

UK Tories say “not the moment” for Johnson’s resignation after PM is fined for lockdown breach

Thomas Scripps
12 April 2022

London’s Metropolitan Police have now issued fixed penalty notices to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, his wife Carrie Symonds and Chancellor Rishi Sunak for breaking pandemic lockdown restrictions.

The Met have been investigating the “partygate” scandal since January, assessing whether laws were broken at any of 12 gatherings held in Whitehall and Downing Street, including one in the prime minister’s flat.

Johnson repeatedly assured parliament that no parties were held, and no laws broken. Sunak is also on record stating in the House of Commons, “No, I did not attend any parties.” The government has insisted since the Met announced its intentions that people allow the police to do their job and wait for the results of the investigation.

The road on that strategy ran out yesterday. After an initial batch of 20 fines were issued last month, Johnson, Symonds and Sunak were among 30 additional penalty notices issued yesterday afternoon.

Downing Street released the text of the notice sent by the Met: “On 19th June 2020 at the Cabinet Room 10 Downing Street between 1400 and 1500 you participated in a gathering of two or more people indoors in the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street.” The event in question was reportedly a surprise birthday party thrown for Johnson.

Johnson responded in a statement announcing he had “paid the fine” and offering “a full apology”. Claiming that “it did not occur to me this might have been a breach of the rules,” he continued, “the police have found otherwise and I fully respect the outcome of their investigation.”

Saying “people had the right to expect better,” he declared “an even greater sense of obligation to deliver on the priorities of the British people,” including “ensuring

Putin fails in Ukraine”.

The news and Johnson’s response will anger, though not shock, millions across the country who suffered extreme hardships by strictly observing public health procedures in an effort to control the COVID-19 virus.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group said there was “no way either the prime minister or chancellor can continue,” with spokesperson Lobby Akinnola calling them “truly shameless” and describing their actions as “unbelievably painful”. He continued, “They broke the law. But even worse, they took us all for mugs.”

A snap YouGov poll suggested three quarters of Britons believe Johnson lied about breaking lockdown rules and nearly 60 percent thought both he and Sunak should step down. A Savanta ComRes poll had the same result.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer made the inevitable call for resignations, saying, “Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak have broken the law and repeatedly lied to the British public. They must both resign. The Conservatives are totally unfit to govern. Britain deserves better.”

The opposition parties have demanded an early recall of parliament from its Easter recess so that Johnson can face MPs.

The response of Tory MPs so far has been either a show of loyalty to Johnson or a commitment to delaying any reckoning.

Douglas Ross, the Scottish Conservative leader who was one of Johnson’s loudest critics earlier in the year, demanding he resign, was one of the first to speak publicly. Calling Johnson’s behaviour “unacceptable” and saying the prime minister would need to “respond”, he nevertheless insisted, “in the middle of war in Europe, when Vladimir Putin is committing war crimes and the UK is Ukraine’s biggest ally, as President Zelensky said at the weekend, it wouldn’t be right to remove the prime

minister at this time.”

Another prominent critic, Roger Gale, said “there will come a time when the PM will have to face this, but now is not the moment”, stressing “our priorities have to be to deal with Ukraine”. Andrew Bridgen said he was “deeply disappointed” but that he would “take soundings” from his local Conservative association before deciding what to do next.

MPs closer to Johnson were effusive. Amanda Milling declared, “The PM’s the right person to lead the country and get on with the job of delivering for the British people and protecting Ukraine from the tyranny of Russia.” James Duddridge said, “The PM should focus on Ukraine and delivering for the people of the UK.”

Johnson tweeted pointedly that evening, “I’ve just spoken to [President Joe Biden] and updated him on my meeting with [President Zelensky] in Kyiv this weekend. Our joint focus remains on supporting President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people in their fight for freedom.”

No outcome is excluded. Johnson could be toppled by a vote of no confidence in him from Tory party MPs, though this seems unlikely; he could limp on for several more months, avoiding a leadership crisis during the May local elections, before being replaced; or he could yet ride the scandal out. What in previous times would have been a career ending event—Johnson is the first serving prime minister in history to be sanctioned for breaking the law—no longer is so, thanks to the authoritarian lurch in the Tory party and the complicity of the rightward careening Labour opposition.

The argument that Johnson cannot go because British imperialism needs stability while it helps to spearhead the NATO war drive against Russia was accepted by Starmer in early March. He said then, “[W]hen it comes to standing up to Russian aggression... whatever the challenges and frustrations and criticism I have of the Prime Minister, and I’ve got many on this issue, there is unity, and it’s very important that we demonstrate that unity.”

This was the outcome of Labour’s policy over “partygate” of ceding the initiative in the moves against Johnson to the frothing warmongers on the Tory backbenches. These forces threatened to pull the trigger on Johnson if he did not rapidly escalate Britain’s involvement in the anti-Russia campaign. Johnson obliged and has had Starmer’s pro-NATO support since.

The same right-wing militarism is dominating the latest round of calls for Johnson’s resignation. SNP leader Ian

Blackford told *BBC News* that the war in Ukraine was “precisely why he should go... We have our allies across the western world that are resolute in supporting our friends in Ukraine. But we cannot do when we have at the head of our government someone who is prepared to break the law, someone prepared to lie to parliament.”

Making a comparison that has since been widely taken up in the media, he pointed out that Neville Chamberlain was replaced as prime minister by Winston Churchill during the Second World War “because he was not considered to be fit for purpose.” The *Guardian*’s Polly Toynbee took things further, “In both world wars, inadequate leaders were dumped unceremoniously for someone better suited for that serious and decisive role.”

As for who would step into Churchill’s shoes, the *Independent*’s Sean O’Grady writes of a possible Johnson resignation, “He could. Mariupol won’t fall. Kyiv won’t surrender. There will be no victory parade in Red Square just because the British prime minister is about to be replaced.” After that, “The easiest and best option would be to replace Johnson with the likes of [Foreign Secretary] Liz Truss or [Defence Secretary] Ben Wallace,” the two biggest warmongers in the cabinet with the latter tipped until recently as a possible NATO secretary-general.

Toynbee spells out the agenda a replacement would be expected to more effectively enforce than the disgraced Johnson: “God knows how long the war in Ukraine may last, but the time may come, before long, when citizens across Nato countries will be asked to make sacrifices, in energy, in supply lines, in taxes.”

The discussion in political and media circles is utterly divorced from the concerns and interests of working people. Popular sentiment, overwhelmingly hostile to Johnson and contemptuous of the opposition parties, finds no expression whatsoever within the walls of parliament. Without an independent intervention by the working class, the renewed crisis in Downing Street will be used as another opportunity to shift politics in Britain further to the right.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact