

A warning. This episode contains strong. Actually, let me go further. The strongest language from the very outset. And for once, it's not mate-less who's to blame.

This is a Global Player original podcast. You called Ministers useless fuckpigs morons, cunts, in emails and WhatsApps to your professional colleagues. Do you think you contributed to a lack of effectiveness on the part of Ministers and of the Cabinet?

No, I think I was reflecting a widespread view amongst competent people at the centre of power at the time about the calibre of a lot of senior people who are dealing with this crisis extremely badly. Slow down, please Mr Cummings. I love the slow down. He's speaking in four-letter words. How can he slow down much further? Those were the ones we definitely all understood quite clearly. That was Dominic Cummings in front of the COVID inquiry being asked by the KC, the questioner, about those messages, WhatsApps, texts that he sent to friends in government discussing, describing members of the Cabinet. And what is coming out of the COVID inquiry is a picture of absolute abject chaos, indecision and dysfunction at the very heart of government at a time of global crisis. Welcome to the news agents.

The News Agents

It's John. It's Emily. And I think the giggles and the laughter is because we're reflecting on frankly, mate, listen I, are used to salty language, but we have been exposed to a whole new word and we shouldn't detain ourselves when there are really serious issues about what happened

with COVID. But a fuck peak. I've never heard of that. We're actually having an editorial discussion right now between the studio and the gallery about what one is and where it first came from. I think we can safely say it might be a Dominic Cummings copyright on that one. But I think underneath the language, and this is where we're going to sort of take the debate, is this sense of WhatsApp messages suddenly revealing just the level of utter scorn that people right at the heart of government had for their colleagues, people who were in charge, people who were actually trying to make the decisions at that time.

And it's one thing for Dominic Cummings, who was an outsider who was brought in as a special advisor to express these kind of sulfurous views on them. But there were civil servants expressing sulfurous views about ministers, about the prime minister. And you know what's extraordinary? I had breakfast this morning with a former very senior civil servant. He was saying to me, the one thing you learn in public service, the one thing above all, is don't write anything down you wouldn't want to be made public. And Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, has been writing stuff down saying he's exasperated at the end of his tether at the impossibility of the prime minister to make any decision and stick to it. And right the way through, the scorn that everybody has for everybody else is quite remarkable. Yeah. And I think we might be at peak transparency right now, because you know that from here onwards, no one is ever going to allow those WhatsApp messages to last on their phones again, or people will find ways of making them disappear.

It will be the Snapchat age, or it will be an age of swapping over your phone or whatever.

I don't think we will ever again see this kind of transparency. And I guess it's a reflection of a slight sort of verbal end of days feeling, you know, those months between January and March, where things were moving so quickly, or according to some, not quickly enough in terms of our own response, must have felt like all the old rules were out the window. Everything that was about process and minutes and meetings and sitting around having lengthy discussions was no longer

viable or credible, because it all had to work much more instantly than that. And I think all of us can understand the need for that increase, if you like, of informality and speed, because so much was changing so quickly. But what this leaves open is just the strength of feeling that you might have had at the water cooler, but you would never ever see in those four letter words. What you get the impression is that two things were happening in parallel. You still had ministers going home with their red boxes and working through the details and stuff like this, in the time on a tradition that goes back kind of 100, 150 years of ministerial government. But you also have, at the same time, WhatsApp, where instant decisions are being taken and instant reposts are being given, and the language is much more salty. There is nothing civil servant about it. And in terms of government inquiries that have taken place over the decades, I mean, the Chilcot inquiry was pretty devastating about government decision making in the lead-up and explanation for the war in Iraq that was very critical of Tony Blair by Sir John Chilcot. This is of a different order altogether. It is showing shambles at the very heart of government, and it is absolutely unsparing in its view of how decision making is working in this government. Well, Dominic Cummings, as we record at one o'clock, is still speaking in the inquiry earlier this morning. We heard from Lee Cain, and I think it's fair to say that the tenor of Lee Cain's argument was actually much more generous towards the former prime minister to Boris Johnson. So Lee Cain was the director of communication at the time. He was his commsman. Yeah, exactly. An A to Boris Johnson. And he's quite cautious, at least when he sets out what happened in those very early months, January, February of 2020, that he doesn't think Boris Johnson was to blame. He doesn't blame him for taking a two-week holiday. He doesn't blame him for not going to the Cobra meetings. He doesn't blame him for assuming that everything is being dealt with by other people because he's been told that it is. And then we get this from him, when he's asked about whether Boris Johnson handled Covid well in those months up to lockdown March. What will probably be clear in Covid, it was the wrong crisis for this prime minister skillset, which is different, I think, from not potentially being up to the job of being prime minister. It's very damning, but it's very quietly damning. And what he goes on to explain is that Boris's strengths, Boris Johnson's strengths, are in the politicking of deal-making. He praises him for how he handled Brexit. I mean, we can have that debate another time. But in Lee Cain's view, the things that Johnson can actually manage are the things that have political gamesmanship involved. And when it comes to a virus, he couldn't. He couldn't deal with it. And he oscillated between one decision and another decision. And whilst Lee Cain praises him for saying, yeah, you know, it's good to spend time thinking about your decision-making before you actually make them. It's good to check evidence and all the rest of it. He doesn't think that's what Boris Johnson was doing. He said Boris Johnson had that behaviour trait of just hearing the last thing that was said to him in the room. It's what we often say of Donald Trump, funny enough, you know, you go along with the last thing that somebody said and you make that your policy. And as Emily says, we're recording this as stuff is still coming out just on the Trump point. I mean, that's when I was in the US. And I suspect there were similar things going on in the White House where you had very experienced people from the Institute of Health saying to Donald Trump, this is what we need to do and the Centers for Disease Control and Trump is trying to avoid it. And the decision

making, I would guess, in the US administration was almost mirroring the shambles that we're learning about with Boris Johnson. I mean, let's just consider a couple of the things that have been said by Boris Johnson that have been reported to the inquiry in Boris Johnson's own words about his views on shutdown. Yesterday, we learned why destroy the economy for people who will die anyway. That was yesterday. Today, the virus is just nature's way of dealing with old people. So Boris Johnson just made a very crude decision. And actually, a lot of healthcare rests on this is how much of your resources should be pushed into end of life care. And Boris Johnson was making the argument in characteristically, Johnsonian language, why should we be shutting down the UK economy for a bunch of people who are already in God's waiting room and about to go anyway. Lee Cain has also been talking about the cabinet and council for the inquiry put this to him. I want to press you a little bit, Mr Cain, about whether the extent to which you endorse what Mr Cummings was saying here. He's clearly saying, isn't he, that the reason that you and others are driving and directing is because those who should be doing it, that is the cabinet office, are not. To use his words, they are terrifyingly shit. Do you agree with that? I might not quite use the same language, but generally, yes. I mean, what we're getting here is this picture. And I think we should acknowledge that this is clearly one-sided. It's from people that we already knew, thought very little of Boris Johnson by the time they left number 10. Dominic Cummings, Lee Cain, got increasingly frustrated with the way that COVID was being handled and with the way that Boris Johnson was governing and they exited in a fairly insolubrious way in November of that year. But I think what this is showing us is that even in those early days, they felt that they were dealing with somebody who was not on top of the brief and who was potentially making the kind of decisions that was going to be lethal, that were going to make things much, much worse for very many people in this country if they caught COVID. And also, this touches not just on the cabinet and the ministers who Boris Johnson assembled around him. And we've heard Dominic Cummings say that he tried to persuade Boris Johnson that he had to sack most of them, but Boris Johnson wasn't interested and he couldn't make any progress on that. And as you say, Emily, they have fell out spectacularly. There is not enough acid that Dominic Cummings can pour on Boris Johnson, but there is also scathing views of the Cabinet Office and their ability to cope. And this is in such sharp contrast with that public perception of the civil service as this purring Rolls-Royce machine. And listening to Cummings, it's anything but. The Cabinet Office was a bomb site and we had a huge problem of of quality control of documents going into meetings and inconsistent data, inconsistent facts being read out. And many officials had come to me and said this is causing chaos. There has to be some formalised system to actually grip this because the Cabinet Office was a dumpster fire. And he also says that those at the top of the civil service, the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Secretary, have 10 times and then he said maybe 100 times more power than anyone else in government, except maybe the Prime Minister himself. And that actually he sort of described a scene which was as if the Cabinet were being used as media monkeys, sort of sent out to do the phrases, to kind of appear on the shows, to do the interviews, but actually they had no control and no power over what was going on. And that all rested with the Cabinet Secretary. Mark said, well first, later Simon Case, and with the Prime Minister himself. I think we should also make the point that Dominic Cummings was brought in as somebody who, to be fair, was a bit of an anarchist, you know, wanted to rip up the way things were being done and do things differently and do things

his own way. He was never going to particularly like the structure of Cabinet or anything that blocked him out if he thinks that he should be centre stage and should be able to direct the decision making more centrally. So I think you have to sort of hold that on one side of your head at the same time. But this idea that they got exhausted with Boris Johnson, Lee Cain, Dominic Cummings, Simon Case, all sending round this message or at least agreeing with a message in which they describe how exhausting it was to work with the Prime Minister because they couldn't keep up with his ramblings. And the attention span as well. I'm interested that you use the word anarchist to describe Cummings. Because of course, when Donald Trump first came to power, it was Steve Bannon. And Steve Bannon was doing a very similar job for Donald Trump as Cummings was doing for Boris Johnson. It was there to be the one who is there to torch parts of the civil service. He's got a flamethrower in his hand and he just wants to kill or extinguish. He did want to bring down the Cabinet. He said it was stupid to have 30 people in Cabinet who wanted to cut that number. We know his views on the civil service. So I'm just saying that everything you hear should be through the prism of what we already know of Dominic Cummings, which is that he doesn't much like that collective Cabinet responsibility. He says some people in it were pretty good, but most were fairly useless. And he didn't think much of civil servants. So I guess at the back of your mind, there's always going to be a, well, he would say that wouldn't he, kind of thing. I think the most unsparing thing that we've seen so far is this 10 days where Boris Johnson disappears at the start of the pandemic. Because he's in checkers. He's not part of any meetings. He's not dealing with his red boxes apparently. This is what was alleged yesterday. The rumor at the time, you'll know, is that he was finishing off a book on Shakespeare because his publisher was saying, we're going to hit the deadline and you've promised to deliver this. Otherwise you have to give back your advance. And I think it's absolutely vital that Prime Ministers, leaders have holidays. I've never gone in for the criticism that people go off to a mystique or wherever it happens to be for two weeks. Thank God you don't. No. But I think it is essential that they recharge their batteries. We have a global pandemic coming. We know by February that something really serious is unfolding. And Boris Johnson is off the grid. No one can raise him. No one can speak to him. He is the Prime Minister of the country at that time. And that to me seems to me one of the most extraordinary, unforgivable, dereliction of duties that we've ever seen of a serving Prime Minister. Don't forget that the COVID inquiry, I think, works on two levels. For those who've lost loved ones, this is a really important moment to try and understand all the places in which decision making went wrong, for them to try and get a sense of why things happen, why things evolved in the way they did. But I think in a slightly more cynical way, the inquiry is also for everyone who appears to try and set out their legacy. And so you will hear, for example, Lee Kane blaming Boris Johnson for not adopting the Marcus Rashford Free School Meals policy much earlier than he did. I mean, there will be people who want you to remember that that was Boris Johnson's decision, not theirs. And there will be people who want you to know that it was Boris Johnson rather than Matt Hancock. And we will see, I think, over the coming days, all the little teams, subsets, fractures of people who are basically trying to paint themselves or their guy into the right narrative and make sure that all the dirt is thrown at the other guy. I think if you went out onto the streets of central London today, you wouldn't find a single bus without a minister or a member of the civil service thrown under it by someone at the inquiry

in the past 24 hours. It has been an absolute free for all of throwing people under buses, and it must be a very perilous time to be a London bus driver at the moment. I'll just give you one example. This is the KC for the inquiry, reading out a text from Dominic Cummings to Boris Johnson. And then in the last paragraph, I also must stress, I think leaving Hancock in post is a big mistake. He's a proven liar who nobody believes or should believe on anything. And we face going

into autumn crisis with the cunt still in charge of the NHS still. Therefore, we'll be back around that cabinet table with him and Stevens bullshitting again in September, hideous prospect.

The same language apology that you had at the beginning still applies.

We've got two C words in this episode. This is a record for us.

I think so. Gosh, you're going to be disappointed tomorrow. But I think we should play you an interview that we did yesterday. And this was with a junior health minister at a very interesting gathering of which more a bit later. But James Bethel was very happy to talk to us to set, if you like, his record straight, his narrative. He worked closely with Matt Hancock and he is throwing right now Boris Johnson under the bus. What we're expecting to see or what we understand is the fractious nature of that relationship between Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings at his side. What is your recollection of how they worked together at the beginning of the pandemic? Well, I'm afraid I was a junior minister, so I wasn't in the room to witness their relationship. But I can tell you that the whole system in the UK relies on strong, consistent leadership from number 10. More than most countries, we are led from the top, from the centre. And we weren't getting it. And you felt that as a junior minister, that you were hoping for big decisions and consistent guidance and the flip-flopping really undermined effectiveness. Why do you think you weren't getting that strong leadership?

I think Downing Street is often chaotic and it was more chaotic than usual under Boris Johnson. And that was Boris Johnson's fault or Dominic Cummings' fault or Simon Casey's fault or all three. Now listen, coming from the leader, we elected Boris Johnson to be the PM. We expected him to be a clear and consistent leader, to set the strategy, to communicate the strategy, and to adapt it to events. That's what leaders are meant to do. And he was not fit for that task.

Lord Bethel, thank you very much indeed. Thank you, John. Thanks, Emily.

That was James Bethel, Lord Bethel, who was a junior health minister during the pandemic.

Just going back to Dominic Cummings using that word, proven liars. I mean, the evidence you've had from everybody, it doesn't all cohere. Not everyone, I'm sorry to say this, and this is a shock, I know, is telling the truth. Because as you say, Emily, they are all there trying to burnish their own legacy, to protect themselves and their credentials, that they made the right decisions. It was just everybody else that was shit. One thing I've been surprised at is that people have given quite solid responses to some of the questions that they've been asked by the KC. We've also heard quite a lot of what I would call the I cannot speak to that sort of response, which is every public inquiry that you've ever heard, where people miraculously forget the things that they were doing or saying a week ago. I cannot, I mean, I can guess or I can speculate, but I cannot recall exactly why I did so. I cannot recall, but I imagine that the Prime Minister, I'm afraid I can only speculate. I honestly can't remember the details of the concerns I raised at that point. The rationale for doing this is unclear to me. I cannot remember that far out. Now, I cannot, I can speculate as to why I might have done it. Can you recall why the Prime Minister himself didn't decide to chair the Cobra? No, I cannot.

We'll be back in a moment where we're going to be talking about the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, ARC. I hadn't heard of it. It's sort of growing in importance.

This is The News Agents.

So yesterday after we left you, we hot-footed it down to Greenwich and spent about 20 minutes trying to get into the building of the Alliance for Responsible...

Are we going to throw Gabriel under the bus for taking us all in the wrong direction when we got out of the Cube Station? We're in that public inquiry.

What are we going to call him? Not a fuck pig, no. Moron. Moron. Yeah, much better. No, he was brilliant

and he steadfastly led us into the most curious conference that we hadn't really known was happening

until the weekend. And as John says, it's called the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, which is one of those sort of catch-all titles, which could mean, quite frankly, anything, anything you want. But it brought together people who are broadly, let's say, of the right, who wanted to talk about freedoms, values. This is a word that came up a lot. Church and family, I'm going to say, it wasn't a sort of low taxation. It wasn't a Liz Truss agenda, but it was more on the cultural side of things. Can I say that more? Yeah, I think it was. I think it's about individual responsibility. It is very against identity politics. It is about trying to say that decline is not inevitable, that there are sunny uplands, that people need to take responsibility for their own actions much more, and that there is a different way of dealing with society and that actually we've taken a lot of wrong turns. Behind all this, we should say, the funding for it came from Paul Marshall. If you don't know who Paul Marshall is, he is a hedge fund billionaire. An ex-lib dem. Ex-lib dem, who then goes to the right, becomes part of the Brexit campaign and has been very forthright in certain views, and he was behind the setting up of GB News. Unheard. Unheard. And so wants to put his wealth into causes that align, he thinks, with what is the decline of Britain, i.e., social responsibility, but it is of the right. And they must have quite a lot of money going into that one because the speakers were phenomenal. I mean, in the sense of ex-prime ministers from Australia, they had the speaker of the house, the former speaker of the house in the US. They had several front benches. I'm not saying all of these people were getting paid, but I'm sure that they sorted out the travel for some of the ones that came a long way, and they basically gathered together, like-minded, souls of the right. And we went along, I guess, just to see what it was all about. So the brains behind this, I mean, if Paul Marshall was the money, the sort of organisation or putting it together was a woman called Philippe Stroud, who is in the House of Lords, so Baroness Stroud, if I'm being more respectful. As you should be. As I should be, of course. And she spoke to us about what she was hoping to achieve.

So one of the things that concerned us the most was the type of narrative that was emerging for the next generation. It was one of declineism and permacrisis and polycrisis. And we could see the impact that that was having on the thinking and the levels of optimism of the next generation and of the mental health of the next generation. We started asking ourselves the question, is it possible for us to draw something from our liberal democratic heritage, from our Judeo-Christian heritage, that actually gives us a sense of hope and optimism, a firm foundation we can build on for the future? Or do we have to resign ourselves to declineism? And as we've done this, we've actually concluded we do not have to resign ourselves to declineism.

It is possible to tell a better story.

It's interesting. You won't find many Lib Dems there, I'm guessing. But she references liberal democracy as a sort of wider, almost a theological place to come from. And earlier you heard from James Bethel, who was also there, Lord Bethel, Hereditary Lord James Bethel. And he was talking to us about values. And he said, that's what I most think this is brought together. It's people with the same values and truth. And this was particularly interesting for us when we turn to talk to a senator from Utah, whose name is Mike Lee, who has his own version of truth, because he was one of, I guess, quite a large number of people who were trying to help Donald Trump to overturn the results of the 2020 election when he thought he'd won.

He was initially an election denier who then, though, went on a bit of a journey and he did actually vote to certify Joe Biden's election victory, unlike an awful lot of people. But he was there and interesting to talk to someone who is very influential on the right of Republican politics. Would you condemn anyone who was trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election? Let's be clear about what we're talking about here. There were those who believed we had authority to do it and who also believed, not without some good reason, that there were massive irregularities. As there would be anytime the bulk of the country moves to universal mail-in balloting for the first time ever, there are going to be some irregularities and some serious questions.

So it's too broad a brush to paint with to say, I'm going to paint anyone who raised questions about it, who had concerns, who maybe mistakenly thought we had authority to fix it at that stage, as someone who's trying to overturn the election. So as for those behind the so-called fake electors plot, willing to set forward new slates of electors that were not real, not legitimate, hadn't been duly appointed by any state, yes, I condemn that. And that is, in fact, trying illegally, unconstitutionally to overturn the result of an election.

So legally, do you think that it is right that there are proceedings going on after there was an attempt to overturn the result of the November election?

What proceedings are you talking about?

Well, I'm talking about Donald Trump facing federal charges. I'm talking about what happening in Georgia with the indictments there. I'm talking about the indictments from Washington as a result of the special government.

I believe every one of those charges are politically motivated and should not have been brought. Every one of those charges are politically motivated. Why?

They're going after an immediate past president of the United States, who is himself the Republican front-runner for the Office of the Presidency.

It shows, even if you believe that there were...

But surely no one is above the law.

Surely no one is above the law.

But you're saying he is.

I have not seen anything particular. You asked about the charges related to what he said on January 6th and leading up to it. Insofar as they're based on that, yeah, I can't defend that at all.

That takes you right inside the mindset of a very senior, current US senator of the Republican Party. It tells you so much right now about where Republican legislators sit with regard to the former president who is trying to run again.

Awful lot more from Mike Lee in the US edition of the podcast, News Agents USA,

which you can get on Global Player. We'll be back in just a moment.

This is the News Agents.

That is the sound of protesters in support of Palestinian rights trying to mob Kirstama, who just delivered a speech at Chatham House, the foreign policy think tank, where he argued again that this was not the right time for a ceasefire in Gaza, as some of his own backbenchers have been calling for.

Yeah, as you heard in that chanting, there are people asking, why wouldn't you say ceasefire? They want to hear him use that word.

He won't. He has said, he has constantly made it clear that Israel should be acting within the bounds of international law, but he doesn't want to call for a ceasefire.

Interestingly enough, yesterday, Soella Bravman, the Home Secretary, called those marches in favour of a free Palestine hate marches. It's pretty strong language, and tomorrow on the News Agents, we're going to be speaking exclusively to Mark Rowley, the head of the Met Police. We'd love to hear your thoughts. How does he police that when he's getting instructions from the Home Secretary that she thinks they're hate marches?

Yeah, so if you want to get in touch, email us at newsagents.global.com, and we'd really love to hear what you've got to say. I mean, just seeing the protests around Kiestarma, very rare to see the leader of the opposition being mobbed like that.

You know, the Prime Minister, yeah, but the leader of the opposition has really aroused some strong emotions with the stance he's taken. I don't think I'll mind that.

No, I suspect he won't. I suspect he will think that that's, you know, him showing leadership at a difficult time, but it's not often you see scenes like that. Well, back tomorrow. See you then. Bye-bye. Bye.