

# UK Labour leader Starmer calls on “decent, honourable” Tory MPs to unseat Boris Johnson

Robert Stevens  
19 April 2022

MPs are to vote Thursday on whether British Prime Minister Boris Johnson should be investigated for misleading parliament over the “partygate” crisis.

Earlier this month the Metropolitan Police fined Johnson, Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Johnson’s wife Carrie for breaching pandemic lockdown restrictions by attending at least one drinks party. Police have so far issued more than 50 fixed penalty notices in the course of investigating 12 events held in Downing Street and Whitehall in 2020 and 2021.

Johnson had told MPs he had not broken any laws, insisting last December that “all guidance was followed completely” over COVID restrictions.

Yesterday, after discussion with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and receiving letters from other opposition MPs, Parliament’s Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle announced he had granted their request that a vote be held on an investigation. Hoyle said, “I’ve decided that this is a matter that I should allow the precedence accorded to the issue of privilege. Therefore, [Starmer] may table a motion for debate on Thursday.”

Hoyle said that what happens next is determined only by parliament’s procedural rule book, Erskine May. MPs will vote only on whether the matter of Johnson’s lawbreaking should be referred to the Commons Privileges Committee. The committee, were the vote passed, would consider if Johnson was in contempt of parliament by knowingly misleading MPs. That process if triggered is expected to take months, involving calling witnesses, including the prime minister, and would end with a report to be voted on in parliament. The Privileges Committee has an-built majority from the ruling Conservative Party.

Thursday’s vote will be held in Johnson’s absence, as he will be in India on a scheduled trip to discuss defence and trade ties.

Everyone knows that it essentially serves as a vote of confidence in Johnson’s premiership, which is why there is virtually no chance of him losing it.

Despite the widespread opposition of the population, with a petition calling for the resignation of Johnson and Sunak reaching nearly half a million this week, only nine Tory MPs out of 359 have come forward in recent months to announce that they have no confidence in Johnson. ITV News estimated that in February, at the height of the partygate crisis but before Russia invaded Ukraine, at most 20 MPs were prepared to back a no confidence vote in Johnson, “but this number has reduced since some MPs have subsequently withdrawn their submissions.”

Those sections of the Tory Party grouped in the rabidly right-wing COVID Recovery Group and others with close ties to the military are satisfied that Johnson has listened to and implemented their main demands that 1) all COVID restrictions be lifted to facilitate the unfettered operation of the corporations—which Johnson did on February 24; and 2) that he act fully in line with the US firstly in provoking Russian President Putin into invading Ukraine and then in backing Ukraine to the hilt as war broke out.

With MPs back after the Easter break, Johnson was addressing parliament yesterday for the first time since he was fined. He offered “with all humility” a “wholehearted apology”, his first of dozens during the debate. He denied misleading parliament, saying he had made a “mistake” in thinking a “gathering in the cabinet room, just before a vital meeting on COVID

strategy, could amount to a breach of the rules.”

It was now time for everyone to move on to the fundamental issue: waging war. He had “an even greater sense of obligation to deliver on the priorities of the British people, and to respond in the best traditions of our country to Putin’s barbaric onslaught on Ukraine”.

Tory MPs responded with fervour in backing Johnson. Just one, Mark Harper, was prepared to declare no confidence in him. The mood was summed up by Sir Edward Leigh, who declared that the only leader who should be removed was Vladimir Putin. David Morris declared, “This Prime Minister is leading the world against Putin”.

Starmer’s response showed how Johnson and the Tories have managed to remain in office, despite overseeing the COVID deaths of over 190,000 Britons during the last two years. He called Johnson “dishonest” and for him to step down. But his main concern was to lavish praise on Johnson’s opponents, real and imagined, in the Tory Party and to demand this age-old institution of British imperialism rule in the “national interest”.

Starmer declared, “As ever with this Prime Minister those close to him find themselves ruined and the institutions he vows to protect damaged. Good ministers forced to walk away from public service. The chancellor’s career up in flames. And the Leader of the Scottish Conservatives rendered pathetic.”

Johnson’s crime for Starmer was to bring parliament into disrepute. He warned Tory MPs, “The more people debase themselves, parroting his absurd defences, the more the public will believe all politicians are the same. All as bad as each other.”

He then made his central appeal, “There are many decent, honourable members on the benches opposite... They know the damage the prime minister is doing. They know things can’t go on as they are. And they know it is their responsibility to bring an end to this shameful chapter.”

Tory MPs had to “Put their conscience first, put their country first... and remove the prime minister from office. Bring decency, honesty and integrity back into our politics. And stop the denigration of everything that this country stands for.”

Starmer’s insistence that Johnson’s fate can be decided only by Tory MPs is because he is resolutely

opposed to any action being taken outside the safe channels of parliament. Under no circumstances must the working class be allowed to intervene to seal Johnson’s fate, and that of a government responsible for social murder on a mass scale, which is dragging everyone into the abyss of a world war.

There can be only one outcome to any removal of Johnson by his own party, if they decide on such a course to safeguard their electoral fortunes: his replacement by an even more right-wing figure such as Foreign Secretary Liz Truss or those leadership candidates closest to the military, including Tom Tugendhat, Tobias Ellwood or Defence Secretary Ben Wallace. Such a figure would have only one remit—stepping up Britain’s role in backing the US war offensive against Russia and China and escalating the class war at home.

Yesterday’s appeal by Starmer for an orderly change of leadership confirms that the Tories and Labour operate as a single de facto party of austerity, herd immunity and war. That is also why he enjoys the backing of the warmongering liberals in the *Guardian*’s editorial office.

On Sunday, the *Guardian*’s online edition published a column by John Harris headlined, “Tories for the good of the nation, save your party from this moral void”. Harris opined, “For any Conservatives who remain genuinely conservative, that ought to be an urgent reason to get rid of their leader and at least attempt to reconnect their party with coherence, sense and the basic responsibilities that come with power... if consciences once again stir and a few Tories start to move, the rest of us ought to quietly cheer them on.”

Fellow *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland warned that Johnson should go because his premiership was threatening the successful pursuit of war. “Johnson’s defenders say he must stay in office because of Ukraine. In fact, the war for that country, and the wider struggle it has come to represent, make it all the more urgent that he go.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**