

# UK: Johnson's premiership under renewed threat over "partygate" scandal

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At least two staff members at UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Downing Street residence received police fines for attending a May 20, 2020 "bring your own booze" party late Friday evening.

Johnson has already been issued with a fixed penalty notice for attending his surprise birthday party. He was also present at the May 20, 2020 event. There is no information over whether he has been personally given a second fixed penalty notice.

The latest fines cap a week of mounting pressure on Johnson. On Tuesday Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer called for his resignation over the "partygate" scandal, saying that he was unfit to govern.

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, while the UK was in lockdown, Johnson and other senior government figures participated in several drinks parties in defiance of rules and guidance in place. Earlier this month Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak received a fine from the Metropolitan Police, among 50 fines they have issued over the Whitehall parties in an ongoing investigation.

"Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak have broken the law and repeatedly lied to the British public," Starmer thundered. "They must both resign. The Conservatives are totally unfit to govern."

Starmer was allowed by parliament's Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle to put forward a motion accusing Johnson of "misleading the House" and calling for the prime minister to face a probe of the House of Commons Privileges Committee.

The motion was put forward in the Commons Thursday, with Starmer demanding a substantive vote be held that would further weaken Johnson ahead of local elections in less than two weeks.

Labour would likely lose any vote held, given Johnson's large majority. But it would also show

which Tory MPs were prepared to abandon the prime minister by voting for or abstaining and open the majority to charges of sanctioning law breaking.

Downing Street first proposed a "wrecking" amendment to Labour's motion that would have delayed any investigation until after the Metropolitan Police had concluded their investigation. Reports suggested that Tory MPs were under a three-line whip to vote for the amendment. But many Tory MPs were clearly not prepared to oppose Labour's motion, given the political backlash they would face.

The government had no choice but to withdraw its amendment and allow Labour's motion to be passed "on the nod" without a vote. Starmer could claim victory but there would be no list of Tory MPs voting against Johnson—a tactical retreat to avoid a politically damaging direct clash between the prime minister's supporters and his Tory opponents.

At that point the *Daily Telegraph* noted, "Only two Conservative MPs gave Mr Johnson their full-throated backing during a bruising five-hour debate that saw Steve Baker, the senior Tory backbencher, urge Mr Johnson to resign and accept that 'the gig's up'."

Johnson, on a two-day trade trip to India, struck a bullish pose, telling reporters in Gandhinagar, "I have absolutely nothing, frankly, to hide here. If that is what the Opposition wants to talk about, that is fine."

He still hoped to continue using the trip to boost claims of a successful post-Brexit trade policy and, above all, to strike a Churchillian pose on NATO's proxy war in Ukraine to throw red meat to his extreme right-wing critics in his own party. Speaking at a press conference, he proposed another significant military escalation. Warning that Russia could yet win the war, he declared support for Poland sending its own T-72 tanks to Ukraine and then having them "backfilled" by

Britain. “We are looking more at what we can do to backfill in countries such as Poland, who may want to send heavier weaponry to help defend the Ukrainians.”

Hopes of a breathing space proved to be short-lived, however. Even prior to Friday evening’s fines, Johnson was having difficulty mobilising his once solid support among Tory MPs for securing Brexit, a decisive election victory over Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn at the 2019 General Election and for ratcheting up war tensions against Russia.

Allies such as Conor Burns, a Northern Ireland minister, said Johnson would now “rebuild the bonds of trust with the British people” in defiance of “colleagues,” who, “If the prime minister stepped off Westminster Bridge and walked on top of the water they would say he couldn’t swim.”

But by the evening Tobias Ellwood, a Tory MP close to the military, was boasting that it was now a question of “when not if a vote of no confidence will take place”—with speculation by insiders of a haemorrhaging of support continuing until July.

The Labour Party was reported to be overjoyed at its success, with Starmer attending a celebration with his top team. But their real “success” is in concealing the right-wing, militarist concerns animating the move against Johnson.

Divisions over Johnson’s future are presented to the millions of people who hate him for overseeing the deaths of nearly 200,000 people from COVID and mass austerity policies solely as his breaking the law during lockdown. But the more fundamental issue at stake is whether he is too damaged to navigate the treacherous waters British imperialism has now entered. Most importantly, can Johnson lead Britain’s war drive against Russia and China, in alliance with the United States, while carrying out the brutal offensive against the working class needed to pay for it?

This was articulated during the debate by Labour MP Chris Bryant. The Privileges Committee has a majority of Tory MPs, but Bryant chairs it. He said he would recuse himself from the investigation into Johnson so the committee could be impartial, before explaining, “I care far more about what is happening in Ukraine and on the cost-of-living crisis than about this—far more.”

He continued, “I would argue that, in the coming months, the prime minister may have to come to this House and say that we will have to change our strategy

on Russia. We may have to consider offensive weaponry. We may have to consider British troops being put in a place of danger. Similarly, the prime minister may have to come to this House and say, ‘I have to ask the British people to make further sacrifices because the economy is in a very difficult place, and the public finances are in a very difficult place.’ At a moment of national and international crisis, we need a leader of completely and utterly unimpeachable moral authority. We do not have that at the moment, not by a long chalk...”

Bryant, Starmer, et al know that the present slashing of incomes, amid rampant inflation, is only a down payment on what is needed to pay for the rearmament agenda and war aims of British imperialism they wholeheartedly support.

Backed by its partners in the trade union bureaucracy, Labour has supported Johnson for over two years as he committed social murder on a vast scale, first under Jeremy Corbyn, and now Starmer, with their policy of “constructive criticism”. Now, as the crisis of British imperialism escalates, amid a war in Europe dragging everyone into its vortex, Labour is competing with the most right-wing section of the Tories as to who is the safest pair of hands to impose a social and political onslaught on the working class.

The Tories have already dispensed with two leaders since 2010, David Cameron and Theresa May. They will continue in office even if Johnson goes, raining blows on working people, letting COVID rip, and carrying forward their deadly war aims in Ukraine. Whatever Johnson’s eventual fate, opposition to this common agenda of the Tories and of Labour must be fought independently by workers and young people—waging class struggle not relying on cynical parliamentary manoeuvres by political criminals.



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