

Boris Johnson appears before UK parliamentary committee over COVID “Partygate” scandal

Robert Stevens
22 March 2023

Former prime minister Boris Johnson gave testimony before Parliament’s Privileges Committee Wednesday over the Partygate scandal.

The cross-party seven-member committee investigates potential contempt of parliament and breaches of privilege. Majority led by ruling Conservative Party MPs, it was requested by parliament to investigate whether Johnson misled MPs when he told the House of Commons that he did not breach COVID lockdown rules by holding drinks parties in his Downing Street residence.

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, while the UK was in lockdown, Johnson and other senior government figures held drinks parties in Whitehall, in defiance of rules and guidance they enacted. These included carrying on with “wine time Fridays” and a “bring your own booze” party. Under conditions in which strict social distancing was in place nationwide, one gathering included a “secret Santa” festive gift exchange.

In May 2022, London’s Metropolitan Police closed its investigation into the “partygate” scandal, with Johnson emerging unscathed. The Met announced that as a result of its investigation 126 fines were handed out, mainly of £50, to 83 people. Only two top government figures, Johnson and then Chancellor now Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, had to pay a fixed penalty notice of £50.

The Met’s report was followed by the publication the same month of a report into partygate by senior civil servant Sue Gray. Johnson was given barely a slap on the wrist. Gray said that many of the events investigated were “attended by leaders in government” and “should not have been allowed to happen” and that her prior interim report had already found “failures of leadership and judgment across Number 10 and the Cabinet Office”.

This was a preamble to Gray concluding, “I am pleased

that progress is being made in addressing the issues I raised [in January]”. Johnson told MPs, “I do not believe I can improve on what Sue Gray has had to say,” and that it was time to “move on.”

The prime minister was forced to resign two months later by a revolt of Tory ministers, with an unprecedented 58 resignations submitted. This was precipitated by another scandal, over the hiring of Tory MP Chris Pincher who was forced to quit as Deputy Chief Whip after admitting sexual misconduct. Johnson was aware of the allegations when he hired him.

The Socialist Equality Party in its statement issued February 4, “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government!”, explained, “What is unfolding in parliament over ‘partygate’ is the modern-day equivalent of a palace coup—a change at the top to preserve the existing order...”

“Amid the crisis gripping the Conservative Party, the Tories are preparing to replace Johnson with someone considered better able to implement the further shift to the right demanded by the British ruling class. Leading contenders include multi-millionaire favourite Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss, known by Tory backbenchers as ‘the human hand-grenade’.”

In its 24-page interim report produced earlier this month, the Privileges Committee said that Johnson may have misled parliament. If the Committee concludes that he did so deliberately, it is expected to recommend sanctions against him. These would include the demand for a formal apology and possibly even a temporary suspension from the Commons to be voted on by MPs. A worst-case scenario would be a suspension of more than 10 days, which would allow voters in Johnson’s Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency to hold a “recall petition” and trigger a by-election.

On Tuesday, in his opening statement to the Committee hearing, Johnson declared, “Hand on heart ... I did not lie to the House”, adding “If anybody thinks I was partying during lockdown, they are completely wrong... I apologize for inadvertently misleading this House, but to say that I did it recklessly or deliberately is completely untrue.”

“If it was obvious to me these events were contrary to the guidance and the rules, it must have been equally obvious to dozens of others, including the most senior officials in the government, most of them like me responsible for drawing up the rules.”

Giving voice to his hostility to Sunak, Johnson stated, “And it must have been obvious to others in the building, including the current prime minister.”

While Johnson can expect a reprimand, the Tories have already moved to ensure that the scandal will not interfere any longer with their deep involvement in NATO’s war against Russia and war against the working class at home. The *Financial Times* reported Wednesday that according to people briefed on the probe, “Conservative MPs on the Commons privileges committee that is investigating the former prime minister’s conduct are reluctant to deploy the ‘nuclear option’ of recommending sanctions that could result in a by-election...”

The most significant part of Johnson’s testimony was his declaration, “I bitterly regret it. I understand public anger, and I continue to apologise for what happened on my watch.” This referenced the outrage caused by his partying while tens of millions obeyed the guidance and rules to try to stop the spread of a deadly virus, even to the extent of being unable to attend funerals of family members and being unable to spend final hours with dying relatives.

But Johnson’s cynical mea culpa barely scratched the surface of the criminality involved. The issue is not whether the serial liar Johnson misled the house, inadvertently or otherwise. Johnson, the entire government and the main opposition parties lied to the British working class as they took decisions that resulted in the deaths of more than 208,000 people from COVID and over a million more suffering the debilitating impact of Long COVID.

Categorized by the BMJ (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) as a policy of “social murder”, the crimes committed by the Johnson government were the outcome of a eugenicist agenda widely supported in ruling circles. The policy of “herd immunity” (the mass infection of the population with a deadly disease) was declared the goal at the outset of the pandemic, with Johnson stating that the

population “could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures.”

As the Socialist Equality Party document in its 2022 Congress resolution:

“The most brutal policies were reserved for the disabled and elderly. The UK’s 20,000 care homes, housing over 400,000 elderly and vulnerable people, were transformed into killing fields. Due to the enormous pressure placed on the National Health Service by the pandemic, a March 17, 2020 directive from NHS England instructed that 25,000 elderly patients should be cleared out of hospital beds without being tested for COVID-19. Many were transferred into care homes. According to Office for National Statistics data, by February this year 45,632 care home residents had perished, with COVID listed on their death certificates as a cause of death, accounting for 16.7 percent of all care home resident deaths.”

Johnson was backed to the hilt by the opposition Labour Party, which made itself partner to a de facto national unity coalition with the Tories. “Left” leader Jeremy Corbyn declared on March 25, 2020, “The immediate task of the Opposition is to support the public health efforts that are being made, while being constructively critical where necessary to ensure that there is an improved official response.”

Replacing Corbyn the following month, Sir Keir Starmer deepened his “constructive” partnership with the Tories proclaiming, “Our willingness to come together like this as a nation has been lying dormant for too long.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact