

Democracy and the credibility of parliament are on trial...

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Today will be interesting, politically. It will also, almost certainly, be depressing.

Johnson has to make a statement to the Commons on being fined. It is being widely trailed that he will deny having broken the law and that he thinks he has done anything wrong. This is despite being fined, and in the face of the very strong likelihood that more fines are coming his way.

The reality (for there must be one on a quite simple issue, which this is) is that:

- a) There was a gathering, which was legally what were not permitted by Covid regulations;
- b) It has been decided by the Met that this was not required for work purposes and was, therefore, a social gathering, and these were banned;
- c) Johnson attended. Presumably there is photographic evidence. And in any event, Johnson had not denied it.

As a result Johnson was guilty of an offence.

Johnson will deny this but as a matter of fact that option is not available to him. It was, but it is no more. If he wanted to make that claim he should have refused to pay the fine. He should have challenged the police to pass the file to the Crown Prosecution Service who could then have brought the issue to trial. We know they would have done; they have been involved in the reviews of these cases for that reason.

Accepting the fine is an admission of guilt, but technically avoids a criminal conviction because there is no trial. Maybe it is this that Johnson will play on. He might say he paid to simply push the matter aside. The claim might be the country required that he not be distracted. But that does not avoid three things.

The first is that he has legally accepted the police interpretation of events, and cannot reopen the case.

The second is that this law was massively publicised by him and so widely understood that millions have appropriately judged that he was guilty of an offence, whatever he says.

Third, the greater charge is that Johnson lied to parliament, and by accepting the facts of this case he has confirmed that he has done so. The only wriggle room is that he denied attending a party and the event was legally not a party, which was too hard to define, but a gathering. I really doubt that anyone will take that claim seriously.

So, it is exceptionally likely that Johnson will lie to parliament again today. And it is as likely that under the rules of parliament anyone saying he has done so deliberately, which we know will be the case as his intention is being trailed, will be expelled from the House for telling the truth whilst Johnson will suffer no sanction.

The consequence is that Johnson is doing what he and his faction always intended to do: he will be making a mockery of parliament and will be doing so deliberately and with the active connivance of a supine Speaker, all with the intention of undermining democracy itself.

What will the Opposition do? Unless person after person stands up and says Johnson is a liar and refuses to withdraw they play along with this. They cannot win a vote today. The Tories will all vote for the liar. So the opposition parties can only make clear the Tory lies.

Those in opposition have to tell the truth in other words and keep doing so. And if the Speaker objects they have to tell him he is making democracy and Parliament the subject of ridicule. That is their duty today. Nothing less will do.

Will it happen? If Keir Starmer is expelled we will know. If he isn't he will either have won a battle with the Speaker or he will not have done his job.

Democracy and the credibility of parliament are on trial today. It needs a strong defence. I just hope it gets it.