

# Part 1

## Government Communications

### 2

## From Consensus to Dissensus: The UK's Management of a Pandemic in a Divided Nation

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### Abstract

With one of the highest number of cases and deaths in Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic had a massive impact on the UK and was a significant challenge for a newly elected government focusing on resolving its departure from the EU – an issue which continued to divide the nation. Prime Minister Johnson's government initially played down the threat posed but the tone quickly changed in March when a full lockdown was instituted. The framing of lockdown coupled with his contraction of the virus led to initial high public support but from May public confidence declined as the government was forced to make a number of major U-turns. Strategies and styles across the nations of the UK diverged – Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in particular positioning herself as an alternative national leader within Scotland. The cracks in the union caused by Brexit have been exacerbated by the pandemic, Johnson and his government appear to have weakened credibility and to largely speak for England alone.

### Introduction

The UK government ran 92 live coronavirus media briefings from 16 March until 23 June 2020, devoting an hour each evening to unseen questions from journalists and later members of the public. The sessions formed the centrepiece of the government's communication campaign and fed directly into advertising and partner communication through outdoor sites, mainstream media and social media. The three devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland ran parallel sessions, while their respective Chief Medical Officers collaborated through UK

government committees such as COBRA,<sup>1</sup> the emergency planning meeting usually chaired by the Prime Minister and the scientific advisory group, SAGE.

This commitment to UK-wide public communication was unprecedented and substantial, involving 12 cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister. It also exposed the public to daily interventions by scientists and clinicians, some of whom became household names. Beyond the briefings, the wider scientific community joined the debate in a display of pluralism rarely seen in contemporary public communication. This was a *volte face* by a government led by a colourful rogue who eschewed factual detail, which had previously avoided scrutiny, questioned the role of experts, threatened the BBC and challenged the access rights of the Westminster press corps (Shipman, 2020; Mayhew, 2020). Johnson was one of the least trusted leaders in recent history, including among his own parliamentary party (Curtis, 2019). Like previous post-1997 governments Johnson's showed a preference for anonymous, partisan briefing of favoured sources rather than open and transparent public communication (Garland, 2016). However, he had three sources of political capital: a manifesto commitment to equality, known as "levelling up"; an 80-seat parliamentary majority; and a clear manifesto commitment to increasing investment in one of the UK's most cherished institutions, the NHS.

While the UK appeared at first to "rally around the flag" the absence of the Prime Minister due to him catching coronavirus and being hospitalized between 27 March and 27 April was not the only threat to the notion of one nation, one leader. Disagreements with the three devolved nations threatened consensus. Scottish Nationalist (SNP) First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in particular positioned herself in opposition to Johnson, with a different approach to handling the pandemic. On the back of her opposition to Brexit in EU-supporting Scotland, Sturgeon used daily coronavirus media briefings to demonstrate a contrasting style of leadership, and an

increasingly oppositional national narrative. Unlike Johnson, who fronted just 16 (17%), and terminated them on 23 June, Sturgeon chaired all but two of the 107 briefings to the end of August (98%), and kept them running throughout 2020, thus controlling the public messaging. The course of the epidemic was similar in Scotland to that in the wider UK, albeit running a few weeks behind, but support for Sturgeon's handling of the crisis contrasted with plummeting poll ratings for Johnson and the governing party. An approval rating of 72% in late March for the UK government's handling of the coronavirus when the first lockdown was implemented fell to 47% when these measures were eased in mid-May and continued to decline to 32% by October (YouGov, 2020c). Johnson enjoyed similar high support in March and April but public approval in his performance as prime minister tracked government approval ratings for the rest of the year. Hence, the handling of the pandemic is the story of an initial spike in support followed by a significant decline in public confidence in government and Johnson as the crisis unfolded (see Figure 2.1). From September 2020, in particular, Johnson faced rebellion and unrest on Conservative benches following a series of high-profile U-turns, blunders and contradictory public health messages (Garland & Lilleker, 2021). Sturgeon was significantly ahead of Johnson in public approval for her handling of the coronavirus pandemic (YouGov, 2020a), and the SNP was predicted to make gains in the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections that could challenge Johnson's resistance to a second independence referendum. Johnson also faced a more forensic political opposition after April 2020 when former lawyer and Director of Public Prosecutions Sir Keir Starmer was elected Labour leader. Starmer initially supported Johnson's call for all political leaders to work together to tackle the crisis but as government competence came into question Starmer went on the attack, citing public interest as justification.

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This chapter conducts a thematic content analysis of the 92 daily Westminster media briefings and 107 Edinburgh briefings to the end of August to ask what visions of national leadership and national identity were presented during the briefings. Evident are the contrasting backgrounds, personalities and rhetorical styles of the two leaders. Like Starmer, Sturgeon is a former lawyer from a relatively humble background who employs a precise and reserved style of presentation. Johnson, an expensively educated former newspaper columnist and Mayor of London, has long practised a flamboyant schoolboy style of address, coining phrases like “moonshot” for mass testing, describing himself as “fit as a butcher’s dog” and “bursting with antibodies” when questioned about his health.

Three distinct phases of communication during the pandemic are identified:

1. 2 to 27 March – Johnson announcing the lockdown: from partisanship to consensus.
2. 27 March to 26 April – Johnson’s absence with coronavirus: the political vacuum and the election of Starmer as opposition leader.
3. 27 April to date – Johnson’s attempted “bounce back”: the return of partisan politics and Sturgeon’s growing oppositional rhetoric.

This chapter argues that just as the daily media briefings presented a faltering image of Johnson’s leadership and the UK government’s efficacy in controlling the epidemic and public messaging around it, they enhanced Sturgeon’s legitimacy as a national leader, offering a challenge to the continuation of the Union after Brexit. This was exacerbated by further divergences from a national approach taken in Wales and Northern Ireland, and calls within England for more regional devolution of decision-making. Sturgeon arguably used the coronavirus briefings to portray herself as the leader-in-waiting of a modern Scottish nation, in turn acting as a fillip to other regional and opposition leaders. This led Johnson to appear isolated and on the wrong course, loosely governing England, while deploying grandiose and outdated UK rhetoric.

## **The Crisis in Public Communication**

Aeron Davis' (2018) critique of the British political elite casts them as precarious, rootless and self-serving. Challenged by systemic changes within the global economy, society and the communication environment, their strategy has narrowed to the management of perceptions and the retention of power. In common with Blumler, Davis' critique develops a current of thought which highlights a crisis in public communication (Blumler, 2018). Responding to structural change, the political sphere has witnessed increased personalization of power, attempts at control of media and political messaging, and a shift towards permanent campaigning (Foley, 2000). These trends are only restrained by the size of parliamentary majorities and the levels of control prime ministers can exert over their cabinets, as well as their relationship with media owners, and their standing in public opinion (Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018). Modern leadership in the UK thus involves attempting to maintain the support of the public and media and retain political control with minimal scrutiny or critique.

The drift towards a more presidential style and the extraordinary statutory law-making abilities bestowed on the Executive in order to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic combine theoretically to award Johnson significant control over public communication. However, crisis leadership is also reliant on performance. Performance encompasses framing the national understanding of the crisis, taking ownership of critical decisions, facilitating horizontal and vertical communication between key actors and agencies, being accountable, building resilience and demonstrating learning and interaction (Boin et al., 2013). To achieve this, leaders must create the perception they are trustworthy, competent, decisive, empathic and courageous (James & Wooten, 2005). Johnson's colourful rogue with little care for detail needed to be sidelined, replaced with a more serious demeanour suited to the gravity of the situation and the decisions being taken.

Johnson's style proved sufficiently successful to secure victory at the 2019 general election securing a significant 80 seat parliamentary majority from 42.4% of the votes, but only 2.4% more than secured by Labour (Cutts et al., 2020). Unlike elections, however, crises require a unifying leader, which is problematic for one who polarizes opinion and does not enjoy the trust of a majority of the electorate (Marland, 2016). A health pandemic requires a shared sense of national identity around the "we" concept (Jetten et al., 2020). The people need to trust their leader and believe they are being "shepherded by a paternalistic government" (Jetten et al., 2020, p. 6). Leaders must therefore perform the roles of "representing us", "doing it for us" and crafting and embedding a sense of "us" in all communication (Jetten et al., 2020, pp. 25–30). Embedded within this is an emphasis on the character and values of a nation. Johnson has been known for his optimistic and nationalist rhetoric relating to Brexit, invoking Churchillian rhetoric to sell his vision (Yates, 2018); however, what may be appropriate for campaigning does not necessarily translate into a one nation policy given the post-Brexit polarization within and between the nations of the UK.

Bækgaard et al. (2020) highlight how people tend to rally around the flag and their leader in times of crisis with reference to the lockdown in Denmark, a phenomenon evident across a range of nations (Lilleker et al., 2021). However, prolonged crisis can lead to a collapse in public support if the leader fails to show competence and get results, all of which are key for maintaining community resilience (Jetten et al., 2020). A clear sense of the values of a nation, built around inclusivity, strength in the face of threats, with a history of working together, is important to foster within such crisis conditions (Pamment & Cassinger, 2018). For Johnson, this requires transitioning his rhetorical style to one that brings all UK inhabitants together around a common focus bound by a sense of identity. For this leader, in a post-Brexit context, there are

significant challenges in terms of his character and style. The extent COVID-19 demonstrated Johnson's capacity to be a unifying leader in the face of existential challenges to the health and unity of the nation and growing opposition from emergent alternative models of leadership is the core question for our analysis.

### **Public Communication in Practice: An Analysis of the UK and Scottish Coronavirus Media Briefings**

After an initially slow response to the coronavirus, the UK government instituted daily coronavirus media briefings from Number 10 Downing Street ("No. 10") on 16 March, and a UK-wide lockdown began on 23 March. A national campaign *Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives* ran until 10 May when it was superseded by a new slogan, *Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives*, that marked a phased lifting of restrictions. The *Stay at Home* campaign was judged by advertisers to be "one of the most effective messages in the history of government communications", achieving awareness levels of 92% (Lee & Spanier, 2020), and enjoyed high public support. The Scottish government began daily media briefings on 20 March, until 10 May deploying broadly similar messages to the UK government. The sessions were broadcast live by the BBC and BBC Scotland respectively, and archived by the broadcaster and on the relevant government websites.

A provisional coding exercise identified key themes informed by these four key public communication norms (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler, 2018) and developed in previous similar research (Garland, 2016):

1. coherent, factual and unified messaging for all citizens,
2. transparency and accountability in public communication,
3. a commitment to serving the public interest,
4. maintaining the dividing line between partisan and impartial communications.

The analysis provides an opportunity to juxtapose different styles of leadership and visions of nation and contrasting degrees of commitment to public accountability. The analysis reveals a perhaps unintended outcome – the honing of a distinctive governing style in Scotland that undermined the constitutional relevance of the UK itself. The crisis also provided an opportunity for Labour. At his first party conference on 22 September 2020 Starmer berated the government for “losing control” of the virus and promised to “act in the public interest”, noting “the challenges we now face mean that even the questions of 2019 already seem like ancient history” (Starmer, 2020). This analysis will first examine the media briefings overall, and then turn to a more detailed examination of two key themes: leadership and national identity. As the findings show, the disparity between the two narratives reveals a fragmented and confused picture of national identity.

### **Assessing the “Look” of the Daily Briefings**

The staging of the daily briefings in Westminster and Edinburgh was similar, consisting of three lecterns with the chair of the panel at the centre, slogans on the lecterns, and, at the Scottish briefings, also projected onto a screen behind the speakers. The Westminster No. 10 briefings took place in a traditional wood-panelled room with the central lectern flanked by two large Union Jack flags and one or two senior advisers. Each 60- to 90-minute briefing started with a short update by the chair, followed by thank-yous, acknowledgements and announcements. The senior adviser provided a statistical update using a series of slides. This was followed by two questions from members of the public (from 27 April), then questions from journalists, always starting with the BBC.

The Edinburgh briefings took place in a modern-looking, black painted and carpeted room in St Andrews House, the office of the First Minister and the Scottish Government, with three white



lecterns placed on a podium. The screen projection initially read “Scottish Government” in English and Gaelic with an image of the Scottish blue and white saltire on the right although the set carried no flags. The sessions were rarely shorter than 60 minutes and began with Sturgeon’s summary of daily statistics, although there were no slides. Other panellists did not always speak, and questions for journalists lasted up to 45 minutes with as many as 20 questions answered, usually starting with the BBC. Unlike the UK media briefings, no follow-up questions were allowed.

Given Sturgeon’s prominence, it is not surprising the gender balance between the briefings varied. The 26-strong UK cabinet at the time included seven women (27%), two occupied roles relevant to the coronavirus crisis. The Prime Minister chaired 16 of the 92 daily media briefings (17%), sharing the role with ten male cabinet colleagues and one female, the Home Secretary Priti Patel who appeared three times. The Health Secretary Matt Hancock made the most appearances at 24 (26%). Scientific, medical and other advisers appeared 123 times, and of these one third were women, a fifth of the experts were scientific advisers. Sturgeon’s 12-strong Scottish cabinet included seven women (58%) and five men. Women accounted for 87% of appearances by politicians. Nine officials and experts made a total of 110 appearances, the most frequent being the Chief Medical Officer with 51% of appearances, the National Clinical Director 26% and the Chief Nursing Officer at 18 (16%).

Thus, while political representation on the UK panels was overwhelmingly male, the opposite was true in Scotland. The dominant expertise was medical, especially in Scotland, with scant representation for nursing, social work, social care, general practice or public health, although Scotland’s chief nurse made nine times as many appearances as her UK counterpart. Behavioural specialists did not attend either briefing, a strange omission given the centrality of behavioural

science in informing public health campaigns (Lawton, 2020). The public were exposed to unprecedented levels of scientific discourse and statistical analysis that helped to counter misinformation, while the experts drawn upon reinforced traditional images of public health this mirrored an approach taken in many countries, a major comparative study found 21 of the 27 countries included placed scientific experts at the forefront of the communication strategy.

### **Visions of National Leadership: Boris Johnson**

Johnson's decisive general election victory in December 2019 is argued to owe much to his optimism and bumptious style of campaigning and his disavowal of his own party's ten-year austerity programme (Flinders, 2020). His initial approach to communication tried to marginalize established journalistic institutions, relying instead on direct communication through social media and interviews with favoured media outlets. As the pandemic gathered pace in China and parts of Europe in early 2020, Johnson played down its seriousness, failing to attend five COBRA meetings and spending ten days at his country home. On 3 March at a televised briefing with the Chief Scientific Adviser, Johnson launched an action plan to tackle the outbreak, yet cheerfully admitted to shaking hands with coronavirus patients. Consistent with his extravagant rhetorical style he praised the UK's "world leading scientists", claiming that the country was "extremely well prepared". Such claims later left him exposed to widespread media criticism once it became clear the government had acted late and demonstrated incompetence and indecisiveness over a range of issues.

The tone and style changed after the media briefing of 12 March when Johnson said "I must level with the British public. Many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time". On 16 March, he chaired the first daily briefing, urging everyone to work from home and avoid pubs and restaurants. Schools closed on 20 March and a full lockdown began on 23 March. Until

his absence through illness, Johnson chaired seven of the ten daily briefings, setting the tone for decisive, science-led yet positive communication that sought and largely achieved massive compliance, and high levels of media and political cooperation (Schofield, 2020). Consensus and compliance remained high during the Prime Minister's absence (Opinium, 2020). The science-led approach was a remarkable pivot for a politician who, as leader of the Leave campaign during the 2016 EU referendum, had been accused by the country's chief statistician of "a clear mis-use of official statistics" (Norgrove, 2017).

The second pivot came in May following Johnson's return from illness. Consensus and clarity gave way to what turned out to be a confused "bounce back" plan for easing the lockdown and opening up the economy. A series of unattributable briefings to preferred newspapers prefigured a much-criticized TV broadcast on Sunday, 10 May where Johnson launched the new slogan *Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives*, and sketched out a "roadmap" actively encouraging people to go to work. Schools would begin a phased return from 1 June. By 9 June, after failed attempts to shame teachers back into the classroom, the Education Secretary admitted schools would not open to most pupils before the summer holidays. Devolved governments claimed they found out about the "roadmap" changes through the media and messaging began to diverge immediately. Sturgeon opened up new lines of attack that would position Scotland in opposition to the UK by adopting a cautious approach. She hinted that unlike Johnson she was not prepared to "risk unnecessary deaths by acting rashly or prematurely" (11 May).

The image of leadership projected by Johnson was of a leader who made sporadic appearances, lacked consistency, did not take time to understand the detail, and veered between misplaced optimism and sudden and ill-explained centralized diktats. He chaired just nine (17%) of the 54 remaining broadcasts, two of which were mainly concerned with the defence of his chief

political adviser Dominic Cummings for breaking lockdown rules. Sturgeon had faced a similar dilemma when Scotland's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Catherine Calderwood, was found to have broken lockdown by travelling twice to her second home. Sturgeon immediately stated that this was wrong and against the rules but that she needed Calderwood in post to help her "steer the country through this crisis". Calderwood resigned later that day as it became clear that her presence was undermining the Scottish government's messages. Sturgeon faced a day of negative headlines compared to the five days of media frenzy endured by the Johnson government as Cummings remained in post despite calls from within the party and public for his resignation. In a distinct change of tone that emerged after the Cummings controversy, Keir Starmer's demonstrated a knack for creating headlines. On 3 June he accused the government of "winging it" in its handling of the pandemic, telling the PM to "get a grip" (Mason, 2020). Numerous polls demonstrated this proved a turning point in public confidence in Johnson and the UK government's capacity to handle the pandemic (Cartwright, 2020; Smith, 2020). Government competence was called into question by the media and Starmer over a series of damaging U-turns on the return of schools (9 June), the provision of free school meals over the summer holidays (16 June), the launch of an NHS contact tracing app (18 June), the publication of exam results based on algorithms (11 and 17 August) and working from home (22 September) (Devlin, 2020). Johnson's reputation hit a new low on 29 September, when, as nearly a third of the UK population faced various degrees of local lockdown, he had to apologize for having "mis-spoke" when asked about COVID rules in the North East (*BBC News*, 2020). Footage of him fumbling and failing to answer journalists' questions was widely circulated. On 13 October, as cases rose steeply, it emerged SAGE had recommended a short "circuit breaker lockdown" of a few weeks at their 21 September meeting. On 14 October, Starmer held a press conference

urging the government to implement this advice, warning the country could “sleep walk into a long and bleak winter” (*Sky News*, 2020). In parliament the same day Starmer warned “we’re at a tipping point; time is running out”. This stance was supported by the devolved governments of Wales and Northern Ireland which implemented national lockdowns in October. Despite dismissing this proposal as a “disaster”, Johnson later implemented a four-week lockdown in England, starting on 5 November.

### **Visions of National Leadership: Nicola Sturgeon**

Sturgeon’s immaculate presentation and her dominance of the daily panels contrasted with Johnson’s dishevelled appearance and vagueness with the facts. The daily briefings showed her on top of her brief, precise in her language, in command of the machinery of government, and as protector of the health and welfare of the Scottish people, often positioning herself in opposition to the UK government. Operational issues such as PPE, testing and the crisis in care homes were dealt with by her co-panellists, leaving her free to focus on the statistics and broader strategy and tactics.

Her messaging was consistent, with regular recourse to keywords such as “clarity”, “transparency”, “calm”, “control”, “cautious optimism” and “proper scrutiny”. Her mastery of data and how this fed into behavioural recommendations was demonstrated daily; at times she spent as long as 12 minutes explaining the statistics. She showed decisiveness, for example in relation to the Scottish school exams fiasco of 10 August, where she acknowledged that “we did not get this right and I’m sorry”, adding in a veiled contrast with Johnson “when we do make a mistake we are big enough to say so”. Several times she remarked “this is not a popularity contest”; she would take the right decision, however unpopular. From the launch of the Scottish government’s “route map” to ease the lockdown on 21 May, she consistently reiterated that the

reopening of schools on 11 August was a priority – an ambition that informed much of the decision-making from then on.

### **Visions of National Identity: Britain as One Nation**

The crisis exposed the fact that key public services such as policing, justice, education and public health had already been devolved to the Scottish government. The Coronavirus Act 2020 devolved further powers, and the Scottish government introduced an additional Coronavirus (Scotland) Act that improved tenant protection, and relaxed planning and licensing rules (Institute for Government, 2020). The UK government glossed over the complexities of an increasingly fragmented country in its daily media briefings, presenting the UK, Britain and England, or England and Wales, as largely synonymous. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were either not mentioned or subsumed within “a united national effort”. “Britain” or “the British” was referred to regularly. Johnson particularly invoked the idea of “Britishness”, for example, praising “fantastic British workers” and “freedom loving Britons” (20 March). On 5 May, he praised the resilience of the UK economy adding “we’re an ingenious bunch, the Brits”. Despite evidence of deficiencies, the UK’s approach to coronavirus was presented uncritically. On 28 March, the Business Secretary claimed, “Britain is meeting the challenge”. Two days later, the Communities Secretary praised Britain as the world’s leading country for vaccine research. It was claimed that “we” have the strongest supply chains and PPE guidelines in the world (31 March). As UK coronavirus deaths passed 20,000, among the worst death tolls in Europe, and shortcomings in infection control emerged, media consensus became increasingly tempered by criticism, most notably on 19 April with an in-depth *Sunday Times* investigation into the 38 days before lockdown when “Britain sleepwalked into disaster” (Calvert et al., 2020).

The contrasts between the effusive language of the government and contrary evidence as represented through media weakened Johnson's image as leader of the whole nation.

In a ministerial address on his return to work on 27 April, Johnson invoked the nation, praising our "collective national resolve", and "all the effort and sacrifice of the British people". He committed himself to leading a national consensus across party lines, promising that "the UK will emerge stronger than ever before". On 30 April, he repeated the pledge on political consensus but by 10 May this was falling away following the botched launch of the roadmap, as the devolved nations, especially Scotland, took every opportunity to criticize Johnson's government for easing lockdown too quickly. When Johnson visited Scotland on 23 July to mark one year of his premiership, he chose to praise the work of two UK-wide institutions, the British Army and HM Treasury, for showing "what we can achieve when we stand together as one United Kingdom" (Honeycombe-Foster, 2020). Given the sentiment in Scotland, he would have done well to praise some Scottish Institutions. By October, a poll showed just 19% of Scots were satisfied with Johnson's leadership, compared with 72% for Sturgeon and 44% for Starmer (IpsosMORI, 2020).

### **Visions of National Identity: Independent Scotland**

An obvious contrast was the absence of the concept of "Britain" at the Edinburgh briefings. The UK government was referenced mainly as a constraining or reckless force that should be resisted. As Scottish and English policy diverged, the border between Scotland and England assumed greater significance and the cultural, historical and social links represented by "Britain" were rendered invisible. Sturgeon denied making party political points at the daily briefings but her strategy to differentiate Scotland from the UK served a nationalist purpose. Her regular exhortations for people to holiday "at home" rather than travel abroad and risk quarantine

referred solely to Scotland. By doing this, she stated, we could prevent the virus from “coming in from outside”, including across the border with England (30 June). On 28 July as quarantine was reimposed on travellers from Spain, Sturgeon stated that the safest holiday was “here in Scotland”, and that if she had time for a holiday she’d choose “to spend it here”.

Scotland was the central brand throughout the briefings. In one early session, Scotland was mentioned 17 times in under 30 minutes (25 March). Comparisons were rarely made with England or the UK, but with other European countries such as Germany and France, as if to emphasize parity with large sovereign nations. When presented with criticisms or proposals from the Conservative or Labour opposition she invariably pointed out that although they had a right to oppose, we “hope at times like this that people would rise above it” (11 June). Her job was to focus on the “here and now” by “getting the country through the pandemic” (21 August).

Nomenclature was used to distinguish between Scottish and UK-wide responses to the pandemic, sometimes churlishly. The slogan “Stay at Home”, for example, did not appear on lecterns or the backdrop until 11 May, the day after it was dropped by the Westminster government. The plan to ease lockdown was referred to as Scotland’s “route map” to differentiate it from Johnson’s “roadmap”. While the UK government referred to NHS Test and Trace, Scotland’s was branded “Test and Protect”. At times the localization of brands appeared parochial, as with the reference to celebrations “across Scotland” on 5 July to mark “the 72nd anniversary of our National Health Service”. The NHS was set up in 1948 on the same day across all four nations of the UK.

Sturgeon’s approach changed in line with the three phases referred to earlier. Initially, Scotland was presented as observing the same lockdown as the rest of the UK. Sympathy was expressed for Johnson in his illness and his return was welcomed as viewers were assured “we are working with the UK government and the other devolved administrations”. She and Johnson were “at one



in wanting to see the virus beaten”. Her response to criticism that the UK had not locked down soon enough was the same – the situation was unprecedented, we took the right decisions informed by the best evidence at the time (28 April). The tone started to change in the lead up to Johnson’s announcement of 10 May. As media stories claimed the PM would announce an easing of lockdown, Sturgeon insisted she would “not be pressured into lifting restrictions prematurely” and dropping the “Stay at Home” advice “could be a catastrophic mistake”. On 10 May she broke from consensus, telling viewers she had “not seen the detail of this plan... let me emphasize at the outset that the lockdown remains in place”. She added: “we should not be reading of each other’s plans for the first time in the newspapers and decisions that are being taken for one nation only ... should not be presented as if they apply UK wide”. She repeated the message the next day, insisting Johnson’s announcements “do not apply here”.

Stiffer criticism of the UK government emerged after 29 June, when exemptions for quarantine after arriving from certain countries were announced from London “unfortunately without any prior consultation at all with the Scottish government”. The next day, when Johnson announced a UK-wide fiscal stimulus package claiming it was comparable to Roosevelt’s “New Deal” Sturgeon was “extremely underwhelmed ... it’s no New Deal”. Three days later she referred to the “shifting sands of the UK government’s position” and its “shambolic decision-making process”. On 8 July, she insisted “we are not a rubber stamp for decisions taken by another government”. She intensified the Scottish government’s “strong representations” to the UK government to increase Scotland’s borrowing powers, extend support for those losing pay and boost the UK’s fiscal stimulus closer to Germany’s. It is clear that while initially Sturgeon sought to appeal to all Scots, including Unionists, by maintaining a tolerant approach to the UK

government, she was later able to exploit its weaknesses and inject an increasingly nationalistic tone.

This deterioration in regional and political consensus signalled a return to more adversarial media reporting as journalists struggled to report each twist and turn in UK government policy. By September, as scientists warned of a likely second wave and SAGE called for more draconian measures, regional mayors in the North of England and Midlands, where cases were rising quickest, mostly Labour and echoing Starmer's calls, joined the First Ministers in a rising chorus of opposition. Johnson's attempt to reassert control and inject hope by announcing plans to implement possible new vaccines was sabotaged by a growing crisis at No. 10 that dominated the news headlines in mid-November, culminating in the dismissal of Cummings. At this point each of the four nations of the UK had divergent strategies with Johnson appearing increasingly isolated and his government lacking a strategy for emerging from the second lockdown.

## **Conclusion**

Between 2 and 27 March, Boris Johnson attempted to develop a public-oriented brand to reflect the four dimensions of public accountability referred to earlier: factual and unified messaging, transparency in public communication, a commitment to the public interest and maintaining the dividing line between partisan and impartial communications. Johnson initially demonstrated a commitment to the briefings, attempting to unite a fragmented nation around a Churchillian style of "Britishness" which largely drove both rallying around the flag and for a wartime community spirit to emerge. This continued during his illness and there was generally strong support for his authenticity in thanking those who had cared for him (Johnson, 2020). A commitment to accountability was mirrored in the Edinburgh briefings but with recourse to "Scottishness". This diverged after 10 May when Johnson launched what was seen as a premature and confused

roadmap for lifting the lockdown. He rarely appeared thereafter and ended the briefings on 23 July while Sturgeon continued. U-turns, as well as his retention of Cummings, undermined his credibility. Sturgeon meanwhile maintained a consistent message and reflected the national consensus over lockdown. She also demonstrated a greater work ethic but her shift to an oppositional narrative could be interpreted as opportunistic, using the pandemic, and her handling of it juxtaposed with that of Johnson, to strengthen her argument for independence. The sympathy Johnson earned through his hospitalization was squandered following the Cummings debacle and failure to manage the easing of restrictions (Johnson, 2020). There has been a dramatic fall in his personal approval ratings since May 2020, while Sturgeon's popularity has been consistently high in Scotland and Starmer's has largely been positive in comparison to Johnson (YouGov, 2020a, 2020b). The data thus indicate a failure in Johnson's performance of leadership, actual and rhetorical, as well perhaps as a rejection of Westminster rule among Scots. The pandemic accentuated three extant challenges. Johnson's bumptious style is appropriate for campaigns but less during a crisis, when alternative foci of leadership appear to have a clearer vision and mastery of the detail. The settlement between the regions of the UK with different powers devolved to Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh parliaments as well as elected mayors for regions or cities of the UK means there are multiple layers of governance. When regions are led by politicians from opposition parties, there is always an opportunity for conflict and the pandemic exacerbated these in the UK as well as in other nations such as France and Italy (Lilleker et al., 2021). But UK regional differences were already strained by Brexit. With England being most strongly in favour, Scotland against and Northern Ireland's stability and economy threatened by the possibility of a border either within the island of Ireland or in the Irish Sea, regional leaders took an oppositional stance to Johnson as the champion of Brexit.

During the early stages, the logic was to follow the science and the Westminster approach. As cracks appeared in the credibility of the government, alternative power bases used the crisis to exert their authority. Hence the pandemic has exposed inconsistencies in the UK constitutional settlement, exacerbated rifts between parties and regions, and laid bare the deficiencies of the Johnson administration. The crisis of public communication, especially where national peculiarities accentuate tensions, creates an environment where adopting a one-nation, inclusive strategy for crisis management can prove impossible. As unity and credibility falter, oppositional forces muster arms to exacerbate the fissures.

**Figure 2.1** Johnson's approval ratings and confidence in government.

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<sup>1</sup> COBRA is a Whitehall acronym referring to the room where the meetings take place – Cabinet Office Briefing Room A.