

Listen to the anger of Middle Britain

IT'S claimed by his supporters that the outrage over Dominic Cummings's decision to flout lockdown rules is largely the confection of a cynical media.

They argue that what was a minor infraction at worst has been blown out of all proportion, in a blatant bid to damage the Prime Minister through his most senior adviser. Inside the metropolitan bubble, his enemies – mainly from the vanquished Remain Left – may be howling for his head. But with ordinary voters, his defenders say, the story simply doesn't 'cut through'.

Our poll today shows how spectacularly wrong they are. In the court of public opinion, Mr Cummings is very definitely guilty as charged.

Eighty per cent of people believe he broke lockdown rules. Almost as many disbelieve his excuses.

Sixty-six per cent want him to resign. A slightly smaller proportion say Boris Johnson should sack him. Most devastatingly, 55 per cent of Tory voters believe he must go. Middle Britain is angry. And the anger will linger as long as Mr Cummings remains in post.

It is true, of course, that many of his critics are motivated by prejudice. The Mail is emphatically not among them.

This paper has nothing personal against Mr Cummings, indeed we admire his intellect and prodigious campaigning abilities. But our belief – clearly shared by most of the country – is that he broke lockdown rules he himself helped to devise. He must be held to account.

His attempts at self-justification have been implausible, especially the 'eyesight-testing' excuse for his Easter jaunt to Barnard Castle with his wife and son. Unsurprisingly, 78 per cent don't believe him.

It pains us to say, but he is damaged goods, and by hanging on in Downing Street, he provides a rallying point for anti-Tory sentiment. With the economic pain of Covid just beginning, that is something Mr Johnson can't afford.

It's summer now and, thanks to furlough payments, millions have been able to enjoy the balmy weather without a thought for the massive economic shock to come.

By midwinter, there could easily be 3 million unemployed. Rising inflation and prices, negative equity, spiralling welfare bills, swathes of British industry in decline. These are the spectres looming.

If they do materialise, Mr Johnson will need all the political capital he can muster to retain public confidence. Squandering what he has in this calm before the storm is sheer folly.

At times of crisis, we need leaders we can believe in. This paper does believe in Mr Johnson and what he's trying to do to 'unite and level up' the country.

We rejoiced in his remarkable election victory. We applauded his triumph in getting Brexit done.

And although he has made some mistakes, his policies have brought Covid under control without the NHS collapsing under its weight. That is to his enormous credit.

However, we cannot be an uncritical friend. Useful though he may be, our poll starkly demonstrates the damage Mr Cummings is doing to both Mr Johnson and the Tory party.

In most circumstances, personal loyalty is greatly to be admired. In this case, the British public says it has gone too far.

■ AGED just 25, gambling addict Chris Bruney killed himself after losing £119,000 in five days. Betting firm Winner had 'groomed' him with bonuses and free bets instead of shutting his account. Despite this flagrant breach of player protection rules, Winner's parent company got away with a derisory fine. No apology, no one brought to book. Giving inducements to keep addicts gambling is costing lives. It's high time this contemptible practice was banned.

EXCUSES, excuses. To think we thought we'd heard 'em all. Then up pops Dominic Cummings on a roasting Bank Holiday afternoon to serve us a 24-carat corker.

His explanation that he made a 60-mile round trip from his parents' Durham farm to picturesque Barnard Castle on Easter Sunday merely to check that his eyesight was up to driving back to London, raised more questions than it was supposed to answer.

Why couldn't the Prime Minister's senior aide simply have taken a spin around his family estate, rather than embark on a 90-minute journey? Why did his wife and child need to accompany him? It was an account so iffy it was a mercy it didn't make the petals in Downing Street's Rose Garden wilt.

Before he'd even finished his rambling explanation, a nation cried collectively: 'Pull the other one, pal!'

And so Cummings' alibi looks destined to join a long line of political tall tales which simply don't cut *la moutarde* in the believability stakes.

Here's a collection of similar eye-rollers we've heard over the years...

THE BADGER ENTHUSIAST

POOR Ron Davies. The once high-flying Secretary of State for Wales was sacked from Tony Blair's cabinet in 1998 after a self-proclaimed 'moment of madness' (© Alastair Campbell) when he was nicked on Clapham Common while seeking an amorous exchange with a gay stranger.

Five years later, controversy struck again when he was pictured leaving a well-known cruising spot on a lay-by near Bath. Ron's response: 'I've actually been there watching badgers.'

After unsuccessfully standing as a Plaid Cymru candidate in 2012, Davies has fallen off the radar, which is a pity. A guest slot on BBC's Springwatch helping Kate Humble seek out snuffle-nosed critters in the West Country gloaming would be a hoot for us viewers.

THE LESSONS IN TECHNOLOGY

BORIS JOHNSON'S first Conservative conference as Prime Minister last year was overshadowed by reports of his friendship with IT expert Jennifer Arcuri, a turbo-charged blonde with a Gatling gun gob for gibberish.

Despite claims that BoJo had visited her East London flat while he was London Mayor, pole-dancing Jen denied impropriety, with a friend of hers explaining he had just 'wanted to be hip and understand tech'.

Boris was recently cleared of investigation by The Independent Office for Police Conduct for giving Arcuri £126,000 in public funding for her tech company, Hacker House. But 'technology lessons' is surely destined to replace Private Eye's famous 'discussing Uganda' phrase – allegedly deployed by journalist Mary Kenny after disappearing at a party with one of the country's cabinet ministers – as politics' sexual euphemism *du jour*.

'JIM' THE REPAIR MAN

AH, KEITH VAZ. That unnerving mixture of vinegar and oil. Voice like a well-tuned French horn. Gait like a tarantula. What a uniquely creepy piece of work he is.

The one-time European Minister's political undoing finally came in 2016, when reports surfaced of him soliciting sex from two male prostitutes and offering to pay for cocaine for a third, all the while posing, for reasons unknown, as an industrial washing machine repair man called Jim.

The *coup de grace* in this richly exotic cocktail of sex, drugs and washing machine hoses came when Keith/Jim explained to the Parliamentary authorities that his newly

acquired chums had merely dropped round to his apartment at 11.30pm on a Saturday night 'to discuss interior decor'.

A deeply unimpressed House of Commons standards commissioner took one look at Vaseline's claims and branded them 'not believable and, frankly, ludicrous.'

THE VERY DRY PRINCE

WHAT was the most wince-inducing moment of Prince Andrew's Newsnight interview over his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein?

His soft-soaped description of Epstein's paedophilia as 'unbecoming'? The 'straightforward shooting weekend' he enjoyed with Ghislaine Maxwell?

No, the true hide-behind-the-sofa moment came when the Prince attempted to rubbish

his accuser Virginia Roberts' claims that he'd been 'dripping from sweat' as they danced together at Tramp nightclub. Apparently he had a 'peculiar condition' which prevented him from perspiring after being shot at during the Falklands War.

To compound this palpable codswallop, it was said that after the cameras finished rolling, the clunkheaded Prince insouciantly sauntered over to Windsor Castle to inform his mother the interview had all gone rather swimmingly.

'I WAS THERE BUT NOT INVOLVED'

JEREMY CORBYN'S capacity for making a bad situation worse was no better illustrated than in 2018, when a bombshell picture unearthed by the Daily Mail showed him at a Tunisia wreath-laying ceremony in 2014

for the terrorists who carried out the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. The Labour leader's response to the controversy – 'I was present at that wreath-laying, I don't think I was actually involved in it' – was roundly considered unsatisfactory.

Corbyn's leadership never did shrug off the anti-Semitism charges which hung over his party prior to their electoral thumping last December.

This incident marked the murkiest stain on his unpleasant tenure.

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

AMID the duck houses and moat dredging, few more laughable excuses emerged from the 2010 expenses scandal than from Lib Dem leader



Pull the other one: Unlikely excuses from, clockwise from top left, Boris Johnson, Dominic Cummings, Nick Clegg, Keith Vaz and Prince Andrew

It's the way they tell 'em!

As Dominic Cummings claims he drove 60 miles to, er, check his eyesight, HENRY DEEDES revels in the far-fetched porkies that make so many powerful men look ridiculous