

UK: Further revelations of Tory government partying during COVID lockdown

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Downing Street was forced on Friday to apologise to the queen over parties held at Prime Minister Boris Johnson's residence on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral.

The two parties, the latest of a series that have been leaked to the media which broke lockdown rules and guidance, were held on April 16, 2021. The next day Queen Elizabeth was pictured sitting alone during the funeral of her husband. The parties were held for James Slack, Johnson's director of communications, who was leaving Downing Street to become deputy editor at *The Sun* newspaper. According to the *Telegraph*, "excessive alcohol was drunk, while at points, guests danced."

The newspaper reported of the other party, "Someone was sent to the Co-op on the Strand, a busy street nearby, with a suitcase which was then filled with bottles of wine and brought back to Downing Street... Around 30 people attended both gatherings combined, according to one present."

At the funeral of Prince Philip, only 30 mourners were allowed to attend, spread 2 metres apart.

According to reports, at least 11 parties were held from May to December 2020 in Downing Street and other government buildings.

As widespread anger mounted against him, Johnson was forced into a desperate apology in parliament Wednesday, while lyingly claiming that a Downing Street garden party, held on May 20, 2020, was a "work-related" meeting and therefore exempt from pandemic lockdown rules.

During that period the UK was still under the first national lockdown, with mixing indoors prohibited except for within one household. Outdoors, people could only meet in groups of six, or two households. At none of the parties held in 2020 did the daily death toll fall below 284 (May 23), with the most deaths (586)

recorded on the same day as a Christmas party gathering on December 18.

On Friday, it was revealed that Kate Joseph, the Covid taskforce chief and now Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council, hosted a leaving drinks party in the Cabinet Office, adjacent to Downing Street in December 2020. The Covid Task Force "is responsible for coordinating the Government's response to the pandemic".

The picture that emerges from these events is of a government utterly indifferent to the terrible consequences of its policies, fiddling while the UK suffers the worst public health catastrophe in a century. Until being forced by the warning of scientists that up to half a million lives would be lost, and with workers in several sectors protesting against unsafe workplaces, the government as late as March 12, 2020 was still preaching its herd immunity agenda that the mass infection of the population was "desirable".

Johnson himself tested positive for COVID-19 on March 27, 2020, just four days after the imposition of the national lockdown and was admitted to hospital and intensive care in April.

As is now clear, this changed things not one iota, with the most senior government officials regularly holding drunken parties and breaching every COVID rule throughout the pandemic.

Even Johnson's most ardent supporters have concluded that with his poll ratings in freefall he is on borrowed time. However, at this stage the discussion in Tory ranks is who among a deeply unpopular party is best placed to replace him. Thus calls for him to resign within his party have come from just five MPs and the leader of the Scottish Conservative Party.

In any other period in history, Johnson, who has overseen the social murder of more than 176,000

people and the mass infection with COVID of more than 15 million, more than a fifth of the population, would have been booted out of office.

But he and his right-wing cabal were able to carry out these crimes because they were supported by the Labour Party who declared first under leader Jeremy Corbyn and then his successor, Sir Keir Starmer, that they would support the government during the pandemic as a “constructive opposition” in the “national interest”.

Labour did this in alliance with the trade unions who suppressed every struggle of the working class which broke out in opposition to the government’s attacks on health, lives and working conditions.

That situation continues, despite Labour’s calls for Johnson personally to go. Starmer has not, despite it being in his gift as opposition leader, forced a vote of confidence in the government.

This is allowing the Tories to prepare to elect a new leader even further to the right than Johnson, while continuing to ram through their anti-working-class dictatorial agenda.

They are being backed to the hilt by the right-wing press. The *Daily Mail* editorialised that Johnson carried out a “masterstroke” by “ending all restrictions in the summer”, but would only retain their support “If he lifts [the remaining limited] Plan B curbs” so that “England becomes the first developed country to exit the pandemic. We would steal a march by kick-starting the economy. Ministers must turbocharge this by cutting self-isolation to five days in order to get people back to work.”

Labour is busy competing for the affections of the ruling elite. On Monday evening, as Johnson was reeling from the flood of revelations, Starmer whipped Labour MPs to abstain on a vote that will limit the amount the government spends on welfare payments and tax credits. All but 14 of Labour’s 198 MPs followed the instruction, allowing the bill to pass with ease.

The cuts will be devastating. In April, millions of unemployed and low paid workers—who have already lost the £20 a week uplift in the Universal Credit welfare payment that had been in place since the start of the pandemic—will see their benefits rise by just 3.1 percent, based on last September’s inflation rate. But the CPI measurement of inflation this is based on is set

to be about 6 percent by then, and RPI inflation is already even higher at 7.1 percent—meaning huge real terms decline in income and living standards.

Yesterday Health Secretary Sajid Javid, a potential leadership challenger, announced that the COVID self-isolation period will be cut to just five days in England from Monday. Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting responded by welcoming the measure to “help people get back to work faster... but what took the secretary of state [for health, Sajid Javid] so long... how many days does he think the NHS has lost, the economy has lost?”

Labour carried out another rightward shift this week with Streeting, a Blairite who is touted as a future party leader, telling the BBC that in office Labour would be using “effective” private firms “to bring down National Health Service waiting lists.” On Thursday, Javid told NHS England to give private hospitals up to £270 million in case of an Omicron surge.

On Friday, Labour announced that while it will vote next week in the House of Lords against some of the latest draconian amendments to the government’s Police Bill, it does not oppose all the measures in the legislation.

With Labour and the unions doing everything to prop up what even the right-wing *Sun* described as a “paralysed” government, the mass well of anger against these rotten organisations and the capitalist system they uphold must be mobilised. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the unions and based on a socialist programme that places human life and the needs of the working class above the profit interests of the capitalists and their representatives.



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