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Government ministers and MPs not wearing mask was bad enough, but their defence of this position made things even worse

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At the Health Secretary Sajid Javid's press conference of 20th October 2021, he repeatedly urged the public to comply with voluntary Covid measures in England, notably wearing masks in crowded indoor spaces. He warned that failure to do so would "hit us all" and "make it more likely we're going to have more restrictions"¹.

Many commentators responded by pointing out that this message was undermined by widely circulated images of Westminster Government ministers failing to wear masks in Cabinet meetings² and of Conservative MPs failing to wear masks in Parliament³.

There are a number of processes through which this failure of ministers to wear masks is likely to impact on public behaviour. First, the effectiveness of messaging depends upon consistency. When actions do not match words, the impact of words is undermined⁴. Second, for those already disinclined to heed the message, non-compliance by authority figures provides a warrant to ignore any guidance. In the aftermath of Dominic Cummings's trip to Barnard Castle in 2020, the police reported that those stopped for breaking lockdown rules would invoke his name as an excuse.

The Cummings affair points to a third – and more far-reaching – effect of leaders failing to do what they exhort their public to do. To the extent that it leads to a sense of 'one law for them and another law for us', this inconsistency not only undermines the specific behaviour in

¹ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/sajid-javid-commons-conservatives-uk-parliament-mps-b961619.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/17/boris-johnsons-revamped-cabinet-meet-for-half-time-pep-talk>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/2fd29862-0316-4319-a6ed-10a2ac8a3a31>

⁴ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/consistent-transparent-messaging-key-to-effective-covid-communication/>

question (whether that be wearing masks or respecting lockdown rules) but also undermines the influence of and trust in the Government in general⁵. One of the most basic findings of group psychology is that we are less likely to trust or be influenced by someone who is seen as outgroup than where the same person is seen as ingroup⁶. And so once Government act in ways perceived as ‘them’ rather than ‘us’, their ability to influence us declines.

The contradictions of a Government exhorting mask wearing while, at the same time, their own MPs failed to heed that call were raised as a question in the Health Secretary’s press conference itself. The Health Secretary acknowledged that this was ‘a fair point’, that ‘we’ve all got our role to play in this’ and that prominent individuals in particular need to be ‘setting an example’⁷.

Others, however, sought either implicitly or explicitly, to defend the ministers and MPs who went maskless by suggesting that the injunction to wear masks did not apply to them. This took various forms, but the most common was to argue that since they were meeting with familiar people in familiar places, masks were unnecessary. The Prime Minister, for instance called for people to wear masks “in crowded spaces with people that you don’t know” and then added that “we on this side (i.e., Conservative MPs) know each-other”⁸.

Such a defence represents a departure from existing guidance on masks. It contains an implied premise that has relevance for all Covid-related risk assessments and behaviours: ‘familiar are safe’. In many ways, this is more corrosive than the original failure of adherence. The assumptions that ‘people like us’ are cleaner and less likely to be a source of infection is widespread but extremely damaging. It is a false premise which Government should be challenging rather than propagating.

We referred earlier to the basic principle that people are more likely to trust ingroup members than those seen as outgroup. In our own work, we have examined some basic manifestations of this principle: we stand closer to ingroup members than outgroup members⁹, we are less

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31690-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31690-1/fulltext)

⁶ <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-97487-000>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/20/javid-vows-to-protect-nhs-as-he-says-covid-infections-could-hit-100000-a-day>

⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-masks-covid-lockdown-b1943539.html>

⁹ <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1348/014466609X449377>

disgusted by their bodily excretions and odours¹⁰, we are more likely to share food and drink¹¹. While this within-group trust is very important in terms of facilitating group cohesion, solidarity and cooperation (which themselves can improve both physical and mental health), it can also have seriously negative consequences in terms of infection transmission¹².

In past pandemics, this has proved to be a key issue. At the height of AIDS, for instance, people were less likely to use condoms with more familiar partners because they assumed them to be ‘cleaner’ and unlikely to be infected. Moreover, linked to this, they found it difficult to find ways of asking such partners to wear condoms insofar as this implied that the partner was dirty physically and/or morally¹³.

During the current pandemic, we have pointed to the significance of these processes in various ways – for instance the dangers of hospital staff forgetting social distancing and mask wearing protocols when entering the familiar confines of the workplace and specific ‘ingroup’ spaces such as common rooms¹⁴. We have also stressed their significance in the opening of mass events, such as football matches, where attendees are likely to have strong ingroup ties to others. This, combined with specific group norms, is likely to lead not only to greater physical proximity and discarding of masks, but also to shouting, hugging and even kissing if (say) one’s team score a goal¹⁵. We have argued that, if we are to avoid such events becoming super-spreader events, it is critical to develop systematic interventions to alert people to the dangers¹⁶. The message that “people like us are safe” does not only ignore these dangers, but directly increases them

While this is bad enough, the notion that mitigations are not needed with ingroup members becomes even more toxic when it is rendered as a specific characteristic of *our* group rather than a general characteristic of *all* groups. Or, to put it slightly differently, when it becomes a matter of ‘*we* are OK, *you* are not’. This can be seen in the argument of the Conservative

¹⁰ <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/113/10/2631.full.pdf>

¹¹ <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/sipr.12071>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ejsp.2288>

¹³ <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1997.tb01128.x>

¹⁴ <https://www.hsj.co.uk/coronavirus/lack-of-social-distancing-in-nhs-staff-social-areas-alarms-national-chiefs/7027689.article>

¹⁵

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/916890/s-pi-b-consensus-reopening-large-events-venues-s0703-sage-52-200819.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0925753521000886>

Leader of the House, Jacob Rees-Mogg. He suggested that Conservative MPs in particular do not need to wear masks because of the ‘convivial fraternal spirit’ that exists between them¹⁷.

Quite apart from the appalling elitism, the class and gender stereotypes involved in invoking the atmosphere of a ‘gentleman’s club’ as the guarantor of Covid safety, this exceptionalism not only creates but celebrates the sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in relation to the public, which, as we have argued, undermines trust in authority and the impact of Government messaging. Still worse, the specific defence of Conservative MPs as a group who do not need to wear masks implies a contrast to other groups (‘the great unwashed’?) who lack the requisite fraternal qualities, who do spread disease and so who do need to wear masks (and observe other mitigations). The fact that mask wearing has been mandated for all members of parliamentary staff except MPs in the last week lends substance to this implication.¹⁸

Perhaps we should not take one remark by one somewhat idiosyncratic MP (although, tellingly, the remarks were not repudiated by his party) as representative of Government rationalisation. However, what we see here has the potential to create new forms of social division whereby certain groups are held responsible for harming others. In this way the extraordinary social solidarity which has so sustained the pandemic response¹⁹ can quickly turn to the forms of social conflict and intergroup hatred which have blighted other pandemics²⁰.

It is a moot point whether any of this evidence will change the minds of those MPs, like Jacob Rees-Mogg and Liz Truss²¹, who, despite media condemnation²², continue to go maskless in Parliament and elsewhere. At the very least, though, they might recognise that they communicate so much more than they say and desist from defending themselves in terms that makes things even worse.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-58997239>

¹⁸ [Masks made mandatory again in parliament for staff – but not for ‘above the rules MPs’ | The Independent](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0884-z>.

²⁰ <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198819660.001.0001/oso-9780198819660>

²¹ [Masks made mandatory again in parliament for staff – but not for ‘above the rules MPs’ | The Independent](#)

²² [Some Tory MPs refuse to wear masks despite Sajid Javid's plea to 'set an example' - Mirror Online](#)