

The Dominic Cummings affair has much more in common with Hillsborough and Grenfell Tower than with politics. It is about loss of trust in those in power. And it has as much more to do with Ministers' response to mistakes than with the mistakes themselves.

We have an unwritten 'psychological contract' with those in power. We expect that the police will treat us with respect. We expect that the government will ensure access to impartial justice. And we expect governments to do everything in their power to protect us from novel viruses – including ensuring that key carers will have enough PPE.

But mistakes will be made, and things can go badly wrong. Crucially, those in positions of power then have a responsibility to restore the psychological contract, even if they are not personally responsible for its failure.

And yet many leaders' response is sadly lacking. Examples include:

- Theresa May visited Grenfell Tower the day after the fire but failed to meet Grenfell survivors or bereaved;
- The Chief Executive of the company that managed Grenfell, whilst watching the tower burn, wrote a memo to colleagues saying *"We need to pull some of this together pretty fast in terms of health and safety compliance"*
- Health Minister Matt Hancock's warned the NHS to not overuse PPE
- Prime Minister Johnson's has failed to acknowledge, and apologise for, Dominic Cummings' failure to comply with the COVID-19 lockdown.

By contrast, leaders who understand the psychological contract respond to crises in a way that builds trust. The outstanding example is New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, both in her response to COVID-19 and to the 2019 terrorist attack. Chancellor Rishi Sunak is also showing both empathy and a determination to do everything he can to mitigate the economic effects of the virus

Restoring the psychological contract with citizens requires:

- swift retribution,
- swift correction of issues,
- appropriately borne consequences, and
- transparency

Let's apply these tests to the government's responses to COVID-19 and Grenfell Tower.

Swift Retribution

The public expect there to be consequences when those in authority appear to fail. This is not about legal fault. It is targeted at individuals who held positions of power at the time of the event, or at the time of decisions that led to it.

The formal processes for this (such as Public Inquiries and civil and criminal investigations) take too long to play out. It can be hard to establish negligence and in the absence of such proof it can be difficult verging on impossible to sack senior decision makers. In addition, whole institutions, and not least governments, will strongly resist the suggestion that fault could be found within their senior teams. That is why resignation as a matter of honour sends

such an important signal that those in power both care and are willing to accept consequences.

The Brexit debates demonstrated that not all politicians have lost the ability to resign as a matter of principle. But no-one has resigned following, nor even expressed contrition for, [the 72 deaths at Grenfell Tower](#). And Dominic Cummings' failure to resign following his breaches of lockdown seems quite inexplicable.

Swift Correction

To be fair, it does seem that the government is trying hard to correct its failings over COVID-19, even if it won't admit them – see further below. But its failure even to criticise Mr Cummings' behaviour taints all its positive efforts. Given that the police consider that he had committed an offence, Attorney General Suella Braverman's support for Mr Cummings ("Protecting one's family is what any good parent does") is particularly shocking.

Grenfell revealed systemic issues with the UK's building stock. Hundreds of high-rise residential buildings have ACM cladding similar to that on Grenfell Tower. Thousands are clad in other flammable facades. Post-Grenfell fire safety inspections revealed systemic issues such as non-compliant fire doors and missing or incorrectly fitted cavity barriers which can compromise compartmentation. And yet, as of March 2020, 68% of buildings had not completed remediation, including 15% where work had not even started.

Failing promptly to make buildings safe is a gross violation of the psychological contract that citizens should be safe in their homes. For those that watched Grenfell burn or lost loved ones, it is unforgiveable.

Appropriately borne consequences

The issue of correction is linked to that of where consequences are borne. Rather like resignation (see above) this is not a legal question; it's a moral one.

This cannot be more tragically evidenced than the deaths of those at the front line of care, and care home residents, as a consequence of government failure to stock PPE in preparation for a pandemic. Whatever the reasons for this failure, and irrespective of legal liability, the psychological contract requires that the government's response should be generous compensation for those injured, and the avoidance of any form of further cost. The Prime Minister's initial determination to impose the NHS surcharge on foreign nurses showed that he and his colleagues were quite oblivious to their responsibilities under the psychological contract with those they aspire to lead.

In the wake of Grenfell, it is estimated that 500,000 people are caught in flats that are unsellable while work is carried out to identify cladding and other fire safety issues. The government could have worked with industry to create a fund for making buildings safe. They

could have diverted money away from litigation, and toward ensuring people are safe in their homes. They did neither.

Transparency

Attempts to spin the narrative, and refusal to admit that mistakes were made, will inflate already heightened emotions and increase distrust.

The governments' reporting of COVID19 deaths is a good example. There was little transparency when initial figures included only those who died in hospital after testing positive, and when deaths in care homes or in the community were not included. Likewise, the lack of transparency in what counted as a 'test' have done little to build trust, nor have numerous missed deadlines.

Whilst bold promises may make sense, ungrounded promises damage trust. This was clearly illustrated by Theresa May's promise that those left homeless by Grenfell would be re-housed in 3 weeks. Nearly 3 years after the fire not everyone has been re-housed.

And something is terribly wrong when the Prime Minister jokes that he is no longer allowed to commit to actions to save lives during the current pandemic.

The Bereaved Will Not Forget

It is noticeable that the current anger with the government is most strongly expressed by those who have self-isolated from their families, have seen relatives die in care homes, and who have been unable to attend funerals. History tells us that they will continue to call for justice. Grenfell United, Doreen Lawrence and the Hillsborough families^[1] are good examples. The pain and anger of the bereaved is inconsolable. People do not simply 'move on'. Mr Johnson's intransigence will haunt him for years to come.

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Notes

This article draws heavily on Gill Kernick's contribution to the recent Bennett Institute report:- [Policy Lessons from Catastrophic Events](#). Gill Has also blogged about Dominic Cummings and the psychological contract. [You can read her blog here](#).

Psychological contracts are typically found in employment relationships, and such contracts can be more influential than formal rules.^[2]

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^[1] See [*'The patronising disposition of Unaccountable Power: A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated'*](#).

[2] <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/employees/psychological-factsheet>