

UK: “Partygate” report delayed as Johnson seeks political survival through warmongering and untrammelled COVID herd immunity

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Expectations are that Prime Minister Boris Johnson will soon be handed the report by leading civil servant Sue Gray into the numerous drinks parties held at Downing Street and other venues during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

How his Conservative Party’s MPs react to its findings will determine whether Johnson faces a leadership challenge.

Events in parliament yesterday were fraught, as the expected release of Gray’s report to Johnson that morning did not happen.

Hours before parliamentary business finished at around 5pm, Speaker of the Commons Sir Lindsay Hoyle told MPs during points of order that he was committed to ensuring that they would have the necessary time to read the report before Johnson took questions on it.

He suggested reconvening parliament last night if Johnson received the report into what has inevitably become known as “partygate” for the prime minister to make a statement.

Any timetable today depends on when Johnson finally receives the report, with a debate possible either today or even Friday.

Yesterday Johnson again took the hard line in the debate while his supporters argued with backbenchers to delay sending letters calling for a leadership contest at least until after the Metropolitan Police investigation made public Tuesday is completed to finally determine any wrongdoing.

Publicly Johnson stood his ground on his ability to “deliver” the policies dearest to the heart of the Tory

right-wing, historically Brexit and today the reopening of the economy and assuming a leading role in US-led military provocations against Russia, based on allegations that President Vladimir Putin is planning an invasion.

On Tuesday, Johnson told a parliament made up of fellow warmongers that Britain is prepared to deploy troops to protect NATO allies in Europe if Russia invades Ukraine. He threatened that Putin would face “ferocious” Ukrainian resistance, raising the spectre of “bloodshed comparable to the first war in Chechnya or Bosnia... If Russia pursues this path, many Russian mothers’ sons will not be coming home.”

The UK and its allies would respond swiftly and “in unison” with “severe” economic sanctions.

Speaking just hours before the Met investigation was announced, something he was aware of since last weekend, and with NATO members including Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands and Bulgaria announcing military deployments to Eastern Europe, Johnson boasted, “The British Army leads the NATO battle group in Estonia and, if Russia invades Ukraine, we would look to contribute to any new NATO deployments to protect our allies in Europe.”

The government was considering helping to strengthen “the NATO south-eastern flank,” including “questions about what we might do” in Hungary.

Tory chairman of the defence committee Tobias Ellwood said it was “not too late to mobilise a sizeable NATO presence in Ukraine”, a prospect Johnson was forced to deny was likely “in the near term” and warn could “constitute a pretext for Putin to invade”.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer rushed immediately to declare his party's "resolute" support for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty. "The Labour Party supports the steps that the government has taken to bolster Ukraine's ability to properly defend itself," he said.

This shared militarist agenda above all ensured that Starmer and other Labour MPs' interventions against Johnson during yesterday's Prime Minister's Questions were feeble. Johnson said Starmer was "in ignorance" of the crisis on the borders of Ukraine, whereas his government was busy "bringing the West together" in a bid to deter Russia from a "reckless and catastrophic invasion".

On "partygate", Starmer asked whether, given the code that ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation, "Does the Prime Minister believe that applies to him?" Johnson replied that Starmer knew that he could not comment on police matters and that he was acting as a "lawyer not a leader."

Johnson also accused Starmer of being "relentlessly opportunistic" throughout the pandemic, declaring that he "would have kept us in lockdown in the summer, he would have taken us back into lockdown at Christmas." This is not territory that Starmer would want to contest, given that Labour is in lockstep with the Tories on the need to end all anti-COVID mitigation measures and for the economy to fully reopen.

Today, venues and events will no longer be required to use the NHS COVID pass and face masks are no longer required by law in any setting. The requirement to work from home where possible was dropped last week, along with mandated mask wearing in secondary school classrooms.

Labour's ten-point "alternative" to Johnson's "let it rip" herd immunity drive is made up of minimal measures such as expanding the availability of COVID tests, "future proofing" the test-and-trace system, publishing a roadmap for "decision making", "transforming" the National Health Service and similar meaningless phrases. Its call to "prioritise children's education", i.e., to keep schools open in the face of mass infections, is the real indicator of Labour's priorities, along with its description of the ten points as a plan to "live with the virus."

Johnson's appeal to his backbenches finally included

a promise to announce a plan to get half a million people "off welfare into work" today. "Many people may want me out of the way," he said. But he was "getting on with the job."

According to ITV's deputy political editor Anushka Asthana, the prime minister is meeting with "something like 15 MPs a day. Their message to him? According to one source the overwhelming message is 'we need you to be more Conservative'," meaning tax cuts, continued opposition to COVID public health measures and cracking down on migration across the Channel.

Johnson's other trump card was to threaten his MPs with a possible general election—a message delivered by Jacob Rees-Mogg, a hardened reactionary known as the Member for the 18th Century. Rees-Mogg, the leader of the Commons, said on Newsnight Tuesday what Johnson's supporters are telling potential dissidents in private—that if he loses a leadership contest then any new prime minister must call a general election.

"It is my view that we've moved, for better or worse, to essentially a presidential system, and therefore the mandate is personal rather than entirely party, and any PM would be very well advised to seek a fresh mandate," he said.

This threat was broadly dismissed as not constitutionally required at all and not followed previously by Tory PM John Major, Labour's Gordon Brown or Johnson's predecessor Theresa May.

As grotesque and indecisive as yesterday's debates were, they confirm that the fight waged in parliament over Johnson's fate is between rival right-wing factions which, whether nominally loyal to the Tory or Labour party, belong to a single de facto entity—the party of herd-immunity, social reaction, militarism and war.



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