

# Abolish the Met? The handling of 'partygate' is likely to increase calls for radical overhaul of the Metropolitan Police



*The Met's investigation into 'partygate' has raised more questions than it has answered, writes [Tim Newburn](#). He writes that this outcome, which comes on the back of other scandals, finds the Met accused of acting in ways that favour their political masters. But while the police cannot afford such a perception to take hold, this does not seem to be recognised in New Scotland Yard.*

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, calls to 'defund the police' began to be regularly aired in the US. An abolitionist movement, relatively muted until that point, suddenly gained traction. And it is not going away. On the second anniversary of Floyd's death, President Biden signed an Executive Order that sought to promote police accountability and raise standards. It contained measures to create a new national database of police misconduct, to ban chokeholds, and to implement anti-bias training among much else. Reformist rather than abolitionist, of course, Biden's actions are nevertheless an indicator of just how much ground the 'defund the police' movement has made in the last two years or so.

As has been regularly remarked, in some ways this abolitionist movement feels peculiarly American. It just hasn't taken off in the same way in the UK or other parts of Western Europe, for example. There are potentially understandable reasons for this. The scale of the use of lethal violence by the cops in the US is quite different from that on this side of the Atlantic. In the UK in 2020/21, there was [one fatal police shooting](#); in America the estimated number of civilians killed by the police was [1,144](#). In parts of the US, some of the largest urban forces have seen massive expansion in funding and capability in recent times, reinforcing the sense for some that they are now the most visible – and oppressive – face of government in the everyday lives of their communities. In England and Wales, by contrast, there was close to a one fifth fall in police funding between 2010 and 2018.

Recent events, however, seem likely to increase, and increase markedly, calls for radical overhaul of the police in England, and in London in particular. A series of well-publicised scandals have dogged the Metropolitan Police, including 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](#). On top of this has come 'partygate', and the Met's investigation into activities in Downing Street during lockdown. [As I have previously noted](#), the botched timing and generally poor handling of that investigation risks seriously undermining the service's reputation for something close to impartial policing.

The Met's four-month long investigation has now closed, costing close to [half a million pounds](#), and leading to a total of 126 fixed penalty notices (FPNs) being issued to 83 people – including the Prime Minister, his wife, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The political fall-out continues, and may yet prove to be highly problematic for the government, though increasingly seasoned observers now think the PM will survive. But will the Metropolitan Police? It is hard to imagine how their involvement in 'partygate' could have been more badly handled. An initial failure (refusal) to investigate. Then a sudden *volte face* just at the point when it appeared the PM was under greatest pressure. Subsequently followed by an announcement by the then Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that because of the criminal investigation the Met had instructed Sue Gray, the senior civil servant undertaking her own investigation, had been instructed to redact her initial report.

So, everyone waited – and waited – for the Met to complete their painstaking work. The outcome? Bar those in power, something that satisfied almost no-one. Over a hundred FPNs, but on what basis? More questions raised than answered. Why a single FPN imposed on the most senior people involved, but several on much more junior 'party' attendees? Why did the PM receive an FPN for one event but not for others he attended? Why did senior figures not receive FPNs for events that led to such penalties being imposed on others? Could we rely on the investigation? Indeed, how serious was it? We were told, for example, that those under investigation were sent questionnaires – hardly the stuff of hard-nosed detective work. How do we trust the outcome? And here lies the crucial problem for the Met. Without any rationale forthcoming, any explanation of their processes and decision-making, there is nothing to disabuse those who fear there's been some form of cover up. And in this context we should remember it is less than a year since the force was accused of being 'institutionally corrupt'.

Just what is going on at the Met? Who has been in charge of all this and what have they been thinking? The Commissioner of course resigned in the middle of it all having lost the trust of the Mayor. Those taking responsibility for announcing the Met's decisions since then have looked consistently defensive and uncomfortable. Indeed, the communications surrounding the force's involvement in 'partygate' have been something of a case study in ineptitude. They've shown a complete failure to appreciate the nature and scale of public and political concern and have demonstrated an unwillingness to explain at every turn. There appears to have been no anticipation of how the force's actions would be perceived, and when criticism has followed the only response has been to fall back on tired clichés about 'policing without fear or favour' or fatuous claims that the procedures used were standard for cases of this type – as if there was anything standard about 'partygate'. Thus far, in response, the Mayor of London has called on the force to explain its decision-making and the Good Law Project has threatened [judicial review](#).

We will have to wait to see just how damaging this will be to the standing of the Met. But at this point, it seems impossible not to conclude that it is likely the consequences will be both serious and long-lasting. Nearly four decades ago and under very different circumstances, the perception that the police – and the Met in particular – were doing the government's bidding during the year-long miners' strike had a dramatic impact on the reputation of the police for integrity and impartiality. Now the Met finds itself accused of acting in ways that favour their political masters. They cannot afford such a perception to take hold. Nothing we've seen thus far, however, suggests this is recognised in New Scotland Yard. Quite the contrary. The Met appears to be slowly sleepwalking into a major crisis. Odd though it may seem, drinks parties at Downing Street may yet become an important step along the road to a British 'defund the police' movement.

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## About the Author



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