UK: Metropolitan Police launch Tory pandemic parties investigation

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The “partygate” crisis wracking Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government worsened yesterday, as the Metropolitan Police announced a criminal investigation.

For several weeks, Johnson has been rocked by leak after leak showing that he and other top government officials held parties, drinking sessions and gatherings in Downing Street and other Whitehall buildings, breaking COVID restriction rules and guidance while the country was in lockdown.

Anything between 15 and 19 parties are being looked into by a Cabinet Office investigation, led by senior civil servant Sue Gray.

Gray is scheduled to report her findings this week, after having taken written statements Monday from the prime minister’s embittered former chief adviser, Dominic Cummings. Cummings, who is behind the leaks, is politically even further to the right than Johnson.

The Met announced its investigation the day after ITV News journalist Paul Brand reported that Johnson held another party, this time his birthday party, in Downing Street’s Cabinet Room. This was attended by up to 30 guests who ate picnic food, on June 19, 2020. Brand claimed that Johnson also hosted family members in his Downing Street flat that same evening. These events were held during England’s first COVID-19 lockdown when all indoor social gatherings were banned in England.

Speaking at a hearing of a London Assembly committee yesterday, Met Commissioner Dame Cressida Dick confirmed that her force “is now investigating a number of events at Downing Street and Whitehall in the last two years in relation to alleged breaches of Covid-19 regulations.” Dick had taken the step after being passed the “outline findings” from Gray’s inquiry.

The Met would be investigating “summary only offences. The people who commit them get a fixed penalty notice.” There was “evidence that those involved knew or ought to have known that what they were doing was an offence.”

For weeks the Met refused to get involved despite claims of illegality carried out by Johnson and government officials, declaring that it was not Met policy to undertake retrospective investigations of lockdown breaches

Dick had to acknowledge mounting anger against the Johnson government, after the deaths from COVID of over 176,000 people, stating, “I absolutely understand that there is deep public concern about the allegations that have been in the media over the last several weeks.”

Initial reports yesterday were that the Met’s intervention meant that Gray’s findings would not be made available for weeks. But just hours later it was reported that the Met had not objected to Gray’s report being released before its criminal investigation has concluded. Sky’s deputy political editor Sam Coates reported, “Gray will consult with lawyers and some officials. The prime minister and political advisers in Number 10 are not part of this decision, I'm told”.

Gray’s report could now be released as early as today**.**

Earlier this week, it was reported that not all of her findings would be made public, as it was in the prime minister’s gift—after authorising Gray’s investigation—to release or hold back any information he saw fit.

After talk that Johnson’s time was all but up, with Conservative MPs queuing up to put in letters to reach the required 54 to trigger a Tory leadership election, so far only six have been confirmed by backbench leader Sir Graham Brady and fewer than 10 of 359 Tory MPs have openly spoken out calling for his resignation.

There are widely differing views on the intervention by the Met, with some speculating that this will be the coup de grace for Johnson and others saying that it will force the party to rally round the leader.

In a statement showing that Johnson intends to hunker down and see the crisis out, he told MPs Tuesday that he

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had not broken any laws and “I welcome the Met's decision to conduct its own investigation because I believe this will help to give the public the clarity it needs and help to draw a line under matters.”

Johnson has no doubt drawn succour from the fact that the breaches of lockdown rules are so widespread in the Tory party that a criminal investigation will now prevent his surgical removal. The *Times* reported Tuesday that Chancellor Rishi Sunak also attended Johnson’s birthday party, even as he was getting ready to attend a COVID strategy meeting in Downing Street. Sunak is favourite to replace Johnson.

The intervention by Dick is indicative of the right-wing forces leading the “partygate” campaign to unseat Johnson. Their main concern is that he is not capable of leading the government as British imperialism faces massive domestic opposition at home to its herd immunity and social austerity agenda, even as a potential war with Russia looms.

Dick, who was then the Met’s Gold Commander, is infamous for leading the July 22, 2005 operation that ended in the police execution on London’s Underground of the innocent Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes, the day after terror bombings in the capital city.

This is not the first time the Met has involved itself in a political conflict at the highest levels of Westminster. In November 2018, it launched an investigation into the Labour Party over bogus anti-Semitism accusation targeting then party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his left-wing supporters. Dick was handed a dossier of complaints assembled by Blairites and Zionists as she appeared on an LBC phone-in show. The witch-hunting dossier then served as justification for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) opening an investigation. The publication of the EHRC’s report in October 2020 set off a chain of events that resulted in Corbyn’s successor as leader, Sir Keir Starmer, removing the party whip from Corbyn for refusing to apologise for not dealing swiftly enough with those accused of anti-Semitism.

Johnson is staking his future most of all on his leading role in whipping up war fever against Russia using accusations of Moscow planning to invade Ukraine.

On Tuesday, the *Daily Mail* in an editorial headlined, “Party madness play’s into Putin’s hands” complained, “Another day, another lurid account of a Downing Street ‘party’. Leave aside that it was a surprise for Boris Johnson’s birthday and lasted just minutes. The constant drip, drip of accusation goes on.

“But isn’t this just proof that we are in the grip of a collective madness? For as Britain obsesses about parties, Vladimir Putin has been busy cranking up his formidable war machine. It is now fully primed for attack.

“Yesterday’s news that we are pulling diplomats out of Ukraine suddenly made a threat which has been rumbling in the background for months terrifyingly real. And puts Partygate in its true context.”

Labour is demanding Johnson’s removal but based on appeals to the most predatory sections of the ruling elite.

On Tuesday, the Labourlist blog published a joint article, “International unity against Russian aggression is crucial and must continue”, by Blairites David Lammy and John Healey, following their visit to Ukraine earlier this month. The two MPs denounced Russia as “an autocracy with little regard for international law or human rights”. Ukraine on the contrary was “a sovereign and independent country on a democratic journey”. Turning reality on its head they asserted, “We must not believe Russia’s assertions that NATO is responsible for escalation. It is a defensive alliance based on security and progressive values.”

They declared, “With the recent rising Russian threats, Britain is right to step up military support for Ukraine to defend itself, as we have been doing since 2015, which is why we backed the delivery of new short-range defensive weaponry last week.”

This warmongering agenda ensured that party leader Starmer responded to Johnson’s belligerent statements in Parliament yesterday that “if Russia invades Ukraine, we would look to contribute to any new Nato deployments to protect our allies in Europe” by declaring that Labour “stands resolute” in supporting Ukraine’s “independence and sovereignty.”

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