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Minutes

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CABINET

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet
held at 10 Downing Street on

WEDNESDAY 11th March 2020
At 0830 AM

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth
Affairs, and First Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for
the Cabinet Office

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor, and Secretary of State for Justice

The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and
Industrial Strategy, Minister for COP26

The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
Secretary of State for International Trade, and
President of the Board of Trade, and Minister for
Women and Equalities

The Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and
Local Government

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Alister Jack MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

The Rt Hon Simon Hart MP
Secretary of State for Wales

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The Rt Hon Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
Lord Privy Seal, and Leader of the House of Lords

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and
Sport

The Rt Hon Amanda Milling MP
Minister without Portfolio (and Conservative Party Chair)

ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP
Chief Secretary to the Treasury

The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP
Lord President of the Council, and Leader of the House of Commons

The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Chief Whip)

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman QC MP
Attorney General

Secretariat

Sir Mark Sedwill
H MacNamara

NR

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I&S

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Covid-19 (Coronavirus)
Outbreak

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the thoughts and good wishes of the Cabinet were with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health and Social Care who had recently been diagnosed with Covid-19 (coronavirus).

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that in the UK, 373 people had been diagnosed with coronavirus and eight people had died. In the case of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Public Health England were in the process of contacting people who had come into contact with her. He had spoken to the Speaker of the House of Commons and to the Shadow Secretary of State for Health, and both had accepted the need for a calm and proportionate response; this message of calm should be communicated by colleagues to others in Parliament. The evidence indicated that the infection was passed on through contact of at least 15 minutes at a distance of two metres or less. Unless individuals were symptomatic there was no point in being tested: the test would not work. The key symptoms were a dry cough and a temperature. Without these symptoms, it was highly unlikely that someone was suffering from coronavirus.

Continuing, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that he would chair a ministerial meeting that afternoon to agree the contents of the necessary legislation to respond to coronavirus. The aim was to introduce the Bill in the House of Commons the following Thursday and pass it through both Houses of Parliament the week after that. More resources had been provided to testing and to the NHS-111 helpline service. Work was continuing on the interventions designed to slow down the spread of the virus. The first decision, likely to be taken later that week, was to tell people to self-isolate even if they only

showed mild symptoms. There would be ongoing pressure to bring forward measures that were not scientifically grounded, and the Government should hold firm in proposing only those with a proper scientific basis. It had rightly won plaudits for its approach so far.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a) given the global death rate and the number of those who had died in the UK, it was likely that far more people were infected than had currently tested positive;
- b) scientific evidence was not fully conclusive about the point at which individuals could transmit the virus, although consensus was that transmissibility was low before individuals became symptomatic;
- c) although the NHS-111 helpline service was under extreme pressure, the NHS-111 online service had responded well. Similarly, there had been an increase in online consultations with GPs;
- d) there was no single scientific view on how to deal with the outbreak; evidence from other countries should also be considered. Experts should set out why they had reached their conclusions. There was a danger of confirmation bias;
- e) passengers from the Grand Princess cruise ship which had been docked off the coast of California would arrive by plane into Birmingham later that day. There were 131 UK nationals and their non-UK partners, 27 EU nationals, four Swiss nationals and two Ukrainian nationals on board. Onward flights were being arranged. Those passengers destined for the UK would be self-isolating. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was working intensively with the Department for Transport to ensure that UK nationals were not stranded in places that were under quarantine, such as in Italy. Thought was also being given to Easter holiday travel arrangements, including school trips; and
- f) the policy to keep schools open was right, but the Easter holidays were not far away and if many teachers became ill it may be difficult for all schools to reopen.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said the Government would be led by the scientific evidence. Scientists did not have a monopoly on wisdom but neither did politicians. The Government would come under pressure to take further significant action, for example closing schools or banning

public events. These interventions remained on the table, but epidemiologists were clear that the timing of their introduction was key to their effectiveness. Measures would be deployed only when the time was right.

The Cabinet:

- took note.

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Continuing, THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that he would set out a series of interventions to support the economy and society through the difficult weeks and months to come. A range of scenarios had been modelled to show the impact of coronavirus on the UK economy: the impact would be significant on the demand side as well as the supply side, as people responded to advice to stay at home. The central case showed a significant hit to GDP towards the middle part of that year. The interventions in the Budget therefore were about providing a bridge to get to the other side of this point. Measures would provide significant, temporary support that would protect jobs and businesses.

Continuing, THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that he

had a three point plan to support the country during the coronavirus outbreak. First, support to public services. Whilst it was impossible to put a figure on the amount of money that would be required, he would commit to providing whatever it took to get through the crisis: all the support and funding required by public services, including the NHS. Second, there would be support for the most vulnerable people in the form of a safety net for those who could not work, whether they were ill themselves or not at work as they were self-isolating. Finally, he would also announce protections for jobs, ensuring that firms were able to survive the crisis and continue to employ people during the recovery. Taken together, this was a significant, targeted and thoughtful set of measures that would compare favourably to the responses of other nations.

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