

Gray report allows UK Prime Minister Johnson to brush off partygate scandal

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The report by senior civil servant Sue Gray into the “partygate” scandal was published Wednesday, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson given barely a slap on the wrist.

Gray was investigating, alongside a parallel Metropolitan Police probe, a series of drinks parties held in Whitehall in 2020 and 2021 while Britain was in lockdown. Johnson and other senior government officials defied COVID rules and guidance they enacted.

Following the eruption of the scandal last November, with his leadership of the party threatened, Johnson authorised Gray—the Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office—to carry out her investigation. The first batch of parties she looked at occurred between May 14 and June 24, 2020, when social gatherings indoors were banned and people only able to meet outside in groups of up to six. Four parties were held, including a surprise party for Johnson’s birthday on June 19.

From November 5, 2020, a full lockdown was in place with indoor gatherings banned and people only able to meet outdoors with one other person from another household. Two parties were held in this period.

In December 2020, London was in Tier 4 and people had to remain at home. They were only able to meet with one other person in an outdoor public area. Four parties were held in that period.

In 2021, three parties were held. One in January in Downing Street, while Britain was in full lockdown, and two in April.

The Met’s investigation concluded May 19, allowing Gray’s to be published, and resulted in 129 fines handed to 83 people. It found staff in the prime minister’s residence, 10 Downing Street, broke lockdown rules on eight occasions. However, only two top government figures, Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak, had to pay one fixed penalty notice each of £50. Those were issued in April among 50 other fines. Johnson was otherwise

unscathed by the Met’s investigation.

Gray’s 37-page report criticised the holding of parties, including the “bring your own booze” gathering on May 20, 2020. This was organised by Johnson’s then principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds. Prior to it going ahead, Johnson’s Director of Communications Lee Cain wrote to Reynolds and Johnson’s then main adviser Dominic Cummings that a “200 odd person invitation for drinks in the garden of no 10 is somewhat of a comms risk in the current environment.”

Afterwards, Gray revealed, Reynolds wrote to a special adviser commenting, “Best of luck - a complete non story but better than them focusing on our drinks (which we seem to have got away with).”

Gray’s report states, “It has been difficult to ascertain exact numbers in attendance, but it is likely that there were approximately 30-40 people in the garden. The Prime Minister attended at approximately 18.00 for around 30 minutes to thank staff before returning to his office with Martin Reynolds for a meeting at 18.30.”

Of a party held on June 18, 2020 in Number 10 and in the Cabinet Office, she wrote, “There was excessive alcohol consumption by some individuals. One individual was sick. There was a minor altercation between two other individuals.”

Of another on December 18, 2020 she concluded, “Some members of staff drank excessively. The event was crowded and noisy such that some people working elsewhere in the No10 building that evening heard significant levels of noise coming from what they characterised as a party in the Press Office.”

In her conclusions Gray states that her interim report issued in January had already found “failures of leadership and judgment across Number 10 and the Cabinet Office”. Many of the events investigated were “attended by leaders in government” and “should not have been allowed to happen”.

But this was just the preamble to handing Johnson a clean bill of health. Her conclusions were so favourable that he was able to quote the following sections to MPs when he addressed Parliament after the report was issued:

“I am pleased that progress is being made in addressing the issues I raised [in January]... Since my update there have been changes to the organisation and management of Downing Street and the Cabinet Office with the aim of creating clearer lines of leadership and accountability and now these need the chance and time to bed in.”

Johnson told MPs, “I do not believe I can improve on what Sue Gray has had to say,” and said it was time to “move on.”

Gray’s report was such a damp squib that most Tory MPs in the chamber cleared off after Johnson gave his statement. The ones that remained offered Johnson only fulsome support. Leading Brexiteer Peter Bone rose to declare that the main concerns of the government were not partygate and the pandemic, but “the terrible war in Ukraine, illegal immigrants crossing the channel, and the economy...”

Johnson was able to swat away the pathetic response by Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer and others on the opposition benches. Starmer is currently being investigated by Durham Police, in what is dubbed the “Beergate” scandal, as to whether he also breached COVID safety rules during a political campaign event in the north east of England. Starmer was photographed drinking a beer at the event at which those gathered had a takeaway curry.

After Starmer again called for Johnson to resign, the prime minister replied, “[T]he great gaseous zeppelin of his pomposity has been permanently and irretrievably punctured by the revelation that—he did not mention this—he is himself under investigation by the police... Sir Beer Korma is currently failing to hold himself to the same high standards that he demanded of me.”

Later in the afternoon Johnson spent all of half an hour taking questions from the media.

The *Guardian*, which has led the way in promoting the partygate scandal as a moment of reckoning with Johnson, was left to report, “The Metropolitan police is facing legal action over the way it handled allegations of the prime minister breaking lockdown rules by attending parties in Downing Street...” Johnson, it added, “was fined for one event but not for others, despite claims he was an active participant in these gatherings.” It reported that “former Met police chief Brian Paddick is part of a group arguing the Met blundered and acted ‘irrationally’ in its

investigation.”

The partygate scandal had nothing to do with any principled political struggle, having originated in leaks from the embittered right-winger Cummings who has sought to undermine Johnson since he was fired in November 2020.

Hostile to any mobilising of the working class that would bring Johnson and his entire government to account for the crime of overseeing almost 200,000 deaths from COVID, Starmer insisted for months that Johnson’s removal be organised by “decent, honourable” Tory MPs in a palace coup. Such a course, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, would only see Johnson replaced by an equally or even more right-wing monstrosity—including figures close to the military—such as Liz Truss, Tom Tugendhat, Tobias Ellwood or Defence Secretary Ben Wallace.

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) statement, “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government!”, published February 4, explained, “Amid a torrent of official hypocrisy over Johnson’s lying, no one should confuse popular sentiment with the political considerations animating the anti-Johnson ‘partygate’ plotters now seeking his ouster... The crisis is being seized on by powerful sections of the Tory Party to engineer the most right-wing policy lurch ever carried out by a British government, with the Labour opposition marching in lockstep.”

The central issue posed then and now was how the working class can advance its own interests during acute political crisis. The statement concluded, “The fight of the working class against the Johnson government will raise ever more urgently the necessity of a political mass movement, independent of and opposed to both the Tories and Labour, and against the capitalist system and its state.”



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