

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

Thank you for listening to The Restless Politics for ad-free listening, early access to episodes, membership to our chat community.

Please sign up at TheRestlessPolitics.com.

Or if you're listening on Apple Podcast, you can subscribe within the app in just a few clicks.

So, welcome to The Restless Politics emergency podcast with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell. You're smiling, Rory. Why are you smiling?

Because it's, I wanted to tell this since it's been a pretty, pretty close run thing. Alistair wanted to hit the emergency podcast button.

Of course, on the football match on Saturday, ever, it's downfall, which of course I'm a great expert on, but we narrowly messed up.

And actually we're hitting it on the parliamentary report on Boris Johnson.

Which, Alistair, you spent the last hour reading. What's your sense of it?

It's, I would say, utterly damning. I think anything that we expected it to be, it is that and more. It's like a, I really do recommend to people that they read the whole thing. I think it's like the Trump indictment.

It's only if you read the full indictment, you get a sense of what he's doing.

And of course, the way that our media operates will give you the headlines, but it's the detail. It's the relentless detail. It's very, very, very, very well done, I think.

It's quite hard to read without, I mean, I try to read these things, especially.

It's no secret. I don't like Boris Johnson very much.

And I hate what he's done to the country.

But it's very hard to read this and think that anything other than the fact that he's absolutely, totally, completely finished. I mean, the misled parliament is, of course, as we know, the sort of parliamentees for Lide in the House of Commons.

And that phrase comes up again and again, several occasions repeatedly, contempt of parliament, contempt of the committee. His entire character, in a sense, is taken apart.

Not by the say, this is about his character, but you just have a sense of it through the whole thing.

Just to, again, for people who've not followed minute by minute,

what's happened is that this was an inquiry done by the Committee on Privileges, which is a committee of the House of Commons, and it's got seven members of whom Alberto Costa, Charles Walker, Andy Carter and Bernard Jenkins are conservatives, so four conservatives, got a conservative majority, two Labour members, whom the Chair is Harriet Harman and a Scott Nat,

Alan Dorans. And they started their inquiry in July last year, looking at the question of Boris's Johnson's statements to Parliament about his behaviour during COVID. And the thing that provoked this was increasing evidence that seemed to be emerging, that Boris Johnson had broken his own COVID regulations by attending parties in 10 Downing Street. And the reason it came to the committee is that he had been asked about this in the House of Commons. And on many occasions, he had denied that he had attended any parties or that any rules had been broken. And as this became more and more implausible, a committee decided to meet on this. And this was separate from another investigation led by Sue Gray, a civil servant, who was looking at what had happened in Downing Street. This is really focused on, did Boris Johnson mislead Parliament? And we

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

did a podcast, people interested on his testimony to the committee a few months ago now. And their conclusion is that not only did he mislead Parliament, he also lied to the committee during that testimony back over to you. If you go through the report at the top, so this is the list of occasions and allegations on which in their view he quotes mislead the House, aka lied.

When he said the guidance was followed completely in number 10, that the rules and guidance were followed at all times, the events in number 10 were within the rules and guidance, etc. Number two, when he failed to tell the House about his own knowledge of the gatherings where rules or guidance had been broken. Number three, when he said that he relied on repeated assurances that the rules had not been broken, the assurances he received were not accurately represented by him to the House, nor were they appropriate to be cited to the House as an authoritative indication of number 10's compliance. Four, when he gave the impression that there needed to be an investigation

by Sue Gray before he could answer questions, if you remember that the wait for Sue Gray thing was there essentially saying that he used that to hide from the fact that he did know that this stuff had gone on. He was pretending he didn't. Five, when he purported to correct the record, but instead continued to mislead the House and by his continuing denials this committee, he keeps saying that he corrected the record at the earliest opportunity when clearly he didn't. It then goes on,

he was deliberately disingenuous when he tried to reinterpret the statements to the House to avoid their plain meaning and reframe the clear impression that he intended to give, namely when he advanced unsustainable interpretations of the rules and guidance and when he advanced legally impermissible reasons to justify the gatherings. In other words, he was aware of the rules, he was aware of the guidance, he was aware that they were broken and he then tried to lie about not just the fact of them, but what they actually meant and it goes on page after page.

So just to kind of sum it up, what they seem to be saying is that he knew perfectly well what the rules were, not least because he frequently was to be found standing at a podium in Downing Street telling the public what the rules were. He had been warned by people in number 10 that what he was

doing in number 10 wasn't in accordance with the rules. And that what he was saying was not necessary

accurate. And he proceeded to attend those parties nonetheless. And furthermore, one of the other things that's come out which really, I mean, certainly more than circumstantially I would think reinforces the sense of the lying is the number of bits of evidence coming from members of his staff that they were very, very guilty about it. So very unfairly his press secretary Allegra Stratton ended up carrying the can because she was caught doing a mock speech from a podium where somebody teased her in a question about how could she possibly justify parties taking place at Downing Street during the lockdown. And she basically said, I don't really know what to do with that and people and she resigned over that. Then Sam Coates from Sky has pointed out extraordinary

testimony which has come in written that evidence submission 7th February 2023. I was the and then

there are huge black lines when you look through this evidence. But anyway, he was in this office which had the press office and a vestigial connecting all three. This was the place meeting where Wine Time Fridays took place. They were calendared weekly events and outlook diaries

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

starting at 4pm where preface officers would gather on Fridays to have drinks. During the pandemic number 10 despite setting the rules the country was slow to enforce any rules in the building.

The press office Wine Time Fridays continued throughout. Social distancing was not enforced, mask wearing was not enforced. I once inquired to Dada in March 2020 whether we should be wearing

masks and was told that the science advice but there was no point and that very little had very little effect on the spread of COVID. This was all part of a wider culture of not adhering to any rules. Number 10 was like an island oasis of normality. Operational notes were sent out from the security teams to be mindful of the cameras outside the door not to go out in groups and to social distance. It was all a pantomime. Yeah and the thing in the report that if you when you just sort of see and the thing about these reports then this one actually is quite well written I think often these reports are quite hard to sort of penetrate. In light of Mr Johnson's conduct in committing a further contempt on 9th of June 2023 this is his reaction the other day when he resigned from parliament attacked the inquiry as a kangaroo court. And also the fact that they had as a courtesy shown him a copy of this report in advance. In confidence and it says in confidence and it also said in the communications with him that as you know any breach of that confidence is itself a contempt of parliament. So they go on in light of Mr Johnson's conduct and committing this further contempt the committee considers that if Mr Johnson were still a member he should be suspended from the house for 90 days. They say he has a deliberately misled the house, b deliberately misled the committee, c breached confidence, d impugned the committee and thereby undermined the democratic process of the house, e being complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the committee. And then hilariously you sort of think and therefore he should go to jail for about 15 years and then says we recommend that he should not be entitled to a former member's pass. So when the House of Commons votes on Monday I said now I'm joking there because the punishment for this is I think the end of his political career and also hopefully the opprobrium that he's long deserved will now be directed towards him. But I suspect that that we recommend he should not be entitled to a former member's pass. I think John Burko had the same punishment. Yeah that's not a crushing pass. I haven't actually myself even bothered to pick up my former member's pass and I left the House of Commons in 2019 so that may not be the greatest punishment. Can I come in for a second and just give a little I think you know we can set a little context on this from both sides and one of them is I was the chair of the House of Commons committee

and I served on another House of Commons committee for four years before that so I was a big backbench committee person and you I think were actually the subject of committee reports so we're able to talk about this from different angles. Yeah so let me start from my end first. First thing I think to understand is that these things are very very lengthy done and in this particular one was done unbelievably carefully and seriously. They've been at it since July last year. They took advice from a former law lord. I was very struck when they were cross questioning Boris Johnson that actually they were much more skillful in their forensic questioning than is often the case with parliamentary committees. Alberto Costa who's one of the Conservative members was a lawyer. I

think Harriet Harmon was a lawyer too so maybe that was part of what helped them there. They have set up very very clear guidance on what an appropriate way to behave was.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

More than actually committees are obliged to in this case they really did go out of their way to try to make sure that he saw evidence that he was given notice that he was given opportunities to give written evidence and he came in quite loyal up in a way that you don't normally go into a committee. Normally when we're asking people to testify we're expecting to turn up particularly a fellow member of parliament in a straightforward fashion you know I testified in any number of committees as a member of parliament and a minister and I certainly never would have thought that I was going to bring a lawyer but he brought in very expensive lawyers man called Lord Panic which I always thought was a slightly terrifying name for the man who's meant to be supporting you in a crisis and they will have also had clerks working on this so what will have happened is very careful drafting very careful gathering of evidence lots of appendixes brought together by the House of Commons clerks and then it will have been reviewed a number of times by the committee until the whole committee till the whole committee was comfortable with the way in which it's come out now on the other hand I think you sometimes have felt as the person at the receiving end of this and this is sort of pushing my luck a bit but were there times when you were subject to these committees that you sometimes did think that you can see Boris Johnson's point that you didn't think they were always fair and that you sometimes thought these committees maybe didn't behave with all the judicial objectivity that you might expect. Well there's sort of various times that I've given evidence to committees but I think the two that I guess came closest to me feeling that they were essentially aimed at me one was a public administration committee I don't know if that exists still whether it's called something different but the select committee on public administration did an inquiry into the changes that I was trying to make to government communication and because of the sort of obsession that the media had with our so-called spin culture etc there was sort of it was huge in the media at the time and they they had lots of people on there that they tried to get to say sort of how terrible I was and blah blah blah I found that when I went to the inquiry to give evidence over several hours myself I didn't find it that difficult to be honest to because of the way as you know the way the committee was the chair sort of sitting there and bringing in people and giving them limited time and so forth and I felt they were just bounced around I didn't think they had a kind of coherent strategy to what they were trying to do whereas I agree with you I think that with the with this investigation into Johnson I got the feeling we both said at the time that the questioning was better than it is often the case but I did feel Roderick Morgan was the chair the former Welsh First Minister it went on to be the Welsh First Minister he was the chair of the committee into me and it was I felt at least half a dozen of them were basically slightly grandstanding coming up with their sort of pre-prepared line of attack and but ultimately when the report came out it was fine I felt actually that they'd sort of you know pretty much got to the point they had a few points that I agreed with a few that I didn't but I didn't feel terribly unfair and likewise the other occasions on which I've been particularly in relation to the buildup to the war in Iraq I felt it was a combination of serious people who were trying to get to the serious points and a few who were just frankly grandstanding but I think what you've seen with this I do I completely agree with you and I think Harriet I suspect Harriet Harman has been a very good chair a very good chair although I've got to tell you Roy just literally just as you were

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

speaking there I got I got a little rash of text messages I'll just read you one it says Rhys Mogg just name checked you on the world at one he was asked about why they were questioning

Harriet Harman as the chair and he said Harriet Harman retweeted Alice to Campbell and he says very aggressive things there we are well that's enough isn't it that's enough that's enough to take you down um so I think that brings us quite neatly to the other theme here which is the fight back from the Boris Johnson supporters so there's been an extraordinary flurry of um would be Baroness Nadine Doris Sir James Dudderidge Sir J. Cabriss Mogg Sir Michael Lord Stuart Jackson all coming out in defense of Boris Johnson was there was there anything they had in common those people you just listed very strange I don't know why I keep saying Sir and Lord in such a sort of strong way whenever I mention their names but no indeed these are all people and some of them not very senior MPs who rather surprisingly Boris Johnson gave peerages to or knighthoods to who are now passionately out there defending him and saying that the whole thing is a kangaroo court and one of the things that of course is most disgusting and there are many things disgusting about this but one thing I think which is a theme that we'll hear again and again and we've got to challenge again and again is the idea that somehow Boris Johnson is unbelievably popular with the people he has this incredible mandate from the implication is the majority of the British people and that therefore it's undemocratic for elected members of parliament to in any way impede or criticize him and this is a mad idea firstly mad constitutionally because Britain doesn't live in a presidential system Boris Johnson was not elected as an individual he was only elected in his constituency of Uxbridge so he's equal with all these other MPs who are elected in their own constituencies his party won an election in 2019 but not him as an individual but the second thing is that actually if you look at the public opinion polling he's astonishingly unpopular with the public so there's a very very good ipsos mori thing that's just come out looking at net satisfaction with prime minister 79 to 23 Boris Johnson is astonishingly less popular most of the time than Theresa May and if you compare him to Tony Blair I mean there's just no comparison if you compare it even to to John Major or Mrs. Thatcher towards the end of their time no comparison I mean in historical terms he was an extraordinarily unpopular MP barely got there with most of the population and most of the polling evidence is pretty clear that the 2019 election was won because of promises on Brexit get Brexit done and because of the unpopularity of Jeremy Corbyn but the idea that this man somehow has some magnificent personal mandate that allows him to ignore the House of Commons the courts all kinds of constitutional checks it's just popular some 101 I'd love I'd love for him just to take a walk down a high street and and see what happened I mean the only time he seems to go in the public

is when there's a camera there to take a picture of him running for about 20 yards and then he goes back inside I tell you I think we've so yesterday we should tell our listeners that we spent a very enjoyable morning talking to the aforementioned former prime minister John Major and we'll be putting

he was incredibly generous with his time and we're actually going to do two episodes of leading over the next week or two and I don't know if you remember this but he said what you were trying to get him to sort of say some very disobliging things about about Boris Johnson and because I know that he really despises Boris Johnson yes I know I know but I say do I but I just thought his I thought he's put down was absolutely marvelous because he basically just said I really think we

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

should stop talking about him and I but the sort of contempt was clear but I think what's what's it was very interesting to me I was sort of mentioned to a couple of people in the swimming pool today that you know we've been speaking to him and and what have you and whatever you say about somebody like Major I would say the same about Thatcher and of course I would say the same about the Labour prime ministers that I work for and you I know would say the same about Theresa May

and I think you'd be right is that there was a commitment to the job being about a genuine sense of public service and when you would when we were talking to John Major you really got the sense of talking to somebody who even now is offended by the idea that politicians should make politics anything other than actual a noble calling and what you're seeing with Johnson now is utter narcissism he now doesn't care in fact I'll go further I think he now actively wants Rishi Sunak to lose the next election because that then will play into this narrative and the other point that John Major said we talked about he talked about the false narratives that develop in politics and you of course have just mentioned one Boris Johnson is very very popular in the red wall he might have been on a given day for the referendum and for the election but given that he's broken every promise he made he's not popular as you say anymore and yet I did a very quick look around the headlines of the of all the kind of main newspapers of how they're covering this report that the male the express and the son are all nosing it leading their coverage on Boris Johnson's reaction and the threat to Rishi Sunak including the express's case that they're going to the threat that the local Tory parties will deselect MPs who vote to support the Privileges Committee report on Monday it's utterly delusional totally mad isn't it and one of the most striking things produced by James Johnson and his polling is that Boris was less popular than Theresa May Boris Johnson even during the 2019 campaign so even at the moment of that election he was less popular than Theresa May consistently less popular and Theresa May wasn't exactly the most popular

Prime Minister ever and the reason of course that they're doing this is that it's a basic attempt again to turn the Conservative Party into Trump's Republican Party all these people are doing in all their arguments is pretending totally US president leading in the polls in the Republican Party who's being attacked by the courts it's quite funny as well that in his you did a very good analysis of his of his 800 word telegraph column that he wrote the other day in response to the when he received the report he's done a slightly longer version today and he actually can't he whether this was deliberate or not I don't know again it looks like it's just been sort of tossed off over a rather drunken lunch which is how he used to do most of his columns in the past but he does actually say he does talk about trumped up charges so it's almost as if he's perhaps psychologically realizes that he's gone full trump I'll tell you the other thing Roy there's some the other thing you will know from these reports both having written them and read them is that sometimes you get the most interesting stuff in footnotes and can I read you my favorite footnote because again it exposes johnson's utter hypocrisy and venality including in relation to another issue it says we note that mr johnson has recently undertaken to supply the covid public inquiry with a large number of his personal whatsapp messages this contrasts with his highly restrictive release of such messages to us if it transpires from examination of the whatsapp messages supplied to the covid inquiry that there was relevant material which should have been disclosed to us either by mr johnson or the cabin office this would be a serious matter which the house might need to revisit that is my footnote of the day yeah and I think I mean

if I can just finish on a couple of kind of slightly pompous points one is that this matters because his shambolic mendacious behavior was one of the reasons that Britain has been poorly governed he was not a good prime minister and although he got the vaccine rolled out quickly he did not respond well to covid he had a very very bizarre oscillation between being too late to lock down because obviously he had some he doesn't like people telling him what to do then being too late to open up again then locking down sporadically open up sporadically it was a shambolic approach particularly in in in march of 2020 to covid which and I hope the covid inquiry is going to get beyond the personality of Boris Johnson to look at all the things within government that went wrong and the second thing I think is just reinforcing the fundamental sense that we live in a parliamentary democracy and we need to take our constitution seriously and that means that members of parliament are equally democratically elected there are 650 of them and they have more of a democratic mandate than any individual and they certainly have more of a democratic mandate than the conservative party where your only eligibility criteria is your willingness to pay 25 quid to join the party so actually this goes to the heart of how Boris Johnson was selected which was a daily express daily mayor whipped up moved through a conservative party electorate members electorate which corresponded to about 0.3 percent of the general population instead of allowing the MPs who knew him best had worked with him best and who are all individually democratically elected to make the decision and that's why we should be respecting parliament and respecting the parliamentary committee but for that to happen and for the respect to be rebuilt for parliament again to go back to our conversation with John major he said that he was ultimately optimistic that this sort of poison in our politics could be reversed and that we could get to a better place but I do think Rishi Sunak needs to do more than he's done so far I think he's made a terrible mistake in allowing these honours to go forward you now have a situation where a man who is no longer allowed to go into parliament into the buildings of parliament without going through security because he's having his pass withdrawn he is sending to the House of Lords to be in our legislature for the rest of their lives people in their 20s who've done absolutely nothing but be bad carriers and sycophants to Boris Johnson likewise every living prime minister and I think it's absurd that Lestrassa is going to get the same every living prime minister gets an allowance for the rest of their lives that is about dealing with the consequences of having been prime minister I think if you leave in disgrace you should not be allowed that either the next thing are we seriously going to have to see Boris Johnson at every single remembrance day ceremony reminding us of who and what he is and the damage that he is done so I think Rishi Sunak actually if he really wants to signal that he's different and it's about professionalism integrity accountability he should block these honours he should not allow those allowances to be played he should not let this trust send anybody to the House of Lords or frankly do anything with an honours list and what's more it should be made clear that there is genuine approbrium towards this guy because otherwise we'll be back with this this is this is where I agree with you that this is incredibly serious and important it is this is this committee report is a really important fight back against post-truth politics and that fight now has to be maintained and to my mind that means Boris Johnson should not have any input into our public life ever again and I guess the only thing that when we've had these conversations in the past about Rishi Sunak that is worth remembering is that he whether we like it or not and this is actually one of the problems is dealing with trying to

control the right wing of the party trying dealing with trying to control the rump of people who remain part of a fanatical Boris Johnson cult trying to control a stranger uh Liz Truss quasi-nomics cult trying to control a unrealistic Brexit cult trying to steer moderate and thoughtful policies through while controlling a party which by some miracle he's holding together but which I remember saying to you in the last days of Boris Johnson Liz Truss didn't feel like one party at all but something fragmented into seven or eight completely different warring groups so this this is um you know he is I think the reason probably why he's fighting to satisfy you is that what's happening is that he's going halfway so he I'm sure it was him who blocked Nadine Doris getting into the House of Lords and I'm very pleased he did but what he's doing is he's compromising all the time he's having to balance these different factions and I guess that's probably something which you I think were pointing to when we were interviewing John Major which is that one of the things that makes parties weak towards the end of their 10 years is this sense that you're dealing with different factions and that's something that Labour presumably is going to try to exploit hard going into the next election. Well what do you mean John Major sort of made the point that they came a point where it was almost it felt as if he was talking about something that was becoming ungovernable and I wonder if that's what's happening I mean I'd love to know I don't really know Rishi soon out but I'd love to know how he's feeling internally about what he's actually confronting now because the thing about Boris Johnson the one thing we know about when Mrs Thatcher wasn't terribly nice to John Major after she after she'd gone but nothing like the sort of operation that Johnson's trying to get up against against Rishi soon out. Now to move on then just to end I want to finish with a passionate tribute to my great hero Glenda Jackson who just died today. So Glenda Jackson was an MP which is why I was sneaking her into the rest of politics she was your MP for a bit you knew her well but she's most famous for being the most extraordinary actress I mean she defined the British theatre of the 1960s a lot of film history in the 1970s she was in Peter Brooks Marasad this great kind of groundbreaking work in the 1960s acted for Peter Hall played Ophelia for Trevor Nunn at the Royal Shakespeare Company and then actually played King Lear again having left Parliament in her 80s so I want to just finish with a huge tribute to her and I loved seeing her in the House of Commons I mean she's obviously a real old lefty well to the left of you guys but there was something absolutely magical about her and I just wonder whether you had any thoughts on how you balance some of your differences with her your views of her as an MP as well as an actor. We talked on the Q&A about this notion of professional politicians and people who've been in other walks of life and the thing that I found really fascinating about Glenda Jackson is that her entire persona as well as her image as an actress and as a politician were completely different now she was the same person and I'm sure that when she was an actress she was passionate about left-wing causes and her political beliefs and so forth but she was an actress and then when she became a politician perhaps it was deliberate I don't know but she projected herself I think in a very very different way and look I think she was I think she actually found the transition quite difficult I think she became an MP she became a minister I think she was a minister in Tony Blair's first job and then from then resigned because she disapproved of you guys didn't she well no I think I think actually she was sacked to be truthful I think that she she wasn't she I don't think she was a terribly effective minister I think she found that side

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 142. Is this the end for Boris Johnson?

of life quite difficult I remember literally she did she did have some criticisms but I think this is in my diaries I remember a reshuffle where Tony had called Grell and said look he was he was making some changes and he'd be essentially he'd need her to vacate her position and I think she was absolutely stunned I mean really stunned I think she was genuinely shocked that he hadn't thought that she was a really good minister now sometimes these judgments are subjective and sometimes they're based upon advice from the whips or from civil servants or whatever it might be but

and then she I guess did become quite a critic but I never felt she was you know we used to see her around all the time because as you say she was our local MP and she was always perfectly friendly but I found I do sense and look people know her far better than I do would know better than this better than I on this but I sometimes felt that she she found the whole sort of it's interesting this given that her professionally as it were she was a performer I think she found the performative side of policy it's quite a struggle but it's not that isn't it and it may be the House of Commons I mean I was watching her deliver a just today rewatching it her something that I saw in the House of Commons which was her attack on Margaret Thatcher and people are jeering and catcalling

from the conservative benches when she's speaking and it is interesting given that she was the most astonishing mesmerizing stage performer she does seem strangely unsettled by the catcalls and it makes one wonder whether actually the personality type required isn't more like a stand-up comedian than somebody who's a highly respected RSC actor that that she couldn't quite modulate her voice and respond to the chaos around her. I guarantee that in all of the television obituaries tonight that there is one clip that will be played and this is when she appeared as a special guest on Walkman Wise when actually her comic timing and her was was was absolutely superb I guess she will be remembered in the main as an actress won't she I think not least because that was a she was she was recognized globally on that front.

Well I think it's wonderful that she became a member of parliament I think it really is wonderful and I mean John Major was talking about this but in a way parliament does take reflected glory from having within it people who are real stars in their own professions and having somebody of that stature you know in the 60s and 70s probably the greatest actor in Britain in the House of Commons I mean not a Ronald Reagan type not a bedtime for Bonzo here I am with the chimps type but a genuinely serious groundbreaking actor was extraordinary.

Yeah well thank you for I actually didn't didn't know she died until you sent me a message saying we should we should pay tribute on the podcast so I'm glad that we've done that and I'm glad too that Boris Johnson's political career so far as I can work out is absolutely at an end other than these ridiculous people going on to the world at one to say that Harriet Harman retweeting Alistair Campbell is now a political sin but all of whom with nighthoods from Boris Johnson and on that time to end all the best bye