

Johnson's reforms over Tory sleaze and second jobs leaves MPs untouched

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After several weeks being mired in a scandal over the income that MPs have raked-in while working second jobs in the private sector, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced to allow a vote to reform parliamentary rules.

Last Wednesday, in a bid to forestall an opposition Labour Party motion calling for the banning of MPs from paid political consultancy work, Johnson said he supported such action and put forward an amendment to Labour's motion.

Labour's motion was defeated by 282 votes to 231, as the Conservatives have an 80-seat parliamentary majority. The Tories' own amendment passed by 297 votes to zero, after Labour and other opposition MPs chose not to vote against it. MPs will be "investigated and appropriately punished" only where they are deemed to be "prioritising outside interests over their constituents" and second jobs will be banned only for "political consultancy work and lobbying".

MPs working second lucrative jobs has been standard practice for so long that when the scandal erupted over Conservative MP Owen Paterson's lucrative arrangements with Randox and Lynn's Country Foods, Johnson attempted to ride it out. Paterson received £500,000 for his Westminster lobbying on behalf of both firms. During the pandemic Randox was given £600 million in contracts, including a £133 million COVID-19 testing contract.

Within days, Johnson was forced to let him go, with Paterson quitting parliament. Johnson reportedly told the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers regarding his initial defence of Paterson, "On a clear road I crashed the car into a ditch."

Further details have since emerged of the vast scale of financial skullduggery, with cabinet minister Michael Gove and Tory donor David Meller implicated in

pandemic profiteering over contracts allocated at the highest levels of government.

A company then co-owned by Meller was "awarded six personal protective equipment (PPE) supply contracts worth £164m from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) during the coronavirus pandemic," according to a report in the *Guardian*. Meller donated £60,000 to the Tories and helped bankroll a 2016 party leadership bid by Gove. For services rendered, Gove put Meller's company into a "VIP lane" as massive taxpayer funded contracts were dished out.

The *Guardian* cited information obtained by Politico, "When the contracts were awarded, Gove was a minister at the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for government procurement, and in charge of the office of the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster, which referred Meller Designs for PPE supply. The company was among 47 awarded contracts for PPE totalling £4.7bn after referrals from politicians and officials... Several were linked to MPs, all of them Conservative."

Despite the hoopla, Johnson's supposed reforms are a misnomer. He signed up for a ban on second jobs, but the parliamentary vote was not binding. Moreover, there is no commitment to any timetable for the reforms' implementation, with a cross party slate of MPs to look into the issue in January. The amendment passed by the Tories states, in the vaguest language, that external paid or unpaid positions by MPs should be "within reasonable limits". The *Financial Times* noted the government's amended motion "does not rule out MPs taking up paid directorships or acting as consultants on matters that are not deemed political."

Among MPs, only ministers are prevented from taking second jobs. A backbench MP's salary is £81,932 before taxation. They can also claim

substantial expenses. Even so, around a third of MPs have second jobs, with the top “sideline” earner Sir Geoffrey Cox, the former attorney general, pulling in nearly £1 million in legal fees last year alone, including for work representing several British Virgin Islands (BVI) government figures including prime minister, Andrew Fahie. The BVI is a notorious tax haven. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, former Director of Public Prosecutions, made around £100,000 for legal work, speeches and writing since becoming an MP in 2015.

An analysis by the *Guardian* of Parliament’s register of interests showed fewer than 10 MPs would be materially affected by Johnson’s proposed ban on second jobs that is backed by Labour.

It noted, “90 out of 360 Conservative MPs have second jobs compared with five of Labour’s 199 MPs and two each from the SNP [Scottish National Party] and the Lib Dems. 48 MPs are working as consultants, of which 46 are Tories”. But only “Between two and five of these Tory MPs could be described as parliamentary advisers or political consultants.” The 20-hour weekly limit on outside work would only cover Cox.

The *Guardian*’s concerns were summed up in a cringeworthy editorial, “On MPs’ integrity: culture change needed at the top”, spelling out its support for a future right-wing Labour government headed by Starmer. It opined, “While parliament can begin to repair its reputation by acting now, the change in culture that is required to restore probity will ultimately require a change of government.”

The campaign against Tory sleaze should, according to the *Guardian*, be prosecuted from that well known refuge of scoundrels: patriotism. On the morning of last week’s parliamentary vote columnist Raphael Behr’s commentary was headlined, “Starmer has found a fruitful line of attack: fighting Tory corruption is a patriotic duty”

As far as Behr was concerned, “There is more at stake here than rules on MPs’ earnings. The question of integrity in public office touches on national self-esteem. It gives Labour a rare opportunity to hammer the Tories on a point of patriotic principle.” He continued, “This is his most fruitful line of attack, casting Johnson’s indulgence of cronyism as an insult to all the people who think abiding by rules matters. It

is unfair. But also un-British.”

Starmer should be “defining patriotism in terms of the values that British people might reasonably expect to see upheld by their government: decency, fair play, respecting the rules. That is what Starmer began to do yesterday. That is the significance of his conclusion that ‘Britain deserves better’”.

The *Guardian*’s servile advocacy of “British values” in defence of a rotten bourgeois parliamentary set-up is about as far as possible from the anger growing in the working class. More than 167,000 lives have been sacrificed to the government’s herd immunity agenda, while the financial oligarchy has gorged itself on profits, corruption, austerity and death. The classes are polarised as never before.

The *Guardian* is well aware of the growing rumblings from below. Behr judges that even if the Tories lose support over the second jobs scandal, Labour will not necessarily benefit. The Liberal Democrats or even the Greens might gain, he speculates. But Behr’s greatest fear is that “contempt for the whole of Westminster could fuel some as yet unidentified, none-of-the-above insurgency.”



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