

Partygate: if enough people come to believe the police are covering up for the government, the consequences for the Met will be catastrophic



Tim Newburn discusses the Met's decision to investigate lockdown gatherings at Downing Street. He writes that the delayed decision to intervene, and do so in a way that may affect the political process, comes on the back of a number of controversies involving the police, whose reputation is now thoroughly tarnished.

As a result of the Metropolitan Police's investigations, and so as not to prejudice the police investigative process, they have told me that it would only be appropriate to make minimal reference to the gatherings on the dates they are investigating. Unfortunately, this necessarily means that I am extremely limited in what I can say about those events and it is not possible at present to provide a meaningful report setting out and analysing the extensive factual information I have been able to gather.

These are the words of Sue Gray who has, after many weeks of waiting, finally published her report – or, strictly speaking, her 'interim update' – [into alleged gatherings on government premises during COVID](#). As she was forced to admit, in the end this was not a 'meaningful report'. Indeed, it's a frankly odd document. It runs to only twelve pages, one of which is the title page and two of which are blank. Of the nine that have substantive text on them, three are an annex, leaving six to cover terms of reference, methodology, and findings.

After all the anticipation, what we get is a redacted damp squib. And why? Because after weeks of apparent inactivity, and just before Gray planned to report, the Metropolitan Police suddenly sprang into action. 'Minimal reference' was all she was requested to make to any matters that they were now investigating. Everything else should be left to them, and who knew how long that would take.

As we now know, this means that of the sixteen gatherings that fell within Gray's remit, twelve are being investigated by the Metropolitan Police and therefore form little part of what she was able to say. The rationale for this, we were told, was that it was important that criminal investigations by the police were not compromised – an explanation that failed to convince [many experienced observers](#).

Indeed, criticism of the police has been growing in intensity. Initially, it focused on their unwillingness to become involved. As details of alleged parties in Downing Street and other government offices gradually emerged, the lack of police response was contrasted unfavourably with their willingness to bring charges against members of the public for their apparent breaking of COVID-19 regulations. Was there one rule for ordinary citizens and another for government and advisers, some wondered? The Met's defence that its general policy was not to launch retrospective inquiries of this sort also persuaded few.

But it was only to get worse. On 25 January, just prior to the anticipated release of the Gray report, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Dame Cressida Dick, took everyone by surprise when she told the London Assembly that her force [was now launching an investigation](#). Alongside this announcement came the revelation that the police had asked Gray's team to limit what they said in their report. Suddenly there was the prospect of an expurgated report and a lengthy police investigation, with the possibility, some feared, that political accountability would be compromised.

For some, the chain of events, and their timing, was just too convenient for the Prime Minister. [It all looked too much like collusion](#) between police and government. Now one doesn't actually have to believe in anything as conspiratorial as this to recognise that it is all extraordinarily bad news for the Metropolitan Police. This is a force that has been bumping from one controversy to another for some time now. Among the lowlights are the failed investigation into the so-called [Westminster VIP paedophile ring](#), the murder of [Sarah Everard by a Metropolitan Police officer](#), the subsequent mishandling of the Clapham Common [vigil held in Everard's name](#), and the allegations of 'institutional corruption' that emerged in the report into the [Daniel Morgan case](#).

For a force whose reputation had already suffered hugely, the Downing Street/Sue Gray affair is perilously bad news. On a straightforward level, it is bad news because it shows the force to be apparently incapable of accounting for itself in public. Its communications over its decision-making – first the decision *not* to investigate the Downing Street gatherings and subsequently the decision to intervene in a way that would inevitably affect the political process – have been atrocious. Such failures of communication provide the opportunity for people to think the worst.

And the worst conclusion is the one that a lot of people have understandably jumped to. Members of Parliament, journalists, members of the London Assembly and countless others began speculating about a possible ‘stitch up’. Questioned in the London Assembly about perceptions that her force was [covering up for government](#), the Commissioner responded by saying, ‘we police without fear or favour. We police impartially’. Unfortunately, this is insufficient, for the difficulty the Met now face is that very large numbers of people do not believe such a claim. And it simply does not matter whether they are correct in this or not. As the sociologist W.I. Thomas observed many decades ago, ‘things defined as real are real in their consequences’. If enough people come to believe the police are protecting politicians, the consequences for the organisation are potentially catastrophic.

For all governing institutions, trust is central to effectiveness. To lose trust is to lose the ability to govern. The reputation of the capital’s police force, the largest and oldest in the UK, is now thoroughly tarnished. The job facing those in charge of the Met today is more difficult than ever. Beyond the enormous challenge of offering an effective police service to a population of nine million people, the task is now to convince the nation as a whole and an increasingly sceptical public, that the job is indeed done without fear or favour.

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