

Why Partygate has a significance beyond the behaviour of an individual Prime Minister



Pippa Catterall writes that the emphasis upon the Prime Minister distracts from the wider implications of partygate. She argues that the parties at 10 Downing Street and other government buildings during lockdown are symptomatic of bigger problems for both the Conservative Party and for Britain.

What is the connection between the cost-of-living crisis and the Prime Minister's lockdown-breaking parties? What is the connection between the low pay and long hours of so many poorly paid workers and the party culture he has presided over at the heart of government?

Why are Johnson's frivolities so serious?

Much of the anger at Johnson's breaking of his government's own lockdown rules is deeply personal. Many people who lost loved ones and were unable to attend funerals and publicly grieve, or who missed other key family events, are understandably incensed at the insouciant insensitivity of a Prime Minister who cavalierly broke his own regulations while they scrupulously observed them. No wonder Partygate matters to them.

Yet Partygate has a significance beyond the behaviour of an individual Prime Minister. It also tells us about the working culture surrounding Johnson. His apologists continue to maintain that he has been 'doing his best' since the start of the pandemic. The promised inquiry into the handling of COVID-19 will no doubt cast light on this. Johnson's best apparently included managing to attend some dozen regulation-busting lockdown parties, while also missing five COBRA meetings in a row on Coronavirus at the start of the crisis. We are continually being told by Johnson's defenders that we should nonetheless 'move on' and look at the big issues. This message would be more convincing if there wasn't this clear evidence that Johnson himself failed to look at the big issues that he, as Prime Minister, was expected to attend to. Instead of attending to the big issues, we now know that he was busy attending parties.

This points to the aspect of Partygate that the media have focused upon – whether or not it will lead to Johnson's fall from power. This emphasis upon the person of the Prime Minister distracts from its wider implications. The parties and the resulting fixed penalty notices are not the main issues but are instead symptomatic of bigger, long-term problems for both the Conservative Party and for Britain.

The revelations about the party culture at the heart of Johnson's government sit uneasily with one of the central myths of the Conservatives' political narrative. Johnson's Tories may have ditched Margaret Thatcher's selective use of free-market economics for the crony capitalism displayed in so many dubious Coronavirus contracts during the pandemic. In the process, they have also trashed another key mantra of Thatcherism – that of cost-effectiveness – as so much of government policy during the pandemic was certainly costly but hardly effective.

Yet one of the few remaining legacies of Thatcherite ideology to which they cling is that of meritocracy. The belief that hard work is rewarded is widely and deeply held among the lower middle and upper working classes who are now, as in Thatcher's day, the mainstay of the Tory vote. Partygate demonstrates how misguided that belief is. It makes clear that Johnson's eminence is not a result of his work ethic. Indeed, he could hardly be more different from the values of the hard-working families who form his electoral base.

Consider the income of the hardest working people during the pandemic – such as NHS staff, delivery drivers, transport workers. The latest offer for NHS staff of 3% is well below current inflation rates, signalling an effective cut in real income. In Johnson's Britain, hard work seemingly does not get rewarded.

Partygate also undermines another key tenet of the contemporary Conservative Party. The term Thatcherism was coined by Stuart Hall in 1979 in an article in which he pointed to the centrality of emphases on law and order to Tory electoral rhetoric. Where, though, is the Conservative Party's boast to be the party of law and order when its leader has become the first Prime Minister to be convicted of a criminal offence and the party has cravenly condoned him doing so?

In urging us to ‘move on’ from such issues, Tory MPs, predictably, seek to belittle the significance of Partygate. The contrast between their punitive approach to petty criminals of lesser eminence and their indulgence of the petty criminal in Number 10 is striking. It reinforces the impression that the party no longer believes in law and order, but in one rule for them and one for everyone else.

Johnson’s behaviour nonetheless betrays his awareness that Partygate might have significant personal consequences. He has made several conflicting attempts to deny or justify his conduct in Parliament. If his defence is considered credible then Johnson emerges as someone who did not understand the rules drawn up by his own government. If it is not, then he is someone who knew but didn’t care and wilfully misled Parliament in the process. In either case, his fitness for high office is clearly questionable.

Wilfully misleading Parliament – and the number of conflicting accounts Johnson has presented strongly suggests that he has – raises another, more serious issue. In between elections it is in Parliament that the Executive is held to account. How can that Executive be held to account if it can get away with wilfully misleading Parliament? If there is no sanction for wilfully misleading Parliament, then there is no effective accountability. Without accountability, holding those in power responsible for their actions, then democratic control over the Executive is also diminished.

If the effects of Partygate eventually lead to Johnson’s removal from office, then that will be the most immediately newsworthy, but not the most significant consequence of this scandal. It has the potential seriously to damage two central planks of Johnson’s party’s electoral appeal. The opportunity is wide open for the Labour Opposition to renew Gordon Brown’s rhetoric of support for hard-working families, for Partygate has made clear that the Tories do not care about them. It also trashes a core element of the Tory brand, that they are the party of law and order.

Partygate’s implications for the constitution are even more serious. Whether or not Johnson’s criminal offences are considered serious, misleading Parliament, whether wilfully or not, certainly is. For without accountability there are no controls to prevent an overmighty Executive arrogating more power to itself. ‘Moving on’ rather than being scrutinised, allows the Executive to act with impunity. Johnson’s rule in general and Partygate in particular has starkly indicated that constitutional safeguards to prevent such conduct in Britain’s largely *ancient regime* state are far from adequate. Partygate crystallises the moment when it became clear that a major overhaul of those constitutional safeguards to ensure Prime Ministerial accountability is increasingly imperative. That won’t happen whilst Johnson stays in office. Yet even if Partygate leads to his fall, it is in its impact on the reputation of the Conservative Party, and in demonstrating that the British Constitution – as well as Britain’s current Prime Minister – is not fit for purpose, that its main legacy will likely be found.

About the Author



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