

The gendered dynamics of 'partygate': leadership and hypermasculinity at the centre of Johnson's administration



[Anna Sanders](#) and [Dave Richards](#) discuss the relationship between the number of fixed penalty notices issued to women in response to 'partygate' and the broader culture of hypermasculinity within the current government.

'Against the backdrop of the pandemic, when the Government was asking citizens to accept far-reaching restrictions on their lives, some of the behaviour surrounding these gatherings is difficult to justify'. So began the findings of the long-awaited [Sue Gray report](#), published on 25 May. These gatherings referred to a series of COVID-19 lockdown breaches within Number 10 – known as 'Partygate' – between 2020 and 2021. As a result of these breaches, the Metropolitan Police issued 126 Fixed Penalty Notices to civil servants working in Downing Street. Of the 126 fines, 53 were issued to 35 men, and 73 to 48 women. A recent [Times](#) article highlights that 'the fines fell disproportionately on junior women working within 10 Downing Street and that more senior male staff had not been fined'. Here, we consider why there was such a skewing effect in the number of fixed penalty notices [FPNs] issued to women.

Gender and senior leadership positions

One possible explanation for the gender disparity in FPNs is that within Whitehall, there has been an absence of women [at the top echelons of political power](#). Access to leadership positions has historically played to the advantage of white, middle-class men. [Analysis](#) shows that by 2015, women comprised just 38.7% of those working in the top four pay bands of the civil service, despite making up over half (53.5%) of all UK civil servants. This overrepresentation of men in senior leadership positions is partly based on the culture of Whitehall itself. A [2015 report](#) by the National Audit Office identified a 'macho', 'competitive' culture within top-level Whitehall positions, resulting in women choosing to 'opt out of more senior roles in the civil service'.

While the absence of women in top leadership positions is a compelling explanation, the number of women appointed to senior positions has markedly increased over the last 24 months. As of 2021, women make up [47% of those in senior grade roles](#) and they currently comprise six of 16 appointments at the most senior grade of permanent secretary in Whitehall.

A more nuanced analysis of gender and leadership positions is needed. [Research highlights](#) that political power is largely concentrated within the core executive, where women have traditionally been marginalised. A closer examination of civil service roles shows that women are absent from senior positions at the *centre* of government, such as Number 10, the Treasury, and the Cabinet Office. The six departments currently headed by women permanent secretaries are BEIS, the MoJ, DfT, DfE, Defra and DCMS.

The vast majority of fines were issued to those working in Number 10 and, relatedly, the Cabinet Office. Yet the FPNs issued by the Metropolitan Police are revealing, as they were also less likely to be issued to those working in more senior positions in these central offices, and therefore less likely to go to men. It suggests that the issue relates in part to women's absence from the centre, rather than the top echelons of Whitehall. Notably, while some junior civil servants who attended Boris Johnson's birthday celebrations were issued FPNs, Cabinet Secretary Simon Case – also in attendance – did not receive a fine. Others flagged in Gray's report as being present at various events were Case's predecessor Mark Sedwill and Johnson's then Principal Private Secretary, Martin Reynolds. Like Case, neither Sedwill nor Reynolds received fines. One outlier was the former head of ethics and Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Helen MacNamara, who received an FPN for attending a leaving event in June 2020. In acknowledging the presence of senior leaders at the events, Gray notes that 'the senior leadership at the centre, both political and official, must bear responsibility for this culture'.

Hypermasculine leadership

A more compelling explanation, then, is that of a hypermasculine leadership style of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and those senior male figures in Whitehall close to him. Hypermasculinity can manifest in the behaviour and rhetoric of leaders. Georgina Waylen [defines](#) Johnson's hypermasculine leadership as 'an English white ruling class one', also evident in his 'libertarian reluctance to circumscribe individuals' behaviour'. This is perhaps best illustrated in the Gray report by Johnson's attendance at a number of social gatherings, but also his tacit willingness to regularly allow gatherings in Number 10 to continue. A press conference delivered after the publication of the Gray report also saw a reluctance from Johnson to comment on specific individuals named in the report. There is a clear failure by both Johnson and Case to either call a halt or seek to discipline those in attendance. Johnson for now remains in office as the threshold for letters to the 1922 Committee remains unmet. For the Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, there are [growing calls](#) for him to resign, including by the former Head of the Civil Service [Lord Kerslake](#).

For Johnson's government, this hypermasculinity has notably manifested in a culture of risk-taking. Outlined in the Gray report was an email from Reynolds to a special adviser, noting a drinking event in the Number 10 garden '[which we seem to have got away with](#)'. [Some](#) have also noted a culture of heavy drinking at the centre of government as being emblematic of a culture of hypermasculinity in Johnson's Number 10, reflecting [his membership](#) of the all-male, Oxford University Bullingdon Club. Though it should be noted that there are [claims](#) and [counter-claims](#) that Johnson himself is not a regular imbiber.

Similar examples of hypermasculinity can be seen in other areas of the government's handling of the pandemic. This included [delays in implementing COVID restrictions and a militaristic rhetoric of a 'War against Covid'](#). The face of communication around the pandemic has also been a largely male one: [research](#) shows that between March and May 2020, only 7% of COVID-19 briefings were led by a female politician.

The disproportionate effects of partygate on women, then, appear to be an issue both of male overrepresentation at the centre, alongside an embedded hypermasculinity in the Johnson government. While hypermasculinity is by no means exclusive to Johnson's government, it has been rife. What this suggests is that a cultural shift is needed within Whitehall to address the gendered power dynamics that manifest within it.

About the Authors



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