UK “second jobs” scandal reveals class gulf discrediting Parliament

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A media barrage in Britain has erupted over just how many Members of Parliament (MPs) have second jobs and the amount they earn. A backbench MP earns £82,000-a-year plus expenses. MPs are allowed to work as consultants for private businesses and no limit is placed on the number of hours MPs are allowed to work in jobs outside of parliament.

Owen Paterson, a grandee of the ruling Conservatives, who more than two years ago was exposed for his highly renumerated (£500,000) lobbying on behalf of two companies, has been at the centre of the second jobs scandal.

Last month, Paterson faced a 30-day suspension from the House of Commons after the parliamentary standards watchdog found he had breached lobbying rules in an “egregious case of paid advocacy”. Parliamentary standards commissioner Kathryn Stone found that Paterson used his parliamentary office to hold meetings with medical diagnostics company Randox and meat processor Lynn’s Country Foods on 25 occasions between October 2016 and February 2020. Patterson was a paid consultancy fees for both companies totalling £100,000 a year.

Despite attempts by Prime Minister Boris Johnson to block the suspension of prominent Brexiteer Paterson, by whipping MPs to vote for a plan to create a Tory-led committee to rewrite parliamentary standards rule, Paterson quit parliament, 24 hours later, on November 4.

The crisis worsened as the scandal enveloped former attorney general Sir Geoffrey Cox.

Cox earned almost £6 million from work on top of being an MP, including a salary with law firm Withers from which he rakes in £400,000 a year (£813 an hour). The *Independent* reported, “On top of his annual retainer, Sir Geoffrey was paid £156,916.08 for 140 hours of work by the same firm between April and May 31, 2021—roughly the same as the prime minister earns in a year.”

So brazen was Cox that he spent up to a month in the British Virgin Islands during lockdown working for Withers on a lucrative contract while voting by proxy in Parliament.

By the end of this week, by which time it had been established that more than a quarter of Tory MPs have second jobs (90 out of 360), from which they earn a collective £4 million a year, the prime minister was named as one of the worst offenders. The *Financial Times* estimated that Johnson had helped himself to more than £4 million in second job income over the last 14 years. This includes the £1.6 million made since re-entering parliament in 2016, after his eight year spell as London Mayor, from speeches, newspaper columns, book advances and royalties. It included the £250,000 a year he received for his *Daily Telegraph* column, a sum Johnson once described as “chicken feed”.

The adage that money talks applies in spades when it comes to the “Mother of Parliaments”. Last week the *Sunday Times* Insight team revealed that the Tory Party was “systematically offering seats in the House of Lords to a select group of multimillionaire donors who pay more than £3 million to the party.” It added, “In the past two decades, all 16 of the party’s main treasurers—apart from the most recent, who stood down two months ago having donated £3.8 million—have been offered a seat in the Lords.”

The investigation revealed that “Many other Conservative donors have also been ennobled alongside the party’s treasurers: 22 of the party’s main financial backers have been given peerages since 2010. This includes nine donor treasurers. Together they have given £54 million to the party.”

The scandal is only the latest iteration revealing how deeply MPs get their snouts in the trough. In 1994, John Major’s Tory government was staggered by the cash-for-questions scandal.

In 2009, under Gordon Brown’s Labour government, parliament was hit by a scandal over the abuse of expenses—with MPs spending millions in tax payers money on everything from a £1,654 “floating duck island” for his pond (a Tory MP) to a £20,700 for roof repairs, including some to the bell tower of his stately home (a Labour MP).

Earlier this year, former Prime Minister David Cameron, in office from 2010-15, was exposed for his lobbying efforts on behalf of the financier Lex Greensill. After leaving office, Cameron took a job with Greensill Capital, the now collapsed supply chain finance company, and on its behalf lobbied ministers, including Chancellor Rishi Sunak.

The pandemic revealed that many of the contracts given to the private sector were the product of cronyism and corruption. A Transparency International UK (TI-UK) report into the awarding of contracts, published in April, examined £18 billion

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worth of contracts awarded between February and November 2020. It concluded that one in five—worth £3.7 billion—raised "red flags" for possible corruption.

Among TI-UK's findings were that £1.6 billion worth of personal protective equipment (PPE) contracts (comprising 14 tenders) were awarded to entities with known connections to the Conservative Party. Three contracts worth £536 million went to politically connected companies for testing-related services. Health Secretary Matt Hancock awarded £30 million worth of contracts for vials and plastic funnels to his former local pub landlord.

As most of the MPs with second jobs are on the government's benches, Labour attempted a point scoring operation. But this soon came unstuck as Labour MPs, including shadow cabinet ministers, have also made a killing from the private sector.

The pro-government *Daily Mail* reported that David Lammy, Shadow Secretary of State for Justice/Shadow Lord Chancellor, pulled in £141,000 in three years for speeches at Google, Facebook, City corporations and media appearances.

Labour MP Chris Bryant, chair of the Parliament's Committee on Standards and Privileges which found Paterson guilty of 'egregious' breaches of lobbying rules, received £2,000 from investment banker Goldman Sachs for speaking at an event.

Another Labourite who has railed against Tory sleaze is right-winger Jess Phillips. But Phillips, an MP only since 2015, has pulled in tens of thousands of pounds working for the private sector. Among the firms paying Phillips collectively over £30,000 are right-wing newspapers, including from the Murdoch press and *Daily Telegraph*, and a property developer, Anthony McCourt.

Those in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, hence the Labour supporting *LabourList* website warning, "The second jobs row is an opportunity for Labour, but not a clear open goal."

The second jobs scandal was as toxic for Labour as the Tories, it cautioned, noting, "Keir Starmer has this week been asked about 'discussions' he had over taking employment with Mishcon de Reya in 2017, and he was paid while an MP (before becoming Labour leader) by the law firm."

Before becoming an MP in 2015, Starmer, a Queens Counsel and former Director of Public Prosecutions and Head of the Crown Prosecution Service (2008-2013), earned thousands from Mishcon de Reya. From June 1 until September 30, 2016, he received £4,500 a month excluding VAT for legal advice provided to the Mishcon de Reya Academy. Starmer worked approximately six hours per month. He only stopped receiving payment on becoming Shadow Brexit Secretary in October 2016. However, as the *Times* reported, he "received £3,200 for legal advice to a separate firm, Simons Muirhead and Burton, the following month."

In the June 2016 Brexit referendum, Starmer advocated Britain remaining in the European Union. After the referendum result to leave, he advocated a second referendum aimed at reversing the plebiscite. Labour campaigned for this policy, under his insistence, in the 2019 general election.

In July 2016, Mishcon de Reya's services were employed on behalf of a group of businesses in legal action to prevent the government from triggering the procedure for withdrawal from the European Union without an Act of Parliament. In January 2017, it won the case with the Supreme Court upholding a November 2016 decision of the High Court that the Secretary of State did not have the power under the prerogative to give notice pursuant to Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

It has long been understood in ruling circles that serving as an MP penalises the very social layers who enter parliament. Including the substantial expenses allotted, MPs earn far more than an average worker, but for many among this grasping, avaricious layer it feels like penury.

However, this is a sacrifice they are prepared to tolerate knowing that once they retire, they will reap the financial benefits with positions on boards as advisers and consultants. This is the endgame not just for the Tories. The archetypal example for them all is former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair who has raked in tens of millions of pounds since leaving office. Should Starmer lose the next general election, it is likely he will soon be back to earning far more in a month than he presently can in a year.

However, the money grubbing of MPs is a pale reflection of the looting of society by the major corporations and oligarchs whose wealth means they view the likes of Johnson and Starmer as lackeys whose loyalties can be secured for chump change.

Despite the wall-to-wall coverage in the media over the second jobs scandal, it likely will soon be dropped. For months Labour has focused on no end of pathetic campaigns against Johnson, covering everything from the choice of curtains at his Downing Street flat to the cost of the refurbishment of his apartment, supposedly to show how "out of touch" he is. But this only reveals that on the main issues, the Tories and Labour are aligned and operate as a de facto coalition.

Johnson's real crime, for which he will never be held to account by Labour, is his committing mass murder during the pandemic, overseeing the preventable deaths of over 165,000 people. However, what is certain is that in the long-term, the degraded spectacle now playing out will hasten the inevitable breaking from the ossified parliamentary setup by the working class.

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