

# Hancock Is Gone, but the Rot at the Heart of UK Government Is Only Getting Worse

Don't be fooled, Boris Johnson's administration is still without transparency or scruples

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*So, **Matt Hancock** has resigned as Britain's health secretary. A line has now been drawn under a scandal that gave the British press the 'public interest' licence to splash photos of a cabinet minister locking lips with his aide. Nothing more to see here.*

This, at least, is what the government wants us to think. On BBC Radio 4's Today programme on Monday morning, justice secretary minister **Robert Buckland** insisted any queries about Hancock were either prurient or irrelevant since "Matt has resigned". Move along, folks.

But the Hancock affair is about much more than a senior minister breaking his own COVID rules with his adviser, **Gina Coladangelo**. The whole episode highlights – once again – the gaping hole in the middle of Boris Johnson's government where transparency, probity and honesty should be.

Forgot about how the footage of Hancock and Coladangelo leaked into the media, the real question to ask is how did the minister's paramour end up with a paid government job in the first place?

We know that the pair met as students – in Oxford, of course – and that last March, just as the pandemic was breaking, Hancock brought Coladangelo in as an unpaid communications adviser. Six months later, [Hancock made her](#) a non-executive director in his health department, for which she netted £1,000 a day before expenses.

Why was Coladangelo, a lobbyist, chosen to oversee the health department in the midst of a global pandemic? It's impossible to say. The government refuses to answer questions about how non-executive directorships are divvied out.

In fairness to Hancock, he's not the only person who has his mates as sinecured board members. As we [revealed last week](#), at least 16 Tory allies have been given roles that are

ostensibly to “challenge” ministers. How much challenge do you think a Conservative donor is going to give his man in charge?

This government has shown itself willing to fight even the most basic transparency

There’s more, inevitably. Hancock was using his private Gmail account to conduct government business, including discussing lucrative COVID contracts. The use of personal email accounts to conduct government business is forbidden. In a detail remarkable even for this administration, Hancock [did not have a department email address](#). Very handy for evading those pesky Freedom of Information requests – as Hancock would know, given he was once [the minister in charge of FOI](#).

It isn’t supposed to be like this. Since the mid-1990s, British politics has had a confusing architecture of committees and watchdogs that are supposed to prevent the kind of sleaze scandals that dogged John Major’s moribund administration. But what good is a system based on norms and values when politicians can break them without any sanction?

Hancock is not the only politician who seems oblivious to Nolan principles of public life. So many sitting cabinet ministers have breached the ministerial code that you could be forgiven for thinking it’s a kind of insider prank, like when [England World Cup footballers](#) shoehorned song titles into interviews for a ‘joke’.

Robert Jenrick remains housing secretary despite breaking the law in overruling planning inspectors and the local council to approve Tory donor Richard Desmond’s Westferry Printworks development (the decision saved Desmond an estimated £45m). After the story broke, the then business minister Nadhim Zahawi said that if voters wanted to raise planning issues with their MPs, they could, as Desmond had done, pay to attend a Conservative fundraiser.

Earlier this month, the High Court in London ruled that the [Cabinet Office acted unlawfully](#) when, at the start of the pandemic, it awarded a contract to a public relations firm run by former colleagues of Michael Gove and Dominic Cummings. Public First, run by James Frayne and Rachel Wolf, was paid £560,000 to conduct focus groups and market research to gauge public opinion of government policies – including the prospect of Scottish independence.

The Cabinet Office responded to the Public First judgment the way it responds to so much – with a barrage of furious and dissembling spin. Michael Gove remains in post at the department despite clearly breaking the ministerial code.

There’s more. Hancock’s health colleague Lord Bethell has also been using private email to conduct government business.

A Cabinet Office inquiry found evidence that Priti Patel bullied her staff – in breach of the ministerial code – but the home secretary remains in office as Boris Johnson, the sole arbiter of the rules, decided not to sanction an investigation. The prime minister’s independent adviser on ministerial standards, Alex Allan, resigned in protest. He was replaced, more than six months later, only after it emerged that a Conservative donor had quietly paid for the lavish refurbishment of Johnson’s Downing Street flat.

One of the recurring questions of recent days is why Boris Johnson did not fire Hancock, rather than allowing him to resign. It is comforting to speculate that it might reflect his own marital infelicities. A prime minister who won't admit how many children he has sired is hardly one to talk, surely?

Alas, it is doubtful that Johnson's reluctance to sack his health secretary owes anything to concerns about his own behaviour. The prime minister has previously described himself as "literally bursting with spunk" (That's a mental image none of us need to see.) But Johnson's reticence is very much in keeping with his own attitude to upholding standards in public life.

In 2019, Parliament's Committee on Standards found that he had demonstrated "an over-casual attitude towards obeying the rules of the House" after failing to declare a property interest. A few months earlier he had breached the rules on declaring book royalties. Before that, he had not sought permission before signing a £275,000 contract as a Daily Telegraph columnist three days after resigning as foreign secretary.

Last year, the prime minister took the unprecedented step of overruling the House of Lords appointment committee to ennoble the long-standing Conservative donor Peter Cruddas. It subsequently emerged that Cruddas, a former party treasurer, gave £500,000 to the Tories three days after taking his seat.

No wonder this government seems so determined to [neuter the Electoral Commission](#). It has also shown itself willing to fight even the most basic transparency. openDemocracy was forced to mount a legal challenge after the Cabinet Office had appealed against a ruling that it should publish documents relating to a secretive unit accused of 'blacklisting' [Freedom of Information](#) requests from journalists and campaigners. The tribunal judge found there was "a profound lack of transparency about the operation" and ordered that the documents be released.

That judgement has sparked a [parliamentary inquiry into FOI](#), launched by a committee dominated by Conservative MPs. But while Johnson's colleagues clearly have concerns about his government's secretive modus operandi, the prime minister has surrounded himself with pliable ministers who will happily defend anything from COVID contracts for Tory donors to the use of private email accounts to conduct government business.

As Robert Buckland attempted to bat away questions about Hancock on Monday morning radio, he dismissed concerns about the epidemic of ministerial rule-breaking on the ground that the Conservatives had won a "resounding victory" in last month's local elections. I don't remember "because we can get away with it" being one of the seven Nolan principles for ethics standards in public life. But it sums up Boris Johnson's government to a T.

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