

'Dump f*ing everyone': the inside story of how Michael Gove's vicious attack dogs are terrorising the DfE**

Divisions within the department 'could have come straight from an Iannucci script'

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The day David Cameron and Nick Clegg smiled at each other in Downing Street's rose garden in 2010, promising their coalition would deliver a "bold and reforming government", Michael Gove and his special adviser, Dominic Cummings, walked to No 10 expecting to be handed the helm of the Department for Education.

The Prime Minister shook hands with Gove, giving him a seat in his Cabinet. But the handshake given to Cummings came with nothing to celebrate. Andy Coulson, then in No 10 as Cameron's Communications Director, regarded Gove's aide as untrustworthy and a liability. Coulson believed that three months earlier, when Cameron, George Osborne and Gove held private discussions in Notting Hill over failures of Conservative policy, Cummings had leaked details of the meeting.

Coulson wanted Cummings' head and finally got it. But the rising heat on Coulson from the phone-hacking scandal, and his resignation in 2011, changed everything. With Coulson gone, Gove quickly brought Cummings back into the fold.

It is now two years since Cummings began radically reshaping the Department for Education. Gove promised the Treasury he would "do more with less", would halve the £580m annual running cost of the DfE by 2016, and slim down his department's workforce by 1,000 people.

What the Gove-Cummings redesign means for those working for the DfE inside the Great Smith Street headquarters opposite Westminster Abbey, is now only beginning to emerge.

According to sources contacted by *The Independent*, along with evidence taken from internal complaints lodged by staff on the receiving end of what many regard as an "us-and-them aggressive, intimidating culture", Gove's policy reform masks a hard-line ideological revolution.

One of the department's senior staff said he was no longer sure what the future held, adding "DfE probably now stands for 'Dump F***ing Everyone'."

The expletive is no accident. An internal grievance report, prepared for a tribunal that was scheduled to be heard this month, highlighted the complainant's belief that events surrounding the attempted removal of a senior civil servant were "more reminiscent of an episode of *The Thick of It* than a reflection of acceptable behaviour of employees of the Department for Education".

So, who qualifies as the DfE's Malcolm Tucker equivalent? This is a long-standing joke across all eight floors of Great Smith Street. The conduct of Cummings, however, along with the former director of communications, James Frayne, a former lobbyist, has been criticised after episodes that have contributed to staff simply walking from their jobs. Two separate

Fleet Street editors are alleged recently to have told Gove that he should end Cummings' reign as a special adviser for the good of the party. Gove dismissed the advice as misplaced.

It took a private settlement of £25,000 last month to stop details of allegations of bullying and intimidation being heard in the London Central Employment Tribunal.

Disciplinary action was not taken against Cummings or Frayne, but the director who carried out the internal report said “the department handled the situation in a regrettable way”.

The report, which centred on a DfE staffer of 27 years, said she had made allegations of being marginalised, promoted over, categorised as “difficult”, and was told on a stairwell that her role was no longer needed. Her complaint describes a “macho culture of intimidation, favouritism and 'laddism'” in Frayne's communications department, with Cummings singled out as “widely known to use obscene and intimidating language”. The report records that Frayne denied swearing on a regular basis.

How deeply divided are the DfE's staff? An internal survey of the way Gove's regime has changed the culture inside the education department has never been published. Although the fast-track internal investigation found no “strong” evidence of “aggressive or bullying behaviour”, the “them-and-us” atmosphere inside the DfE was acknowledged. “Dysfunctional” was another description used in the report. This has been officially denied.

The us-and-them divisions inside the communications management team, according to one former DfE employee, “could have come straight from an Armando Iannucci script. A Have I Got News For You session, supposed to engender insight, turned sour. An 'away day' almost required another away day to fix, and plans for an anti-bullying week campaign ended up with some staff being turned on. You couldn't make it up.”

The source, who asked not to be named, said: “Cummings and Frayne want what Gove wants: to put a firework up the DfE. You challenge that, and there's no place for you.” Frayne is reported to have said at one meeting: “Wind your neck in, you're acting like a t***.” Frayne admits to “heated” exchanges, but denied calling anyone a “t***”. “F*** it,” or “let's just f***ing do it”, and “what the f*** do you mean?” are described by the complainant in a grievance report as the routine retort to those who might be showing signs of slowing down the Gove revolution.

The grievance process leading to the £25,000 settlement has one document in which the complainant describes the elite group of special advisers close to Gove as having created a culture of “untouchable entitlement” surrounding themselves, with the belief that “their behaviour is not open to challenge”. Cummings is also alleged to have said “You're not on the same page, love”. Cummings denies ever using the word “love”.

Cummings holds ideological credentials Gove values: campaign director of the 1999 anti-euro campaign, setting up the campaign for a referendum on the EU constitution, establishing the New Frontiers Foundation which pushed for an alternative to Britain's partnership with the EU. And both he and Gove are now in a position to do what they said was necessary when the Tories were in opposition.

A source close to Michael Gove said tonight: "This case was a wide-ranging grievance against the department, not specifically against special advisers. No departmental inquiry has found that special advisers did anything wrong. James Frayne was right to restructure the communications department and the allegations against Dominic Cummings were dismissed by internal inquiries." A spokesman for the DfE said: "It would not be appropriate to comment on individual employment matters."