we bring the schools back in September."

Many of us had said in the summer to the Prime Minister, "Do not tell everyone, 'Get back to work.' Don't do this whole, 'Everyone go back to work' thing, and, 'Covid's over,'" and whatnot, but at that point his main concern was about the economy, so, over July-August, obviously the whole impetus of the Government was to try and pretend that we could get back to normal.

So, on the 17th, Patrick and Chris come to No. 10 and say we should lock down. I say to the Prime Minister, "The lesson of the first wave was the earlier the better when dealing with exponentials like this." Then, on the Friday, there was a long discussion of it with the PM, and essentially, at the end of that, he decided we were not going to do anything, so I said, "Listen, we all lived through the March horror, and I've got a dreadful feeling about this—that we're making the same mistake." I said, "Before you make a final decision on this, I want to do something that sounds a bit weird. I want to have another meeting on Monday, where what we do is imagine the meeting is the end of October, and we'll have all the documents presented to you." I am talking about Monday the 21st, I think it was.

The meeting itself will be on Monday 21st September, but we will set the whole thing in the future, at the end of October. We will look at the data asking, 'What is our best guess that this is what the situation is going to be like at the end of October? We will talk through all of that. Because if you are going to look at that then, and then decide to lock down, we should do it now, that is the whole lesson of March.' The Cabinet Secretary says, 'I completely agree. That is a very good idea. We will get the data team on it, etc.' The data team did not really exist in February/March, it was Ben Warner, but by now, there was a really, really good team of a mix of officials and SPADs in No. 10. They crunched all of these numbers with SAGE data and other stuff over that weekend. Then on the Sunday evening there was a meeting with a combination of SAGE scientists and some external people.

By this point, unfortunately, the Prime Minister was listening to various people who were saying things like, "There's already herd immunity in the

population; there won't be any second wave, etc, etc." So we had the meeting in the Cabinet Room on Sunday evening. Patrick and Chris gave their view. A guy called Heneghan and a woman from Oxford called Professor Gupta,[1] I think it was, gave the kind of "Don't lock down" view. John Edmunds, who is on SAGE, said, "Surely we are going to learn the lessons of March. Here's what the data will be. The only logic of not doing a lockdown now would be that you are not going to do it at all. There is no way that you are going to make that decision. Just do it now; otherwise it's all going to be worse." The Prime Minister said, "I'm not persuaded of that." We then had the hypothetical meeting of the future, and a brilliant young woman called Catherine Cutts, who we brought in from outside Whitehall, presented all of this data.

We set it all out to the Prime Minister. Remember, there is a huge contrast at this point with what I was describing in March. In March, there was no testing data, no proper data system, me with an iPhone scribbling things on a whiteboard. By now, we have got a completely professional team, really on it, and they had all the testing data and all the NHS data. It is all really clear. They set it all out. From some of our point of view, it is just completely obvious that at this hypothetical point, five or six weeks hence, which is when we are looking at, we are back to where we are now days from the point at which you have no further—you are going to have to act now or you cross the tripwire whereby the NHS is going to get smashed again. That is what all the data is showing us. And the Prime Minister wasn't persuaded about this. I said to him, "The whole lesson of what happened before is that by delaying, the lockdown came later, it had to be more severe, it had to last longer. The economic disruption is even worse anyway, and we will have killed God knows how many thousand people in the meantime who have caught covid who wouldn't have caught it if we act now. Surely we've got to learn the lessons from the past." And the Prime Minister decided no, and said basically, "Just got to hit and hope."

Q1155 **Chair:** Let's pause at that point, and we will go into some detail. I am going to start with Carol Monaghan, before I go to Jeremy Hunt.

Q1156 **Carol Monaghan:** Thank you, Chair.

Mr Cummings, you said earlier in your evidence today that you should have been hitting the panic button back in February/March time. We are now talking September, and we have learnt lots of lessons and, as you say, we have a handle on things. Were you hitting the panic button in September?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1157 **Carol Monaghan:** Was the Prime Minister aware of how seriously you were taking things at that point?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. As I explained before, in February/March, I was very frightened—that is the only way to describe it—about hitting the

[1] Professor Carl Heneghan and Professor Sunetra Gupta sent in written evidence relating to this point.

panic button, because I was worried, thinking "What if I am wrong, and the people who are telling me that the official plan is wrong are wrong?" And the data was completely hopeless. By this time, it was a completely different situation. Basically, all credible serious people in my opinion were saying essentially the same thing. So, I was very, very clear with him about it.

Q1158 **Carol Monaghan:** So you were pressing for a circuit breaker lockdown in September?

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1159 **Carol Monaghan:** So if the Prime Minister wasn't persuaded, in your words, of the importance of this, whose advice was he taking?

Dominic Cummings: He wasn't taking any advice; he was just making his own decision that he was going to ignore the advice.

Q1160 **Carol Monaghan:** Did his Cabinet agree with his decision?

Dominic Cummings: The Cabinet wasn't involved or asked.

Q1161 **Carol Monaghan:** Did you hear anything from Cabinet members about these decisions?

Dominic Cummings: There were different views, I think. I have been very critical of Matt Hancock, but I think he actually agreed with me in September about acting then. But there wasn't any formal Cabinet meeting to discuss it, or, if there was, it was a purely Potemkin exercise. It wasn't a real discussion that actually affected anything.

Q1162 **Carol Monaghan:** So all of these decisions were entirely the Prime Minister's?

Dominic Cummings: On the September lockdown, correct.

Q1163 **Carol Monaghan:** I understand there was a meeting with SAGE representatives, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister back in September where they were told of the importance of that lockdown.

Dominic Cummings: I was there, yes.

Q1164 **Carol Monaghan:** You were there as well? Okay. What was the Chancellor's view on this?

Dominic Cummings: The Chancellor's view was, "The Department for Health, who want to do this, have no plan. There is no plan for what to do. We've just gone through a whole thing where we had all of these arguments in June/July, and some people like Dom said, 'Don't do "Get back to work", don't just try to go hell for leather for the economy'—but you decided to do it. Now the Department for Health is suddenly hitting the panic button again and saying, Well, we've got to stop for two weeks. And then what? Then are we going to tell everyone to go back to work again? Two weeks later, say the opposite? There is no plan, there is no coherence to anything."

Q1165 **Carol Monaghan:** So, knowing that the Department for Health was chaotic in its approach here, were the economic arguments outweighing everything else at this point?

Dominic Cummings: For the Prime Minister, yes.

Q1166 **Carol Monaghan:** There was talk, and certainly the Scottish Government were pushing hard following that SAGE advice, about an extension of the furlough scheme. Why was that not discussed more seriously at that point? It was only eventually extended at the very last minute.

Dominic Cummings: I can't remember all the details on timing with that I'm afraid, but I know that all the way along, Rishi and his team took forward the whole issue about furlough. Remember, they came up with the idea, it wasn't us in No. 10. Once the Prime Minister said at each stage, "I'm going to do X and I have made a decision", the Chancellor always extremely competently, ably and effectively rode in and said, "Right, here's the economic package to go along with it", and he made it happen.

Q1167 **Carol Monaghan:** He made it happen. Do you think that if a different Prime Minister had been in No. 10, things would have been managed in a different way?

Dominic Cummings: Undoubtedly, yes.

Q1168 **Carol Monaghan:** His predecessors?

Dominic Cummings: You mean, what do I think each of his predecessors would have done in this situation?

Carol Monaghan: Yes, had it been David Cameron or Theresa May.

Dominic Cummings: I mean, it's all a bit hypothetical. God only knows what each of them would have done. What I would say is that if you took anybody at random from the top 1% of competent people in this country and presented them with the situation, they would behave differently from how the Prime Minister behaved.

Q1169 **Carol Monaghan:** If we were to describe his behaviour at this point, was it driven by arrogance, complacency, or something more sinister?

Dominic Cummings: No. There is a great misunderstanding people have that because it nearly killed him, he therefore must have taken it seriously. In fact, after the first lockdown, he was cross with me and others for what he regarded as basically pushing him into that first lockdown. His argument after that happened was, literally, I quote, "I should have been the mayor of Jaws and kept the beaches open." That is what he said on many, many occasions. He didn't think, in July or September, thank goodness we did the first lockdown, that was obviously the right thing to do, and so on. His argument then was, "We shouldn't have done the first lockdown, and I am not going to make the same mistake again."

Carol Monaghan: That does sounds like arrogance.

Dominic Cummings: I don't know if arrogance is the right word. It's just that, as I said in the earlier session, the Prime Minister took the view in January/February that economic harm caused by action against covid was going to be more damaging to the country than covid itself.

We could not persuade him that if you basically took the view, "Let it rip, and don't worry about covid," you would not just get all the health disasters but also a huge economic disaster, because if people are faced with not having any health system—which is what we were faced with in March if we had gone with plan A, or what we would have been faced with if we hadn't finally put the brakes on in October—then they will lock themselves down out of terror. We could never persuade him of this argument.

He also essentially thought that he'd been gamed on the numbers in the first lockdown, and he thought that the NHS would somehow have got through. All the stuff about the NHS—

Q1170 **Carol Monaghan:** Was he not concerned about the number of people who died? Did you hear him say, "Let bodies pile high in their thousands" or, "It's only killing 80-year-olds"?

Dominic Cummings: There have been a few different versions of these stories knocking around. There was a version of it in *The Sunday Times*, which was not accurate, but the version that the BBC reported was accurate.

Q1171 **Carol Monaghan:** And you heard that?

Dominic Cummings: I heard that in the Prime Minister's study. That was not in September, though. That was immediately after he finally made the decision to do the lockdown on 31 October.

Q1172 **Carol Monaghan:** Next question. You showed us a whiteboard picture and one of the phrases on it that has caused some concern is, "Who do we not save?" What was the answer to that?

Dominic Cummings: That was asking the obvious question at that point. At that point, on 13 March, it was too late to stop disaster—that was my view and that of the people I thought had figured this out best. That comment was essentially, "We're already partly over the cliff. Who is not going to be saved in this situation? Have we figured that out—who is most vulnerable etc, etc?"

Q1173 **Carol Monaghan:** What was the final straw that prompted you to come and give evidence today? Some would say that discretion is important for a Prime Minister's adviser, but you have disclosed everything today. What has prompted that?

Dominic Cummings: A couple of things. The scale of the disaster is so big that people can't wait—people need to understand how the Government failed them when they needed it. People need to understand that now. Who knows what other problems might come along in the next few years that could easily have exactly the same consequences because,

critical as I have been of the Prime Minister, in no way, shape or form can you say that this is just his fault and that if you just shuffled him, a couple of Ministers or Hancock around, everything would suddenly work. It wouldn't. These failings are programmed by the wiring of the system. If you have something this bad, and you have got tens and tens of thousands of people who have died who did not need to die, and massive economic destruction, the way that we have had, that did not need to happen if we had sorted things out earlier, everyone in this country needs to face the reality of this.

Secondly, it has become clear over the last couple of months that, contrary to when I spoke to the Prime Minister about it last year, in the summer, he has clearly changed his mind and is now desperate not to face up to this and not to learn the lessons—I think because of the disaster in the autumn.

Q1174 **Carol Monaghan:** Talking about not learning the lessons, I will ask you some quick yes/no questions, then I will be done.

I appreciate that you left in November, but were you surprised by the Government delays in putting India on the red list?

Dominic Cummings: No, not surprised at all. It is completely in character with No. 10.

Q1175 **Carol Monaghan:** Are you surprised by the confusion about the current travel arrangements with green, amber and red countries?

Dominic Cummings: I am afraid it is déjà vu all over again.

Q1176 **Carol Monaghan:** Who is now advising the Prime Minister?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know.

Q1177 **Carol Monaghan:** Are you surprised that people are being encouraged to travel this year?

Dominic Cummings: I am not on top of it enough to have a sensible view, I'm afraid, on whether or not people should be travelling.

Q1178 **Carol Monaghan:** And last year?

Dominic Cummings: As I said—I said at the time—I think lots of things that we did last summer were big mistakes. Lots of people said to the Prime Minister last year, "Do not listen to the media screaming at you about, 'Physically get back to work', because as soon as you get to September, you're going to be screaming back at everyone, 'Work from home again', and everyone will think you've lost the plot and the Government's lost the plot, and they'll be right." But that was one of the many arguments I lost on this whole thing.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you very much, Mr Cummings.

Q1179 **Chair:** I can't remember whether you said you were opposed to eat out to help out.

Dominic Cummings: I was opposed to the general strategy that the Prime Minister set out. Once the Prime Minister said, "Everyone get back to work, everyone get the economy going" and everything else, things like that are logical. The problem is that his fundamental decision about the strategy was wrong.

Q1180 **Chair:** But in the particular, did you advise anyone against it?

Dominic Cummings: I can't really remember conversations, to be honest, about eat out to help out specifically.

Q1181 **Chair:** It was quite a big initiative.

Dominic Cummings: To be honest, in the grand scheme of things it didn't seem like that at the time, no.

Q1182 **Chair:** So you don't recall having any conversation—

Dominic Cummings: I was definitely in meetings at which it was discussed, but at that point I had basically lost the argument on the approach.

Q1183 **Chair:** So because the strategy was not the one that you wanted, you didn't raise any objection to actions that were consistent with the strategy.

Dominic Cummings: Specifically on eat out to help out, I don't remember, to be honest, exactly what the conversations were that I had on it. Before that happened—That was a consequence of a strategic decision made by the Prime Minister, which was: we've killed the economy; we've got to get the economy back; covid's in the past; there won't be a second wave; get everything open. Me, the director of communications, the Cabinet Secretary and other people said, "Hang on a second. What about all the following objections to this plan?" We lost that argument. The Prime Minister made a decision. Once that happens, lots of other things naturally flow like, for example, the students coming back in September and all that sort of thing, which, clearly, if you're taking a different view of it, you would never have done.

Q1184 **Chair:** Okay, so you didn't oppose eat out to help out because it was consistent with the strategy.

Dominic Cummings: I honestly can't even remember what I said about eat out to help out. I didn't pay huge attention to eat out to help out.

Q1185 **Jeremy Hunt:** You have been very clear that the Prime Minister rejected the idea of a circuit breaker towards the end of September. Of course, what he would say is that they did have that circuit breaker in Wales, but they still had to go into the November lockdown. Many people say that it was actually inevitable, anyway. The seeds had already been sown by that stage.

I just want to go through some of the things that could also have contributed to the need for a second lockdown. You don't recall opposing eat out to help out, which is something that a lot of people have talked

about. I think you just said—correct me if I'm wrong—you didn't oppose students going back to university at the beginning of September. Is that right?

Dominic Cummings: I advised against that.

Q1186 **Jeremy Hunt:** You did advise against that?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. I didn't say that I was opposed or pro eat out to help out. I just thought it was part of a plan, a grander scheme, that was wrong, and I don't remember if I even gave a view specifically on eat out to help out.

Q1187 **Jeremy Hunt:** But you did, for example, advise against telling people to go back to work. You thought that was wrong.

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1188 **Jeremy Hunt:** And you did advise against students going back in September.

Dominic Cummings: Yes.

Q1189 **Jeremy Hunt:** You did. And you are not sure about eat out to help out. Can I ask you about the high numbers of infections that were circulating on NHS hospital wards? NHS data now says that about 8,700 people died, having picked up infections inside hospitals—we were obviously very sorry to hear about your uncle earlier. Did you advise that we needed to bring forward the weekly testing of NHS staff, which wasn't actually introduced until November?

Dominic Cummings: Yes. There were many, many meetings on testing NHS staff. One of the things that I spent a huge amount of time on was trying to get these LAMP and lateral flow tests going so that NHS staff could basically have a test a day—for everyone in the NHS if they wanted to. It was clear that that was technically possible—it was organisation-possible—and it should be done. I did all I could to try and accelerate that.

Q1190 **Jeremy Hunt:** Who resisted that happening? It took a long time. We did care homes in July. I think it didn't get operational until September, but it was promised in July. It wasn't even promised for the NHS until November.

Dominic Cummings: I think, in general, on LAMP and lateral flow, there was this same kind of incredibly conservative attitude and a kind of, "Well, if we just do PCR, everyone knows where they are and no one's going to criticise us." As soon as you do something new inside the civil service, if it works no one gets any credit, and if it doesn't work you get the blame, so there is this huge kind of reverse ratchet all the time against this. It took huge effort from No. 10 to try and push this through, and that's after we had the Prime Minister supportive, the Cabinet Secretary supportive, Hancock personally supportive—and we had a whole bunch of great people involved.

To give you an example of how hard this was, after I had spoken myself to some of the scientists involved with getting the mass testing going and they had described all the problems and I had spoken to the team in Test and Trace, I sat down in the Cabinet Room with the Cabinet Secretary, the head of commercial, the head of HR for the civil service and another whole bunch of the key, literally the top, officials, and I said to all of them, "This is a war. This is a wartime measure. This makes, could make, all the difference between how this country survives—hundreds of billions of pounds between now and the vaccines, hopefully, coming onstream in quarter 1 next year. Any rules—forget. Procurement things—throw them away. HR rules in particular—throw them away," because there were huge problems with recruiting a team. You can't really have much more than the PM, the PM's main adviser and the Cabinet Secretary all saying that. Two weeks later, all the people just came back to us and said, "Nothing's changed." We had to do the whole thing again, and the Cabinet Secretary had to threaten people with being fired. There was a whole, huge, just general resistance to this thing, because it seemed so new and risky. You've got these PCR tests where the accuracy rate is very, very high, and then a lot of people couldn't get their head around the stats of the mass tests.

Q1191 **Jeremy Hunt:** The thing that's puzzling about weekly testing of NHS staff is that there were repeated calls in this place, from lots and lots of different people, to get on with it, from the start of the summer on, and it wasn't even announced as a plan until November, so it wasn't like anyone said, "We want to do weekly testing of NHS staff." It was actually not announced until November, and then the promise was to try and get it done by—I think—the first week of December. So why did it take so long even to accept that that should be the plan, given that we now know so many people picked up infections in hospitals?

Dominic Cummings: With respect, I don't think that's—I'm not arguing with you about the announcement; I can't remember now when definite announcements were made, but I was having meetings in April about testing NHS staff on as fast a basis as possible. I had meetings in July about getting mass tests out. And I had, literally, meetings almost every day of my government career, from 1 September till the day I left, on mass testing and this subject.

Q1192 **Jeremy Hunt:** So you wanted to do it. That's the point. It just wasn't announced as an objective. That's the point—

Dominic Cummings: No. 10 was pushing it. The team, the test and trace team that we had built, was pushing for it. That was definitely one of our core goals, yes.

Q1193 **Jeremy Hunt:** Last one from me on this section. You said earlier that you should have resigned probably in the spring and definitely in September. You did actually end up resigning at the end of the year. Can you understand how, to some people, it looks like you resigned after losing a power struggle in No. 10 but you didn't resign over issues that cost thousands of lives, and how that makes people angry?

Dominic Cummings: Well, there are so many crazy stories about what happened in No. 10 that are mostly untrue, so all I would say to people is: don't believe what you read in the newspapers about things like that.

Q1194 **Jeremy Hunt:** So your resignation had nothing to do with Lee Cain not being appointed to the position you wanted and things like that?

Dominic Cummings: My resignation was definitely connected to the fact that the Prime Minister's girlfriend was trying to change a whole bunch of different appointments at No. 10 and appoint her friends to particular jobs. In particular, she was trying to overturn the outcome of an official process about hiring a particular job, in a way that was not only completely unethical but was also clearly illegal. I thought the whole process about how the Prime Minister was behaving at that point was appalling. And all that was definitely part of why I went. However, this had all been—as I said to you, I had this conversation with him the night before my operation back in July. It was clear in July that our relations were very far from where they had been, and they took another terrible dive after the second lockdown, in October, because the Prime Minister knew that I blamed him for the whole situation, and I did. By 31 October, our relations were essentially already finished. The fact that his girlfriend also wanted rid of me was, you know, relevant but not the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem was fundamentally I regarded him as unfit for the job and I was trying to create a structure around him to try to stop what I thought were extremely bad decisions and push other things through against his wishes, and he had the view that he was Prime Minister and I should just be doing as he wanted me to. That is obviously not sustainable for very long. I only stayed because I was desperate to try and push through action to stop as many people dying as I could.

Once the second lockdown happened on 31st, it was obvious that I was going to be gone within days. Remember: I had already said in July that I was going to go by Friday 18 December, so it was not really anything.

The thing that I got wrong, and the thing that I terribly regret now is on Tuesday 22 September, after we had done that theoretical meeting, setting the future five or six weeks, which I had organised, and he saw all the data and he said that. At that point, I was already going in 12 weeks anyway. What I ought to have done is said to him then, "I am resigning in 48 hours. We can do this one way or we can do this the other way. If you announce that you are going to have a lockdown and take serious action now, I will leave, go quietly—we are all friends. If you don't, I will call a press conference and say, 'The Prime Minister is making a terrible decision that is going to kill thousands of people.'" I should have gambled on holding a gun to his head, essentially. Who knows if that would have worked or not? But fundamentally it was kind of all upside, given that my role there was basically done at that point.

So I apologise for not trying that. I should have done. I was dissuaded from it, because people basically thought, "Well, maybe you could help reverse this decision over the coming weeks." It is a constant problem: you stay because you think maybe you can change things. But in

retrospect now, seeing how things played out, lots of things are quite difficult to figure out hypothetically, but there is no doubt in my mind now that I made a mistake and that I should have gambled in that week.

Chair: Thank you.

Q1195 **Paul Bristow:** Mr Cummings, I have listened carefully to your testimony around decision making in September, but SAGE's advice on 21 September had a shortlist of options, only one of which was a circuit-breaker lockdown. Is it any wonder that the Prime Minister saw alternatives to lockdown given the weakness of that advice?

Dominic Cummings: Well, as we can see from March, often what is written down in SAGE papers is not really very close to the conversations that are in the room. So with respect, I would say that your picture of what was presented to the Prime Minister is not accurate. Patrick Vallance was very, very clear, Chris Whitty was very clear and the data was extremely clear that unless you act, thousands of people are going to die.

Q1196 **Paul Bristow:** Sorry, Mr Cummings, it says here in SAGE's September advice that, "A more effective response now may reduce the length of time for which some measures are required." "May" is not "will" is it?

Dominic Cummings: The word "may" does not mean the same as the word "will", no, but that is not what the conversation was in No. 10.

Q1197 **Paul Bristow:** Okay, all right. In your testimony and on social media you talk about an able few, many of whom are now "gone or leaving or planning to leave", and the rest, who are all "disastrously wrong/useless" get the promotions. There does not seem to be any in-between. Your world only sees heroes and villains. Is it really that black and white?

Dominic Cummings: No, of course not, but it is a basic problem inside the system that lots of very able people get weeded out from top jobs and lots of people who are not fit for them get promoted. That is a core problem in political parties and in the civil service.

Paul Bristow: Do you accept that there are some people who may be brilliant but who are also difficult and flawed and, in the end, impossible to satisfy?

Dominic Cummings: I didn't hear that very well.

Q1198 **Paul Bristow:** Do you accept that some people may be brilliant but are also difficult and flawed and, in the end, impossible to satisfy?

Dominic Cummings: Of course, but if you are trying to get a team at the top of Government to deal with crises you have to try and get the best talent that this country has to offer, and different kinds of talent. You need people who can think through very hard problems in a quantitative way, you need people who can make decisions effectively, you need people who can build things operationally at scale and you need to bring these skills together and integrate them. We didn't have that.

I am not suggesting, by the way, just so that we are completely clear, that I am at all putting myself in the category of good people who should be promoted—quite the opposite. I regarded my own position there as a weird quirk of history and my goal in January was to try and recruit a whole bunch of people who were much smarter and better able than me to deal with Government problems, so that I could make myself redundant, which I said publicly and which I believed.

Q1199 **Paul Bristow:** Just one final question. I want to return to your earlier comment about not being focused on coronavirus until a relatively late stage. One journalist has posted a message from someone who was working in No.10 at the time. With apologies for the language, it reads, "Disingenuous little fucker. The reason he wasn't paying attention is that his plan to derail Boris by pulling off his—"

Chair: Paul, I don't want any repetition of that language. You can edit it.

Q1200 **Paul Bristow:** Okay. "The reason he wasn't paying attention is that his plan to derail Boris by pulling off his putsch and having Cummings acolytes in every post with power was undone by the reality of the situation. I have never seen such a squirming nest of vicious contradiction embodied in a single individual." What is your response to that?

Dominic Cummings: I don't quite understand the accusation, I am afraid. What is it that I supposedly did in February?

Q1201 **Paul Bristow:** I guess it is saying that you were distracted—you say that your focus wasn't on covid until the back end of February, despite the fact that the WHO had already determined that this was an emergency, and that you were distracted with other things. The accusation is that you were distracted by placing your own acolytes in every post with power, and that was undone by the reality of the situation. Quite frankly, Mr Cummings, you have to work with other people, and I guess the accusation is that you didn't work well with others.

Dominic Cummings: Well, I think I worked well with some people; I didn't necessarily work well with others. Different people have different kinds of temperaments. I would stress that a lot of things that you read in the media about me are not correct. I would point out that on quite a few occasions I have built teams that have been successful, because I know how to build teams and I know how to manage them well.

The media stories about all kinds of things—about how relations were with civil servants and whatnot—are 99% nonsense. I would advise that you don't listen to them.

Q1202 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Mr Cummings, do you have any reasons to believe that the Prime Minister may have been distracted from leading a national response to the covid pandemic because of his own personal financial interest?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know exactly what you mean. It is certainly the case that in February he had a string—Obviously, it is a matter of

public record that he was distracted by finalising his divorce, his girlfriend wanted to announce being pregnant and an engagement, and his finances and all that sort of stuff. Certainly, mid-February he had a very difficult time in his private life, for sure.

Q1203 **Taiwo Owatemi:** What I am trying to get at is that given the fact that the Prime Minister is currently writing a book and the fact that he has reportedly spent time seeking private donations to fund his own lifestyle, do you think that that is a useful way for a Prime Minister to spend his time, given the fact that we were in a public health crisis?

Dominic Cummings: Well, obviously I think that the Prime Minister's focus should be on the Prime Minister's job. I made clear before this meeting my views on what he was doing regarding other things in No.10, but I don't think today is the day to go into that sort of stuff.

Q1204 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Fair enough. Moving on to communications, do you think that senior medical officers such as Professor Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance, working within the Government, were ever used during the evening press conferences as political props to present greater plausibility to the Government's covid-19 messaging, even when the message wasn't clear or was ineffective?

Dominic Cummings: I certainly believe that the Secretary of State, Matt Hancock, used Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty as shields for himself—yes. He used the whole "We are following the science" as a way so that he could always say, "Well, if things go wrong, we will blame the scientists and it is not my fault." I saw him discuss that with the Prime Minister and I think it was one of the many appalling things that Hancock did.

Q1205 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Do you think that was an acceptable way to use the time of senior medical officers, given that we were in a public health crisis?

Dominic Cummings: In principle, I think it was certainly a reasonable use of their time to give press conferences. I think that it was actually a good idea for us to do the press conferences at No. 10, with the Prime Minister and the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer. I think, in principle, that was the right thing to do. I was very strongly, actually, in favour of having the scientists and the medics just explain the reality about what was happening.

I think what was not right was the Secretary of State trying to use them essentially as a kind of shield for himself. That was unethical and obviously wrong.

Q1206 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Moving on to the matter of ethics, as you know, all MPs have to sign a code of conduct to say that we are going to be honest, we are going to be transparent and we are going to be accountable. Do you think that the Prime Minister and other Cabinet members—you have already expressed your concerns about Matt Hancock—were always transparent, honest and accountable to members of the public regarding the covid-19 pandemic?

Dominic Cummings: I think inevitably it's a mixed bag. I think that the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, did brilliantly. Dominic Raab has not got nearly enough credit as he should have done, because he had to step into an extraordinarily difficult situation, with the Prime Minister on his deathbed. Remember, when Raab took over, there was a conversation in No. 10 with the Cabinet Secretary and Lee Cain, director of communications, about calling a Cabinet to try and find a replacement for the Prime Minister in case he died. That is how serious the situation was.

Dominic had to just step into that environment in a completely kind of unparalleled—nobody had dealt with the situation that Dominic Raab faced, literally since Churchill in world war two, because you had crucial elements of the state gone, the Prime Minister on his deathbed, crucial people—the Cabinet Secretary—ill, blah, blah, blah.

Dominic Raab did an outstanding job. The Chancellor did an outstanding job. I have made my views on the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State clear.

Q1207 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Do you think the reason why the Prime Minister did not sack the Secretary of State was because he himself had made very similar mistakes during this pandemic, so in doing so, that would mean he would have brought his role into disrepute? Do you think that is the reason why the Prime Minister did not make such a decision?

Dominic Cummings: It's definitely the case that the Prime Minister was told that, contrary to my view—I said, "Sack him"; I said, "Sack him" almost every week, sometimes almost every day. He was told, though, that you should not sack him, you should keep him there, because he is the person you fire when the inquiry comes along.

My counter-argument to that was, if you leave him there, we are going to have another set of disasters in the autumn, and that is the critical thing. Forget the inquiry—God knows when that will bloody happen—we have got to get rid of this guy now, because every single week things are going disastrously wrong. The whole focus of how to deal with the politics of the inquiry is mental.

Q1208 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Let's just move on to autumn and how the tiering system was introduced. I know you said earlier that the tiering system was—*[Interruption.]*

Dominic Cummings: Sorry, I didn't hear what you said there. How the what was—

Taiwo Owatemi: The tiering system was introduced and that was when the Government started—

Chair: The Division bell is ringing here, so it is a bit hard to hear.

Dominic Cummings: Sorry, the Division bell is ringing. The something system is all we heard.

Taiwo Owatemi: The tiering system—how tiering was the beginning of ensuring that breaks were in place. How did we get to the point of having the tiering system? How was it decided?

Dominic Cummings: Goodness, I mean—

Taiwo Owatemi: Were you involved deciding on the tiering system? Did you agree when it was proposed?

Dominic Cummings: I was certainly involved in it. In principle, it made sense to have some kind of regional system. Again, if you look at the experience of east Asia, if you have an outbreak in parts of Korea, they don't shut the whole of Korea down, right? They have targeted, specific local action, to try to hit hotspots. What I wanted to do was try to get us as close as possible to that kind of a system.

Similarly, in Britain, in an ideal world, if you have an outbreak in Cornwall, we did not want to have to be shutting down the north of Scotland, right? We wanted to be able to have a more nuanced approach. In March, we didn't have any testing, we didn't have any proper information—we didn't know anything—so we were completely snookered and we just had to do a national lockdown.

The whole point of the shift to plan B and the building, testing, etc, was that we can then move to the east Asian approach, where the testing data you testing, sewage data—all of that can come together—so, fast, you can go, "Hotspot—Cornwall! Shut down there! That town, that town and that town, that area or whatever", but, "Scotland, carry on." That was the conceptual idea that we had, if I were to do it.

In practice, the way that it was actually worked out and actually implemented was full of holes and extremely problematic, to say the least—in practice. But I think the basic concept has to be right.

Q1209 **Taiwo Owatemi:** What were the holes? Do you think that the Government acted quickly enough to implement the restrictions? What were the holes in the tiering system, in the restrictions?

Dominic Cummings: In?

Taiwo Owatemi: You talked about having holes in the tiering system and the restrictions. What were they?

Dominic Cummings: It was put together chaotically. There were all sorts of problems. Are we doing it by town, are we doing it by region? If you draw a line there, will you just get people driving 30 miles to go to a pub across the line? Like lots of things, it was the victim of having to be cobbled together when under time pressure to do things, rather than having been thought out earlier on.

There were also second-order or reverberation effects. Because we couldn't get enforcement sorted out properly in various ways, then we could not do the kind of very specific hyper-local approach that places like

Korea did. Therefore, you have to do them bigger, therefore you annoy more people, therefore more people drive out of the area, etc, etc, so with the whole thing, we just didn't get into it.

Basically, we created it ad hoc because the Prime Minister wouldn't do the, "Let's try and smash it now", and get on. What should have happened is—well, what really should have happened is that we should never have let it get out of control anyway. Once you had let it get out of control, then in September we should have smashed it and got control, and then had a Korea-type targeted and specific approach.

Chair: I think we need to move on. Is that okay, Taiwo?

Taiwo Owatemi: May I quickly ask my last question?

Chair: Last one.

Q1210 **Taiwo Owatemi:** Earlier, you spoke about the fact that when the furlough system was introduced, there were no plans with that. As areas were entering into a new tiering system, was any financial plan properly drawn up or any modelling done to think about how areas like that would be funded?

Obviously, there were issues around some of the financial support, for example, provided to Manchester—the Government were giving £8 per person to help support that region. In preparing for the tier system, were there thoughts on how it would help individuals and business in the regions that were going into lockdown?

Dominic Cummings: In a nutshell, I would say that the Treasury did its best in a very, very difficult situation, but the Treasury had to deal with the fact that No. 10's policy was constantly shifting on the tiering and where the boundaries were, and with the Prime Minister's conversations with specific people. So the whole thing was just so fast moving and chaotic that there was never any—in a nutshell, no, there was not a kind of, "Here it is: we've got an exact plan, we know how we're going to deal with all of these different local areas."

That had not been worked out in the summer, and therefore it was all kind of bodged together in the autumn, in an environment where the policy was having to be created, the implementation was having to be bodged together, and the Prime Minister was constantly changing his mind about this area or that area or harder here or less hard there, so the Treasury were constantly playing catch-up on it all.

Chair: Okay. I think we need to move on, Taiwo. Did you have a very brief question?

Q1211 **Taiwo Owatemi:** I was just going to ask whether that means that, essentially, numbers were just decided randomly in someone's head when it came to the money.

Dominic Cummings: There was definitely a lot of crazy randomness in terms of how money was apportioned, and decisions that didn't really make sense—correct.

Taiwo Owatemi: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Taiwo. Finally, we will go to Chris Clarkson and then to Sarah Owen.

Q1212 **Chris Clarkson:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Cummings, for your forbearance as we go to the back end of hour seven.

You have already indicated that you think the Government was slow off the mark after advice was given in September that we needed to consider a second national lockdown. My own constituency of Heywood and Middleton, along with the rest of Greater Manchester, was placed into tier 2 restrictions on 14 October, and then on 23 October moved into tier 3 restrictions.

Do you think the Government was acting quick enough to raise tiering and restrictions in areas where there was an obvious increase in cases—if not, why not? And why did you advocate for this tiering system?

Dominic Cummings: The simple answer is—I will take your second question first. As I explained earlier on, the whole point was to try and shift from a world in which you've got no real data and no real understanding in March—and no real testing—and therefore you are forced to have national measures for everything, to a world in which you've got good testing; you've got good data; and you can be hyper-targeted in the way that they are in successful east Asian countries. That was the conceptual approach that we were trying to take.

I think that that was definitely the right approach to take, you know, because after all, that is the way in which the countries that have been the most successful on the face of the planet have done it. So I think the kind of direction was correct; it was just that, like lots of things, the thinking was done too late and operationally it was not done well.

Q1213 **Chris Clarkson:** I would agree that there were some operational inconsistencies. For example, when Liverpool went into tier 3, personal care facilities like gyms stayed open; in Greater Manchester, they were closed. Who built that into the model?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know, I'm afraid.

Q1214 **Chris Clarkson:** Okay. Very quickly, it sounds like you gave quite a lot of advice during this entire process and, according to you, most of it was disregarded. Why did you stay on? If you had the opportunity to be a whistleblower, rather than a whistleblower without a whistle, why did you not step out of Government earlier and call out what you saw as these egregious breaches?

Dominic Cummings: Well, as I said, I thought about it a few times. I discussed it with senior people; I discussed it with the Cabinet Secretary and others. These decisions can often be difficult. I'd watched the March

situation, and then I'd watched how he decided that, basically, he wished that he'd never done lockdown and shouldn't have been bounced into it and blah blah.

I was extremely tempted to go in the summer, but various people said to me, "The autumn is going to be a disaster. He's in a complete let-it-rip mode, to just let everything open up and keep the beaches open. You've got to stay and try to control the shopping trolley, otherwise God knows what's going to happen."

Part of the problem was that people thought that, like in 2019, I had a lot of influence over the Prime Minister and that, on a lot of things, he would do what I said. Whilst that had been the case in 2019, from 10 o'clock on election night—as soon he had an 80-seat majority—that situation changed almost immediately.

As I said, I definitely should have gone in September, without any shadow of a doubt in my mind now. The reason why I didn't was because it was clear we were heading for another disaster and there was going to be another whole set of meetings, and I thought, "Well, maybe I'll be able to force this through."

Q1215 **Chris Clarkson:** Irrespective of what other people thought about your input, clearly at this stage you must have reasonably assumed that you did not have the type of influence that you thought you did—in fact, you said as much after 10 o'clock on 12 December. Surely, the logical thing then would have been to take an alternative course of action.

Dominic Cummings: As I said—I mean, I am half agreeing with you. I think I definitely should have gone in September.

Q1216 **Chris Clarkson:** And what do you think the outcome would have been if you had?

Dominic Cummings: I don't know, but as I said 20 minutes ago, I think it was one of those gambles that was worth doing. My relations with him were already broken. At the latest, I was going to stay there until Friday 18 December, so we were only talking about 12 weeks anyway.

If I had gambled then and said, "I will basically call a press conference and blow this thing sky high", and then he had caved in and done it, tens of thousands of people would now still be alive, and we could have avoided the whole horror of the delays and the variants and Christmas and the nightmare that the country has gone through in the first quarter of this year. As I have tried to say, I think I made the wrong decision, and I apologise for that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Chris. The final Member is Sarah Owen.

Q1217 **Sarah Owen:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Cummings, for your time today. I really appreciate it, because we have had far longer with you than we have ever had to be able to scrutinise the Secretary of State

or the Prime Minister, and I think that is a real problem.

I just have a few quick questions. You have accused Matt Hancock of lying repeatedly. Will you publish the evidence publicly today?

Dominic Cummings: I will definitely have a look at evidence that I've got. In general, it is better not to get into the business of publishing people's private messages and WhatsApps, and I don't want to embarrass—you know, some of these people are in position now, and publishing WhatsApps with the Cabinet Secretary and people like that is a very big step.

What I think should happen, far better than me randomly throwing WhatsApps out on the internet, is that you, the MPs, should force the Government—MPs have the power to force the Government to face this reality and to discuss the things that I have discussed today. You have the power to do that, and what should happen is that the MPs force this situation.

Sarah Owen: We have that power—

Q1218 **Chair:** I do think it is important that, if as serious an accusation as lying is made, that should be corroborated after this hearing. There are other things that can hang in the air, but I think that is a specific requirement.

Sarah Owen: Perhaps it could just be evidence given to the Committee and not published on the internet.

Chair: I am sure the Committee will find a way to receive it.

Dominic Cummings: I am happy to discuss that process. Also, obviously, I am going to have to take some legal advice on the whole thing as well, and about the public inquiry and whatnot, but I think that people like the former Cabinet Secretary and others should be here in this seat like me, under oath, explaining what happened, and like me, saying what we think we got right and what we think we got wrong.

Q1219 **Sarah Owen:** Thank you, Mr Cummings. I am going to move on to procurement, because you mentioned it several times as being chaotic and not fit for purpose, and as something that you wanted to change before the pandemic. Now, that falls under the Cabinet Office. Do you think that Michael Gove is culpable in any of the chaos that you have described around PPE procurement, or any of the contracts that have been dished out around covid and our response to covid?

Dominic Cummings: I don't think, really, that—I don't think that, really, Gove had a huge amount of responsibility, in a sense, for this. There were officials in the Cabinet Office, yes, who were in charge of certain aspects of this, but procurement is not just done centrally from the Cabinet Office. Every Department is running its own procurement operation, so what happened during the covid crisis is that some parts of the procurement exercise inside DH were pulled out of DH and given to the Cabinet Office to run. That is correct, but it is not like Gove was in charge of Government procurement.

Q1220 **Sarah Owen:** He is the Minister responsible for the Department in Government that is responsible for procurement. Are you saying that he shares no burden of blame in this situation at all?

Dominic Cummings: I am sure that he would say, like all of us involved—I don't think there is a single senior person involved with this who would say that they didn't make some serious mistakes, and I am sure Michael would say the same: that he made mistakes on it. But at the heart of it—we went into the crisis with the wrong system, and everybody had to try to bodge a way through that.

Q1221 **Sarah Owen:** Thank you. I am going to move on to the issue of lockdowns. Who in the Cabinet was a block or delay on the second lockdown or was sceptical about lockdowns in general?

Dominic Cummings: I don't remember the Cabinet being involved in the discussion.

Q1222 **Sarah Owen:** There was no discussion about the second lockdown with the Cabinet. It was entirely the Prime Minister.

Dominic Cummings: Not in a meaningful way. As I said, I never attended Cabinet in 2020. I tried to keep out of political stuff. I didn't attend Cabinet. The way that Cabinet works now—it is largely a Potemkin exercise, so I saved my time and didn't want to go. I didn't attend PMQs meetings all year either. The first time I saw PMQs was a couple of weeks ago—since the election. There may have been one of the Potemkin Cabinet meetings about the lockdown, but I was in the meeting where it was actually decided. It was the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Secretary, Vallance, Whitty, me and other officials there arguing this stuff out, and it was the Prime Minister's decision. There may have been a Cabinet meeting, but that was just for show, not as a relevant part of the decision-making process—unless I have completely forgotten some Cabinet that was significant.

Q1223 **Sarah Owen:** Thank you. You have told the Committee that the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, was totally supportive of lockdown in 2020. That is a pretty interesting statement and endorsement from you, given that you have been pretty scathing of other Ministers. Did the Chancellor provide scientific evidence or medical advice to back up the safety of his eat out to help out scheme, which literally had his name on it?

Dominic Cummings: As I said before, I wasn't really involved with the eat out to help out thing, so I don't really have very much useful to say about it. Just for complete clarity on what I am saying about the Chancellor and lockdown, there had been stories saying that he was a block and tried to throw mud in the gears, and that he and the Treasury were trying to stop the first lockdown. What I was saying was there were powerful voices in the Treasury who were saying, "The real danger here is economic, and we shouldn't do this." But in the meetings that I had, the Chancellor never tried to stop that happening. In fact, when I went through plan B with him and said, "Here's what I think we should do, given that this thing is either wave 1 or wave 2—let's shift to plan B and

try to build all of this stuff and escape," the Chancellor was completely supportive. In fact, what I ought to have said earlier and forgot is that one of the key architects of that plan B was actually the Chancellor's chief economic advisor, Mike Webb. He worked with Ben Warner and Marc Warner on trying to figure out what the hell this plan B looked like. So those stories are false.

In the autumn, the Chancellor was extremely sceptical of what Hancock and the Department of Health were saying, but he could appreciate my argument about where I was coming from. His argument was, first, that there is no plan from the Department of Health on what we do next. Secondly, we cannot be in a situation where we just constantly trolley from one side to another: "Eat out to help out, get everybody back to work—aah! Lock down again, then a circuit breaker. Stay at home." Then, in three weeks' time, we were having a discussion and the Prime Minister was like, "Well, we can do this maybe for two weeks and then we'll tell everyone to come back." The Chancellor was saying, quite rightly, "The economy doesn't work like that. If you're going to say to people now that we are going to have to do another lockdown, you have to realise that a lot of people are going to conclude that the Government has lost control of the situation. They told everybody to work from home before, then they told everyone not to work from home. Now, they are telling everyone that there's going to be another lockdown. A lot of businesses are basically going to say, 'That's it until the spring,' and they are going to shut the doors. You need to understand that. Hancock and the Department of Health don't have any plan for that, and we can't just keep careering around backwards and forwards like this. Otherwise, we will have complete bedlam." So what the Chancellor was begging for was, finally, a consistent plan that we could stick to for more than two days without being knocked off course by *The Telegraph.*

Q1224 **Sarah Owen:** Thank you. So the reports from September 2020 that the Prime Minister did not impose a new lockdown over fears that Rishi Sunak would quit are untrue, are they?

Dominic Cummings: Completely—100%. I would know; I was there. The Chancellor never threatened to quit. He did not tell me that at the time. I had private meetings with him about the situation and all the difficulties of it. He said to me, "For God's sake, please don't you quit. I know you want to, but don't." That story is definitely false. He was definitely not throwing around resignation threats. He was just desperate for a plan that was coherent and that the Government could stick to, and like lots of us he was completely at his wits' end about the shopping trolley.

Q1225 **Sarah Owen:** Some people might ask whether you are hedging your bets slightly, with an eye on a future Administration run by Rishi Sunak.

Dominic Cummings: I think everyone, from my wife to everybody in Westminster and Whitehall, will agree that the less everyone hears of me in the future, the better.

Q1226 **Sarah Owen:** Why do you think the Government are blocking a covid

inquiry now? Do you think that the 128,000 people who lost their lives, and their loved ones, deserve answers now?

Dominic Cummings: Yes, as I have said all day today, I think that they deserve answers now. It is genuinely terrible, the idea of trying to punt all this off to after the next election. When you have a crisis this bad, you have to face reality. It is beyond absurd that we are in a situation where millions of people watched the Government have an official policy last March and now No. 10 tries to claim that it didn't exist. My point is that, if they have lost the plot that badly in there, what on earth else is going on in that building?

Q1227 **Sarah Owen:** This one is quite is specific. You tweeted, and have spoken today, about the unwillingness to learn from east and south-east Asian countries, because people were saying, "Asians all do as they're told; it won't work here." Who said that, and how much do you think that this outdated racist stereotyping has contributed to the number of deaths in the UK?

Dominic Cummings: I don't want to get into quoting things like that, because I think it would be unfair on some of the scientists and others involved. It is undoubtedly the case that there was a general view— I wrote about this in, I think, 2014 or something, about the Department for Education. There is a general problem in Whitehall of parochialism. People don't want to look at what is happening abroad, and there is a specific issue of thinking that we cannot really learn from east Asia. That has been around for many, many years.

I think, actually, that a lot of senior people would openly admit to you— We all know what the conversations were in January in February. I have WhatsApps between me and all kinds of senior people. The view was that the public will not accept lockdown and the kind of surveillance involved in the whole test-and-trace infrastructure. Mine and others' argument was that, actually, if you look at somewhere like Taiwan, you have a very small but serious curtailment of civil liberties, in some ways. If you want to go in and out of the country, you are quarantined. They do not have a joke system like we have. You are in a hotel; it is patrolled; you are not leaving—forget it. It is ultra-serious. But then if you walk around Taiwan, life is basically normal; I have friends who live there.

If you are faced with the choice between a massive wave killing hundreds of thousands or that, I think almost everybody in this country would say, "Let's go down that route." That is the route that we should have started to go down in January. We started to think about that in mid-March, but it took a few months, really, for that new thinking to develop into real policy and real operational capabilities in certain ways. You don't change big cultural barriers like that, about learning from abroad, quickly. I think it will take time for Whitehall to adapt.

Q1228 **Sarah Owen:** This is my last question. You have described the PM's running of No.10 as chaotic, incompetent and lacking judgment at times. Do you think Boris Johnson is a fit and proper person to get us through

this pandemic?

Dominic Cummings: No.

Q1229 **Chair:** Reflecting on the autumn and the winter, we are approaching this with hindsight, clearly, as we do everything. What we do know that happened was that there was a Kent variant, and it has contributed most of the deaths since the summer. But we didn't know about it in September. In evidence to the Science and Technology Committee, the chairman of NERVTAG, Professor Peter Horby, on 23 December was asked if the Government had acted in a timely way. He said, "I think they have. We sent our first note to them raising a significant concern on the 18th"—that is 18 December—"and on the 19th measures were put in place". That is at odds with the kind of repeated cycle of delay and inaction that you are describing, is it not?

Dominic Cummings: I don't think that's right, no, because although the specifics about Kent may only have come up at that time, it was certainly the case that variants were being discussed in September. I had scientists say to me in September that one of the reasons why we must not let this get out of control is the problem with variants. If I knew about it in September, that means that other people were definitely talking about it well before then.

Q1230 **Chair:** But not a specific variant; it was a concern about variants in general.

Dominic Cummings: I can't remember the detail of my conversations now on variants, but it is certainly the case that I had specific warnings from scientists—not just any old scientists but scientists who had been repeatedly proved right, so I took what they said particularly carefully.

Now, I was looking back over the whole thing and doing a kind of scorecard of, "Who's been right about this and who's been wrong about it?" And the people who were right about it said to me in September, "Watch out for this variance thing. It could suddenly get very nasty. You could have a really, really serious problem with it." And the same people who were right about that in September—the reason why I brought the issue up recently publicly was that the same people were saying the same thing to me in January. They were saying, "The Government is not acting properly. We still don't have a proper border policy."

Q1231 **Chair:** The Committee has taken extensive evidence on variants and you will know that variants arise all the time, in their thousands; that is the nature of viruses. So, given that we were in September, we now have the benefit of the hindsight that tells us that we know that there was a particularly dangerous variant—an infectious variant; the Kent variant. We also know that we have vaccines, which in September and October were not approved for use. So, would it have been reasonable, based on a generalised concern about variants—not a specific concern that one had been discovered that was very infectious—to say that imposing lockdown restrictions without any particular intelligence as to a variant that required it a recipe for permanent lockdown?

Dominic Cummings: With respect, that is not at all the situation that we actually faced. In September, the argument was not at all about variants; it was about the existing case. And the point was that we were going to have to lock down in five weeks because of the existing variant. The argument in September wasn't, "Lock down now pre-emptively, because of variants". The argument in September was, "The data on current hospitalisations, current cases, ICUs, blah blah blah, is all completely clear. You are going to have to lock down at the end of October to stop the NHS being washed away again."

The whole lesson of this situation is—once you get to a position like that, there are only two logical positions. Logical position A is, "Deep breath, forget it, we're going to let the wave crash and it's going to be what it's going to be." Option B is, "We're not going to do that. That is inconceivable. The risks of it are too high. Therefore, we're going to have to lock down."

As soon as you make the decision that we are going to have to lock down, you do it today, because that is what exponential curves are. The faster you act, the faster you get on top of it and then the faster it exponentially decays. That means you do not have to have it in place as long, it does not have to be so deep and everything else. That is what the No. 10 data team were saying to the Prime Minister in September and what the chief scientist and the chief medical officer were saying. It was not anything to do with variants. And that is exactly what happened.

When we all came back on Friday the 31st and we looked at the data, it was basically what Catherine Cutts had read out five weeks earlier. That is why the Prime Minister was so enraged by the situation, because he knew that I and others were looking at him, saying, "You were told. Catherine Cutts read out all this information to you, and that is what we are now looking at. Now you are doing it again. And now the lockdown's going to have to be worse, the destruction's going to be worse. And that means that thousands of people have caught it in the intervening five weeks who are now going to die, and we'll be doing lockdown anyway. And we're going to trash the economy more anyway."

Q1232 **Chair:** So in that circumstance, before we had vaccines that had been approved—quite a long time before they were approved—with that rise in infections, your advice would have been to engage in a series of lockdowns to keep infections at a low enough level for an indeterminate future. Would that be right?

Dominic Cummings: I left before the big conversations about variants happened. As I said, I had some conversations about variants in September at the latest—possibly even August; I cannot remember now. My view in September was, "If you whack it now—hard—we get on top of it." Also, remember, at that time we were in the process—I was spending a very large part of each day and each weekend working on the mass testing thing. So we were having these things balanced out, and I was saying to the PM, "Look, okay, we have totally screwed it up and we should have been doing this mass testing since March, but we didn't

realise until July. Okay. We are now pushing everything we possibly can behind it. The Cabinet Secretary is doing a brilliant job, and he is pushing all the officials behind it. If we smash it now"—in September—"then we've got a chance when we come out in a month's time to come out with millions of these tests starting to be available, and then the game could be different. The tests can also help in terms of dealing with the variants." That was the fundamental argument in September.

Q1233 **Chair:** That testing was the extra variable.

Dominic Cummings: If we had done that in September and really got control of it, then you would not have seen this great spike, which we only just started to see coming down in October. Then he said, "Oh well, now we've got to come out of it. We can't keep this going any more." Then, of course, the variant kicks off—but from a very high level. If we had crushed it in September, by the time the variants came along we would have been in a fundamentally different position.

This is not hindsight. James Phillips, Patrick Vallance and others were making this argument in September.

Q1234 **Chair:** I think we should conclude. This is a lessons learnt inquiry, as we said some hours ago at the beginning, and we have taken a lot of evidence from a lot of different people. This is the penultimate session before we write our report. Just reflecting back on your time in Downing Street dealing with the pandemic, what are the key lessons that you would learn—lessons that can be applied?

Dominic Cummings: I think there is a general principle of making things like SAGE and scientific advice more open. There is an obvious question about responsibility: a really fundamental question about how the British state works, about power between Ministers and officials and about who is actually in charge of things and who can actually form teams. In normal Government business, the assumption is, "Well, we can all live with a bit of friction to have this kind of division of responsibilities and muddle along," but it is completely fatal when you are dealing with a really serious thing. When you are dealing with a really serious thing like this, you need to get a great team that knows exactly what the goal is and exactly who is responsible for what. The Whitehall culture of how responsibility is deliberately diffused is intrinsically hostile to high-performance management.

If you had Bill Gates himself or any great people from history who really understand how to run these kind of teams, the first time you put them in a job, all of them would say, "How the hell am I supposed to manage that if I can't pick who the team is, I can't fire them and I can't bring people in?" If there is one change you could make in terms of the civil service, the HR system should change so that, except a tiny fraction of national security oddities, which are not really relevant, all appointments—fundamentally 99-plus per cent of civil service jobs—should be open by default. The competition for them should be open by default. We have got so many brilliant people in this country and then we have a civil service

system that literally puts a massive barrier up and says, "We are going to recruit all these things internally," like a caste system. It is a completely crackers way of doing things.

During this thing, we had to go out and get external people to come in and provide all kinds of crucial skills, but that shouldn't be just something that you do because there is a crisis. The British system should be open, so that we can get the best people in the country to the best jobs.

Now I know from conversations that there are lots of senior people who agree with me, but parts of Whitehall will fight to the death to stop a culture of open-by-default jobs. But if you are going to make one change in the system, that is one of the most crucial.

The other thing is really thinking hard about incentives, because people are not incentivised to tell the truth. They are not incentivised to think through hard problems. They are not incentivised for operational delivery. People are incentivised to keep their heads down, to back up the system when it fails, and the culture is that senior people are constantly appointed to jobs on the basis of, "Are they a good chap? Are they not going to rock the boat?"

Actually being really good at your job and operational delivery when it counts is not taken seriously. Everyone wants to have stupid words like "strategy" in their job title, but the people who actually get things done are not respected, often, inside the system. That is a huge point. That connects, finally, to the meeting culture of how we do things. Over and over again in this crisis, we would just about get to the point where the crucial thing would be exposed and some senior person, in terror, would say, "Let us take this offline." I would sometimes shout, "No! Let's not take this offline. Let's keep it online. We are just almost about to get to the bloody point." But you have got this culture, constantly, in which things are elided away—let's not bring up, let's not embarrass anybody, let's not really get to the heart of the problem. Again, that is normal in Whitehall, but when you are dealing with a problem like this, it is a complete and utter disaster.

Q1235 **Chair:** You fell into that trap yourself, you said this morning.

Dominic Cummings: Yeah, we were all in these ludicrous meetings with people saying, "Take it offline, take it offline, take it offline."

Q1236 **Jeremy Hunt:** First of all, thank you very much for giving evidence today for over seven hours. That is really appreciated.

I want to ask, finally, about one of your last comments, which is that the Prime Minister is not fit and proper to do his job. I just want to ask you about your own record, about which you have been admirably honest today.

You are someone who attended SAGE, who was known to take a great interest in science, but it wasn't until 11 March that you advised the Prime Minister that we needed to change direction. It then took more than two

months after that before we had a test-and-trace system set up. You then didn't win the argument for the circuit breaker in September; we didn't have weekly testing of NHS staff until the end of November.

Applying exactly the same standards, do you think you did your job in a fit and proper way last year?

Dominic Cummings: I think there is no doubt whatsoever that there are many thousands of people in this country who could have done my job much better than me. That is unarguable.

Q1237 **Chair:** You have been very critical of many individuals and, indeed, the apparatus of the state. As Jeremy said at the beginning of the hearing, you were very clear that the advice that SAGE had given was advice that was then followed by the Government. You hadn't attended the Cobra meetings—

Dominic Cummings: With respect, I didn't quite exactly say that. I said I can't remember exactly what meetings I attended. It is possible I did attend some of the Cobra meetings in February. I was certainly paying close attention to it, and not attending some of the Cobra meetings chaired by Hancock is not a sign of not taking something seriously.

Q1238 **Chair:** But I think you accept from the evidence that we have heard that you could have—should have, I think, in your view—done more earlier to assert the case that you became convinced of.

Dominic Cummings: Undoubtedly the case.

Q1239 **Chair:** We all operate through hindsight. Last spring, you edited your blog to better be able to claim foresight, with the benefit of hindsight.

Dominic Cummings: No, that is not what I did.

Q1240 **Chair:** Do you think you are falling into that trap—which is a very human trap—here?

Dominic Cummings: With respect, that is not what I did. I think that when you have these kinds of group-think episodes, kind of by definition, the reason why they happen is that certain kinds of ideas take hold, and you have an institutional setting in which people who understand why those things are wrong are kind of excluded from the process. That is what happened.

The lesson of that, as I said earlier on, is openness, because the people who alerted me to this were not people inside the system. It was people like Marc Warner who came to me and said, "Hang on a second, there is something terribly, terribly wrong with this." That shows the scale of the problem, and the nature of it as well. If this had been exposed even a few weeks earlier than it was, then the whole story, I think, would have been different. I did go to people; I did try to get outside help. This was, of course, portrayed in the media as "Terrible Cummings tries to influence SAGE" and "Why's he even attending SAGE?" and everything else, but I took the view that I ought to listen to SAGE meetings in February, and I

ought to try and understand this as well as I could do. I could sense that the communications between SAGE, the Department of Health, the Cabinet Office and back round to No. 10 were failing. That was my sense, and that sense proved to be correct. It clearly was massively and radically failing, but if I had gone to people earlier—if I had gone to outside people earlier—then I would have realised earlier that we were all making a big mistake.

Chair: As my co-Chair, Jeremy Hunt, said, you have been very generous with your time. This is a lessons learnt inquiry. We will, two weeks tomorrow, hear from the Health Secretary. There are various points that you have agreed that you will follow up in writing with the Committee, so we look forward to that, and then we will reflect on all of the evidence you have given today when it comes to our report to Parliament. That concludes this session of the Joint Committee.