

View from Westminster May 2021

Inhabitants of Westminster have recently been reporting a strange noise reverberating around the corridors of power. Further analysis reveals it was a massive sigh of relief coming from the shed in David Cameron's garden as he realises his own misdemeanours have been shunted out of the news by the cash for curtains scandal.

The month commenced with the focus foursquare on the former Prime Minister and his lobbying efforts on behalf of a cast of characters with names lifted straight out of a Marvel comic book. It was a salacious smorgasbord of sleaze. It dragged in civil servants who were topping up the salary with a spot of private sector moonlighting and suggested pretty much every waif and stray who walked down Whitehall during the Cameron years had a Downing Street desk and business card.

As is the Westminster way, an inquiry was soon set up to sweep the whole thing under the carpet...I mean propose robust and meaningful reform to the lobbying rules for ex ministers and advisers. In the meantime, Boris Johnson, for reasons known only to himself, decided to launch a nuclear missile at his former Chief Adviser by dragging him into the mess over what was a reasonably peripheral part of the story involving James Dyson, Rishi Sunak and the taxation treatment of scientists asked to provide ventilation equipment.

Dominic Cummings, being the shy and retiring chap that he is...responded with a nicely written 1000-word blog. Unfortunately, his words contained some rather serious allegations, the most prominent of which implied that the refurbishment of the Downing Street flat might have been initially conducted on the never-never. He also covered off alleged interference into leak inquiries from the Prime Minister to avoid a domestic at home, taxation questions from benefit in kind donations, and whether Boris made some crass comments about dead bodies piling up.

Forget a John Lewis Nightmare...the polemic from Cummings represented a political crisis that was the biggest since...the last one... For Conservatives, there is just pure bafflement that the Prime Minister picked a fight with Dominic Cummings in the middle of a pre-election period when the polls looked solid for them. Labour meanwhile has the challenge of dusting down the old Tory Sleaze mantra and making it stick in an age where polls aren't so great, people have tuned out in a haze of vaccination euphoria and the heartland of Hartlepool is on a knife edge. It is ultimately however a story that only has further to run should the accusations against the Prime Minister stand up. Mr Cummings is appearing before a committee in Parliament shortly where he has promised to answer any question asked of him. It will, on its own merits, be blockbuster television.

Whether the public share that view however is debatable. Recent polling suggests Mr Johnson has extended his lead in the who-would-make-the-best-PM race over Mr Starmer by 5pct points in the last week, taking him 15% ahead. One wonders what Mr Johnson, or indeed Mr Starmer, has to do to move the dial. Labour advisers have always insisted their man would come good when the pandemic was over, and peacetime commences. To that end, this great scandal might have come too soon for maximum exploitation. The forthcoming elections will reveal that. One man who it hasn't come too soon for though is the former Prime Minister, who will relish the opportunity to retreat his successor has accorded him. Back to the shed in peace for Mr Cameron. Politics is a funny old game...