

Temple of Low Men

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The Prime Minister's public apology at Parliamentary Question Time today for a Number 10 garden party event in May 2020 when Covid-19 restrictions were in place on outdoor gatherings came as something of a surprise to me, as his track record to date would have suggested brazenly trying to ride it out and deny any responsibility or culpability.

However, the PM's attempt to claim that he thought it was a "work event" and in hindsight "should have sent everyone back inside" [\[1\]](#) seems markedly disingenuous. Even if one gives Johnson the benefit of the doubt in terms of this, the question remains that how could the Prime Minister of the UK seemingly not realise or consider the implications of such a gathering with a UK public that did their best to comply with restrictions and the consequent hardship suffered by many of us.

To me this demonstrates clear culpability on his part. The best that could be said of him at this juncture is that his judgment is sorely lacking; and appears to be one manifestly unfit for public office. At worst the question remains of whether he has deliberately misled Parliament and the UK public. Whether his attempts to bluster that "technically" the event could be said to have not broken the law will not sit well with the wider electorate and only reinforces the notion of "one rule for us, another rule for them".

This is also reinforced by the serious questions now being asked of the London Metropolitan Police in failing to investigate allegations and the inconceivable suggestion that they had no awareness of alleged breaches of Covid-19 regulations, and thus, UK law.

Little wonder that polls currently show the Conservative Party trailing behind the Labour Opposition. From a high of having an 11-point lead over Labour in May 2021 as the vaccine roll-out took effect, the Government has slumped to 34%, four points behind Labour at 38% according to Politico's 'National Voting Intention' poll, [\[2\]](#) as the cumulative impact of perceived Tory sleaze and corruption takes hold.

Even if Johnson is forced to go, the wider whiff of incompetence, corruption and cronyism in the Conservative Government is unlikely to disappear with him. Indeed, turning to the issue of corruption in the awarding of Government contracts for PPE, the High Court ruled today that the Government had acted illegally in the "fast-tracking" of tendering for PPE production in the creation of a "VIP lane". [\[3\]](#) Indeed, Mrs Justice O'Farrell, the presiding judge in the case commented that:

"There is evidence that opportunities were treated as high priority even where there were no objectively justifiable grounds for expediting the offer."

That some £14 billion of public money was spent by the UK Government on the procurement of PPE through "directly awarded and negotiated contracts" (ibid.) points to a significant misuse of public money. Compared to the personal transgressions of Boris Johnson, the fact that billions of public money were given to favoured firms is truly heinous. Whilst it is right to focus on the PM's conduct, today's decision points to the need to hold of all his government to account.

That said, the rising cost of living coupled with "one rule for us, another for them" will surely do for the Conservatives. None of Johnson's would-be successors (Truss, Sunak, Javed etc.) are likely to deviate from the low regulation, small state, low tax "ideal" pursued by Tory hardliners.

As tax rises that disproportionately affect the poor, and increases in energy bills begin to put a squeeze on the cost of living, the stark contrast of "one rule for us, another for them" will become

more evident to the voting public on the receiving end of regressive Conservative economic policies – such as the rise in national insurance contributions and the £20 weekly cutback to Universal Credit.

The May local elections are increasingly looking like a bloodbath for the Conservative Party. Of course, it still possible that the Tories could take stock and try to reform themselves under a more reasonable and dignified leader such as Jeremy Hunt (should he be in the position of wanting to challenge again..) and ameliorate the impacts of some of their harsher policies so as to restore their fortunes.

However, such is the degree of hold of the more extremist elements on the parliamentary Conservative Party epitomised by MPs like Steve Baker that it is inconceivable at this stage for anyone who might replace Johnson to not continue to kow-tow to the heavy right wing factions within the Party.

To me, it appears that only a sustained spell on the Opposition benches will rid the Conservative Party of its current tendencies and allow “decent Conservatives” to purge its current crop of corrupt, malign and incompetent individuals (if they can....). It’s time to clear the Temple of its “Low Men”.^[4]

References

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/12/boris-johnson-admits-attending-downing-street-party-during-lockdown>

[2] <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/12/use-of-vip-lane-to-award-covid-ppe-contracts-unlawful-high-court-rules>

[4] ‘Temple of Low Men’ was the second studio album released in 1988 by antipodean rock band Crowded House. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Low_Men)