

Redacted Sue Gray “partygate” report debated as Labour’s Starmer invokes spirit of Margaret Thatcher

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The initial findings of civil servant Sue Gray into social gatherings in Downing Street during the first national lockdown were released yesterday. Her report, pointedly described by Gray as only an “update”, was gutted by an ongoing Metropolitan Police investigation, revealed last Tuesday, into 12 of the 16 gatherings within the scope of her inquiry.

She writes that “Unfortunately, this necessarily means that I am extremely limited in what I can say about those events and it is not possible at present to provide a meaningful report setting out and analysing the extensive factual information I have been able to gather.”

The five-and-a-half pages that remain conclude lamely:

“The gatherings within the scope of this investigation are spread over a 20-month period—a period that has been unique in recent times in terms of the complexity and breadth of the demands on public servants and indeed the general public. The whole of the country rose to the challenge. Ministers, special advisers and the Civil Service, of which I am proud to be a part, were a key and dedicated part of that national effort.

“However, as I have noted, a number of these gatherings should not have been allowed to take place or to develop in the way that they did. There is significant learning to be drawn from these events which must be addressed immediately across Government. This does not need to wait for the police investigations to be concluded.”

Everything is written in the neutered language of “could do better”. There was “too little thought given to what was happening across the country in considering the appropriateness of some of these

gatherings”; steps must be taken “to ensure that every Government Department has a clear and robust policy in place covering the consumption of alcohol in the workplace”; official access to the No 10 Downing Street garden “should be by invitation only and in a controlled environment”; there should be “easier ways for staff to raise... concerns”.

Johnson was given license to issue a brief apology in a statement to Parliament yesterday afternoon, while accepting the recommendations of the report, promising the reform of Downing Street, and brushing off any questions about his personal actions with the insistence that everyone “wait” and “let the Metropolitan Police get on and do their job.”

Gray’s full report could yet prove more damning. The Met have announced the receipt of 300 photos and 500 pages of evidence taken by Gray from 70 different witnesses. Although Johnson repeatedly refused to commit in Parliament to publishing the finished version when it is finally delivered, a spokesperson afterwards claimed, “at the end of the process, the prime minister will ask Sue Gray to update her work in light of what is found. He will publish that update.”

What is certain is that the fixation on a government-commissioned inquiry by a civil servant places Johnson’s fate entirely in the hands of a Conservative Party lurching ever further to the right.

Gray’s findings have been attributed inflated significance by the Labour Party and other opposition parties primarily to keep the crisis over Johnson’s premiership confined within Westminster and fenced off from the mass anti-Tory sentiment in the working class, centred on its criminal handling of the pandemic.

This effort was summed up in the response to

Johnson given by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who intoned, “Margaret Thatcher once said, ‘The first duty of Government is to uphold the law. If it tries to bob and weave and duck around that duty when its inconvenient, if government does that, then so will the governed’.” She made these comments at the 1975 Conservative Party conference against those who “tried to turn the Shrewsbury pickets into martyrs.”

Starmer’s was an obscene appeal to the most right-wing majority government in post-war British history, ending with him begging, “Whatever your politics, whichever party you vote for, honesty and integrity matters. Our great democracy depends on it. And cherishing and nurturing British democracy is what it means to be patriotic. There are members opposite who know that, and they know the prime minister is incapable of it. The question they must now ask themselves is what are they going to do about it?”

It was up to the Tories, the “patriotic” scoundrel Starmer continued, to “spare the country from a prime minister totally unworthy of his responsibilities. It is their duty to do so... It is only they that can end this farce. The eyes of the country are upon them.”

He contrived to say nothing about the policy of social murder enacted by these same putative saviours of the nation, presenting the pandemic as a joint tragedy, the gravity of which was not taken seriously enough by Johnson. “Our national story about COVID,” said Starmer, “is one of a people that stood up when they were tested, but that will be forever tainted by the behaviour of this Conservative prime minister.”

Several senior Tory backbenchers, including former prime minister Theresa May, rose to declare their lack of confidence in Johnson or to insist that he release Gray’s full report. But whether they take Starmer up on his offer and force Johnson out or not, they will carry on in the direction of travel already being laid down by the prime minister in his efforts to appease them.

Johnson’s responses to questions in the House of Commons yesterday were on the themes set out in an opinion piece published that morning in the *Daily Mail* to mark two years since Britain’s exit from the European Union.

Brexit, Johnson wrote, meant that the “UK is coming out of Covid faster than virtually any other European country.” Cheering the abandonment of all public health measures to control the virus, he added, “Look

around you. There are people without masks”.

Now that the government has declared the pandemic over, “it is impossible to hold back the UK, and impossible to stop this country taking advantage of our new freedoms—and we will go ever faster.”

By this he meant a major deregulation offensive launched by a new Brexit Freedoms Bill. Announcing the legislation, Attorney General Suella Braverman wrote in the *Telegraph* that morning, “It is time we began the task of reshaping these rules in a way that suits UK consumers and businesses.”

Militarism and war are at the heart of Johnson’s crusade to save his own scalp. He appealed to the need “for the whole of the West to come together” in the face of “great uncertainty and peril, when 100,000 Russian troops threaten Ukraine.” The UK, he boasted, was “the second biggest contributor to NATO” and “one of the few countries to have taken the step of providing Ukraine” with weaponry.

Johnson returned to the issue frequently throughout yesterday’s debate, beating Labour over the head with an issue the party steadfastly refuses to comment on further than Starmer’s *Telegraph* article, “Britain must stand firm against Russian aggression.”

He won the loudest support from his party in telling the House, “We are standing together with our NATO allies against the potential aggression of Vladimir Putin when he [Starmer] wanted not so long ago to instal as a prime minister a Labour leader who would have abolished NATO.” This was an inaccurate reference to Jeremy Corbyn, who abandoned all verbal opposition to NATO upon becoming Labour leader as he cosied up to the Blairites.

Neither Labour nor any of the other opposition parties offer any meaningful criticisms of the policies of mass infection, economic deregulation, and war. The fight against Johnson and his government cannot be left to the parliamentary manoeuvres of such political bankrupts and defenders of British imperialism but must be based on a programme of independent socialist struggle waged by the working class.



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