

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Johnson denies lying to parliament over partygate

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Hello, I'm Oliver Conway. This edition is published in the early hours of Thursday, the 23rd of March. The former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson denies lying to Parliament about Covid lockdown parties. The US raises interest rates again despite fears it could add to the turmoil in the banking sector and whoever ventures out on the streets taking a chance of either getting kidnapped or attacked or murdered. We hear from the increasingly dangerous capital of Haiti. Also in the podcast, could the mystery surrounding what killed Beethoven finally be solved?

Like Donald Trump in America, Boris Johnson casts a big shadow over politics in the UK. The former British Prime Minister certainly dominated events in Parliament on Wednesday, spending hours trying to convince MPs and the wider public watching on TV that he didn't lie about lockdown parties in Downing Street during Covid.

The hearing of the Commons Privileges Committee was chaired by opposition Labour MP Harriet Harman.

We are examining what Mr Johnson said to the House about gatherings in number 10, whether what he said to the House was correct or not, whether and if so, how quickly and comprehensively any misleading statement was corrected. Mr Johnson swore an oath on the Bible and then set out his defence that he didn't knowingly or recklessly mislead Parliament when he denied that rules had been broken. I am here to say to you hand on heart that I did not lie to the House. When those statements were made, they were made in good faith and on the basis of what I honestly knew and believed at the time. The committee House said it should have been obvious to Mr Johnson that Covid rules had been breached in Downing Street. Here's the Conservative

MP, Sir Bernard Jenkins. Can I just read to you what the guidance actually says? You must maintain social distancing in the workplace wherever possible, where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full in relation to a particular activity. The businesses should consider whether that activity be redesigned using screens or barriers to separate people from each other. So where in the picture are there screens or barriers? There were screens or barriers, I believe, in the adjacent press room. They're not here. This is an impromptu gathering at which I am thanking at least one member of staff for his contribution during Covid. I believe it was an important part of my job to do that. That was the best place to do it. I accept that perfect social distancing, Sir Bernard, is not being observed, but that does not mean that what we were doing, in my view, is incompatible with the guidance. Labour's Yvonne Fovogu asked about an email invitation to a garden gathering in Downing Street and whether Mr Johnson really believed that no rules or guidance had been broken. Were any concerns about the gathering's compliance

with

Covid rules or guidance raised directly with you at the time? No, and the individual that you mentioned who raised concerns, if you read what he says, he was concerned about the optics, not about

the rules, and he himself attended and certainly no concerns were raised with me.

The event had been within the rules. Why were you concerned about the optics?

I can't say. I think he was concerned about the impression that people might gain if they looked over the garden wall, if they were coming from the media room and thought that we were doing something that other people weren't allowed to do. Well, listening to the hearing was our UK political

correspondent Rob Watson. So how crucial could the outcome of its investigation be for Boris Johnson's political future? Well, it's certainly very important for his future as an MP, because at the sort of worst end of the spectrum, if this committee decided that actually he had lied to Parliament, they could suspend him. And if he suspended for more than 10 days, it is possible for his constituents to demand a sort of a mini election, a by-election, which of course ultimately he could lose. I mean, there's an awful lot of ifs there, but at the extreme end of the spectrum, it's a real threat to his continuance as an MP. His future as a political leader is a slightly different issue. I mean, one suspects that however he comes out of this inquiry, a lot of people think that he may already be something of yesterday's man. He spent a long time preparing for this, and quite a lot of money was put on lawyers. Did he do enough to convince MPs?

The short answer is I have no idea what to predict what's in the mind of those seven MPs. It is difficult. I mean, I suppose all you can say is you can highlight the areas that they seem to be concerned about. We've got a bit of a flavour of it there. I mean, I think they seem to worry about how you reconcile these photographs with what most ordinary people would see as well. How could that possibly have been compliant with the guidelines, you know, the photographic evidence? And the second thing I think they were worried about was Mr Johnson says, look, his justification for telling Parliament that all these guidelines and rules were followed is that he'd had reassurances from his aides. Now, the committee wasn't very happy that two of those aides that he relied on were political aides. They weren't lawyers. They weren't sort of neutral civil servants.

Of course, the committee has a majority of Conservative MPs on it. Will they vote on what happens to Boris Johnson now? What happens next is that the committee comes up with a verdict about whether he lied or not or something short of that. Whatever they come up with then goes to the broader Parliament, so every MP will get a vote on it. Our political correspondent, Rob Watson. America has warned Uganda of possible economic repercussions. If a law imposing severe new restrictions on LGBTQ rights takes effect, Uganda's Parliament passed sweeping legislation that criminalises anyone identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. The US and UN have called for President Ueri Museveni to reject the anti-gay bill. Here's our North America correspondent, Namia Iqbal. This law has yet to be enacted. Washington says it's a big if, but is watching closely. Back in 2014, the US imposed sanctions on Uganda for passing a law which punished gay people with life in jail. It's not clear what this new law involves, but some reports suggest people could face the death penalty. White House spokesman John Kirby said if the law passed, any repercussions would be financial. He expressed regret at how much of that would be related to health assistance. The US invests almost a billion dollars annually in Uganda through 13 government agencies. America's top diplomat, Anthony Blinken,

also criticised Uganda, saying the law would undermine fundamental human rights. Namia Iqbal. The US central bank, the Federal Reserve, has again raised interest rates despite the recent turmoil in the banking sector. It's thought that recent rate hikes contributed to the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank. But the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Jay Powell, said he had confidence in US banks. Our banking system is sound and resilient with strong capital and liquidity. We will continue to closely monitor conditions in the banking system and are prepared to use all of our tools, as needed, to keep it safe and sound. In addition, we are committed to learning the lessons from this episode and to work to prevent events like this from happening again. I asked our North America business correspondent Michelle Fleury why the Fed had raised interest rates again despite the recent turmoil. It is battling record high inflation and it still remains elevated. But the Fed did find itself in this bind. How does it manage this double objective of, on the one hand, trying to contain inflation and bring down prices, whilst at the same time now having to worry about a new headache and that is the stress in the financial markets? And so they made a point of saying we are raising interest rates, we did consider pausing but felt we still needed to proceed. That being said, they didn't raise as much as everyone was expecting a few weeks ago and they signalled their rate hike campaign would end sooner than anyone previously thought. And this is also what we've seen in terms of raising interest rates in Europe. Tomorrow we have the Bank of England making its decision. Are we going to see interest rates rise there as well? You've just had the latest UK inflation data and again it makes for uncomfortable reading. Trying to maintain stability and reduce stress in the banking sector doesn't necessarily sit comfortably alongside with fighting inflation. But given the problems in the UK, it's hard to see how they can pull back from that campaign to try and address the problem of rising prices. If you go on the street and you talk to anyone, the first thing they'll tell you is how much they're paying for their food. And so that's hard to ignore. And we've seen that with the ECB last week as well. The European Central Bank, it proceeded ahead with its planned rate hike. I think it shows that these central banks around the world are trying to kind of do two things at once and we're all waiting with beta breast to see whether or not that works. And briefly where are we with the banking crisis? We've seen sort of a series of recoveries and then falls again. This shotgun marriage between Credit Suisse and UBS, the two biggest lenders in Switzerland, really was a potentially very dangerous situation. We're talking about a bank that was too big to fail. So the fact that that deal was done has calmed the market. In the United States, we've heard from the US Treasury Secretary and from the Federal Reserve Chair, Jay Powell, trying to say that US banking system is sound, it is resilient. But again, there are sort of lingering concerns with some individual banks. For now though, there seems to be a bit of a pause or a bit of a lull, but I don't think those fears have completely dissipated yet. Our North America business correspondent, Michelle Fleury. The United Nations has warned of the imminent risk of a global water crisis at its first major summit on the issue for nearly 50 years. The UN says water scarcity is becoming a big problem because of overconsumption, pollution, and the effects of climate change. Nader Taufik reports from New York. The opening of the three-day conference took those assembled on a virtual video tour around the world to communities facing different challenges. Access to water and sanitation, pollution, and the threat from climate change, drought, or flooding. It was meant to illustrate how water is life itself and the defining issue of our time. Global fresh water demand could exceed supply by 40 percent in just seven years

by 2030. By then, the UN's most recent study estimates that almost half of the world's population will face severe water stress. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said the conference had to represent a quantum leap forward.

We are draining humanity's lifeblood with broken water cycle, destroyed ecosystems, and contaminated groundwater. Nearly three out of four natural disasters are linked to water. The conference will not produce a binding agreement, though countries and the private sector have been encouraged to make clear commitments and pledges that will make up a water action agenda.

Neddart Taufik in New York. Gang violence in the Caribbean nation of Haiti has killed more than 530 people since the start of the year, according to a UN report out this week.

More than 200 people died in the first two weeks of March alone.

Redi Klabi spoke to independent reporter Harold Isaac in the capital, Port-au-Prince, which is at the center of the violence. A couple of hours ago, there were shootings in many well to do areas that were mainly unaffected by violence so far. Is it spreading then to other areas and what is its state? What is the contestation about? It's gang violence that is increasing and reaching every corner of the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, whether it's mass murders, whether it's sexual violence, whether it's home invasions or outright shootings. So, it puts the inhabitants of Port-au-Prince on the edge. No one is left unaffected.

I, myself and friends of mine had to, at some point or another, flee their house eventually to return, but there is not really a safe place per se in the capital right now. Gangs in the last two weeks have increased their footprint in the capital and are challenging the police force, which seemed to be overwhelmed. Is there an answer to this intense violence?

Well, the prime minister has announced that it would resort to using the Haitian army, but that is still trying to be restored after it was disbanded in 1994. The plea that he made internationally for foreign troops to come to Haiti has not or has yet to be answered. Observers here are really doubtful that this will bring a resolution to the security crisis.

Are there multiple gangs? Is there one gang that is dominating? And who are they targeting? Do they just target anyone? There are at least two major coalition of gangs fighting each other, the G9 and the GPEP. There are reported 200 gangs in Haiti and increasing. Whoever ventures out on

the streets taking a chance of either getting kidnapped or attacked or murdered, but you still have 11 million people that are trying to make a living. How are you and your family keeping safe? You refrain from going out. If you can work from home, you try to work from home. If you can reduce

your commute, you reduce your commute or you try to optimize where you're going, how long you're staying, how you're coming back. So it's a lot of thinking to be able to handle that situation.

And it's a reality for everybody. Maybe those who are better off can afford to have security guards or to have armored vehicle, but for most folks, they have to figure out how they make it to work and how they make it back safely and run their errands. Haiti is facing a compelling set of crises, including a severe economic depression as inflation rates nearing 49%. We have a sanitary crisis that

had started to unfold with the cholera crisis that happened at the end of last year. So it's a lot of issues to factor in on a daily basis for regular folks. Many of them are trying to flee the country. All of this creates various dynamics or conflicting in the local context.

Harold Isaac, a reporter in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince.

According to Sotheby's New York, it is the most highly valued historical document ever offered at auction. The Codex Sassoon is the oldest known near-complete Hebrew Bible. It's currently on display at a museum in Tel Aviv in Israel before going under the hammer in New York. It's one of only two surviving manuscripts containing all 24 books of the Hebrew Bible on which the Old Testament is based. Richard Hamilton has the details. We know that the Codex Sassoon is very, very old. A title deed shows the book was sold in 1000 AD and was then held in a synagogue in what is now northeastern Syria until around 1400. But perhaps the most remarkable twist in this story is that it then disappeared for 500 years, turning up again in 1929 when it was offered for sale to one of the greatest collectors of Hebrew manuscripts, David Solomon Sassoon. This manuscript bridges the gap between the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date back to the third century BC, and today's standard texts of the Hebrew Bible, which are based on the work of Greek translators or early medieval Jewish scribes. Sharon Mintz, who's a specialist in Jewish texts at Sotheby's, says it's of huge historical and cultural importance. Codex Sassoon is the earliest most complete Hebrew Bible extant. It was written around the year 900, either in the land of Israel or Syria. It's written on parchment. It is a very luxurious lavish manuscript on 792 pages of text written by one scribe over the course of either a year or perhaps two years.

This Bible has only been on public display once before at the British Library in 1982.

The curator of the ANU Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv says they're expecting around 10,000 visitors this week to see the manuscript before it travels to the United States. Sotheby's are expecting to sell it in May for between 30 and 50 million dollars.

Richard Hamilton. Still to come.

I obviously was made a dealer and the articles were very much about my appearance. I think one article says shapely and sultry. It was just incredible.

50 years on, what was it like to be among the first women to work on the floor of the London Stock Exchange? More on that later. Love Genessa is the true crime podcast from the BBC World Service and CBC Podcasts investigating the murky world of online romance camps. She was trying to get me to send her money. Catch up with the whole series now. Search for Love Genessa wherever you found this podcast. You win their hearts, you win their wallets.

This is the Global News Podcast. The French President Emmanuel Macron has been sharply criticised by opposition politicians and union leaders for refusing to back down over his unpopular pension reforms. In a TV interview, he defended his decision to force through the increase in the pension age from 62 to 64, saying it was vital to protect the system for future generations. A big day of protest has been called for Thursday and there are concerns about security for the upcoming state visit by King Charles. Hugh Scofield has this report. Paris stand up, rise up. That was the chant last night at the Place de la République, where once again crowds came out to denounce the passing of the pension bill and once again there were outbreaks of disorder.

It's become a nightly pattern since last Thursday in Paris and elsewhere and meanwhile rubbish continues to pile up in the street because of the bin strike and in some parts of the country queues are beginning to form at petrol stations. Making his first public intervention since the crisis broke, President Macron did not give ground on the importance of his reform. To yield, he said,

and fail to implement the pension bill would be to portray future generations.

I'm not looking to be reelected under the constitution, I can't be. So between the opinion polls of today and the general interest of the country, I choose the general interest of the country and if it makes me unpopular, so be it. There was never any chance the interview would change the minds of his opponents and sure enough the president was immediately condemned

as showing contempt towards the people. Tomorrow there's another day of strikes and protests. The first since the reform was so controversially pushed through the National Assembly last week. The risk of demonstrations spilling over into violence has never been greater and now worried attention is also being directed towards the king's visit which starts on Sunday evening.

It may well be that certain judicious changes to his itinerary will have to be introduced to avoid exposure to unruly elements. Hugh Scofield in Paris. The Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar

has been described as one of the most discriminated against in the world. In 2017 the Burmese Army carried out a series of massacres forcing hundreds of thousands of them to flee Myanmar into Bangladesh.

Today nearly a million Rohingya live in crowded refugee camps in the Cox's Bazaar region.

Now a delegation from Myanmar has been to meet some of these displaced people to discuss a possible return home. As I heard from our South Asia Regional editor and Barasen Etirajan. After a gap of five years a delegation from Myanmar they crossed the river and reached the Bangladesh territory to discuss with the Bangladesh authorities

as well as the Rohingya people about possible repatriation on a pilot project. They want to take back about a thousand Rohingya Muslims back into the country and they conducted interviews with nearly 500 people in the first phase. They wanted to check with them about where they came from from the which part of Rakhine state they came from whether they had any documents with them to prove that they belong to Myanmar. They spoke to a Bangladeshi official earlier in the day and he was talking about this was the first time the Myanmar authorities spent so much time talking to the refugees verifying their papers for a possible repatriation but he also warned that it would take time. So do we think that that some of these refugees will go back to Myanmar and if they

do so will they be safe? So many of these refugees even when I was there a few years ago they were worried about their safety back in the home in Rakhine state in Myanmar because some of these people have been driven out of the homes three or four times. This time they were very categorical they were talking to the UN and other agencies it is fine for Myanmar to come and ask us to come back

and even if they're not taking all of us at least they should give us some sort of papers to show that we belong to Myanmar and also whatever properties we have lost you know we need to get

them back because there have been reports that many homes were raised down to the ground because

after the violence so these refugees are a bit apprehensive you know. And is Bangladesh keen to see them return to Myanmar? Bangladesh very much wants them to go back to their country because

you're talking about a million people and they have been living in these you know hills and in open lands and government lands. So that is putting a huge pressure on Bangladesh itself. First economically because Bangladesh will also have to spend some money on these refugees apart from the UN and other international bodies. And second thing is there is also increasing tensions between the local population and the Rohingya refugees and that is why Bangladesh wants to send these people back to Myanmar. Anbarasen Etta Rajan. Three years ago Malawi legalized cannabis farming for industrial and medicinal use promising to transform the lives of thousands of farmers. Economic expectations were high but many farmers who decided to cultivate cannabis say they've been unable to access seeds and other materials despite making thousands of dollars of advance payments and acquiring expensive cultivation licenses. The BBC's Charles Gitonga traveled to Malawi to find out what went wrong. In efforts to reduce its dependency on tobacco one of the country's largest exports Malawi legalized cannabis farming for medicinal and industrial use in February 2020. The government wanted to involve as many small-scale farmers across the country as possible who would source seeds from local private companies and later sell their harvest to the companies. But things didn't work out as planned. Ethel Chilemboe is a tobacco farmer in western Malawi. The biggest challenge is to access seeds. We have been waiting for seeds since 2021 and that is why we are stuck. Ethel says her group paid thousands of dollars for registration seeds and training in 2021 to a private company called United States Cannabis Association Malawi abbreviated USDA. It was the first cannabis company to register small-scale farmers and is the largest in the country but she didn't get the seeds nor the training. I'm inside this greenhouse that is a size of a football pitch and inside I can see light bulbs that were used at one point to provide light to the cannabis plants but right now they are all hanging so low to the ground and just around me there's just about 10 odd cannabis plants and the rest are just random plants that have taken advantage of the fact that no farming has taken place here for a good number of months. Makwenda Chunga a former lawmaker who supported legalization of cannabis in the Malawian parliament says his group spent about 250,000 dollars to set up this farm. He says USDA only supplied a fraction of the seeds paid for. The initial harvest they managed to produce now lies in boxes inside a small storehouse with nowhere to go despite USDA also having committed itself to buy the harvested hemp. We've got a contract with them which they gave us the price mark about 80 dollars 150 per kg so we had a hope if we do this thing even if we can borrow the money from the bank we know for sure that we'll pay back. The company has nearly 7,000 farmers in its register its chief executive officer Paul Maulidi blames a fallout between the local owners of the company and foreign investors leaving them with no funds to carry out their plans but still believes things can work out. We are engaging with the corporatives they are coming here and we are meeting and we are telling them what are our plans and how we can execute those plans. Malawi's cannabis regulatory authority says it has asked the company to fulfill its contracts or refund the farmers extending its license for three months since it had since expired and will only renewative farmers concerns are addressed but the problem isn't just USDA out of the four companies operating in the cannabis industry in Malawi only one still has a valid license the permanent secretary at the ministry of agriculture Dixie company however insists farmers will get help. If those farmers claim that they don't have seed

and so on they should come forward and present their case through the CRA to us who will be able to

show them the direction of how they can get assistance. Malawi still hopes to make a success out of cannabis but despite the promises farmers like Ethel and Makwenda who hope to benefit say they have been left financially scarred by this experience and that they have little hope things will improve anytime soon. Charles Gutonga with that report from Malawi.

What killed Ludwig van Beethoven? It's a question that's been puzzling biographers since the German composer's death almost 200 years ago. Now researchers think they may be closer to an answer thanks to DNA analysis as Harry Bly explains.

Ludwig van Beethoven is by some considered to be the greatest composer who ever lived. His works are well known today. Beethoven was just 56 years old when he died in 1827 and struggles

with chronic illness are well documented particularly gastrointestinal problems and jaundice. In addition from his mid 20s the composer suffered progressive hearing loss leading to total deafness

by his mid 40s. It is reported by historians that locks of Beethoven's hair were taken shortly after his passing and it's these strands of hair that have been analysed by an international team of researchers led by Cambridge University in an attempt to discover more about his life and death. Their study confirmed that liver failure or cirrhosis was the most likely cause of death. The researchers said Beethoven had a strong genetic disposition to the disease.

It's possible hepatitis B also played a part. Their analysis suggests he had the liver infection in his final months. This combined with his heavy alcohol consumption is what likely led to his death. Researchers were however not able to determine the cause of Beethoven's hearing loss.

Harry Bly. On Wednesday it was 50 years since women were allowed onto the floor of the London Stock Exchange. It's incredible to think now that before 1973 you had to be a man to trade stocks and shares but back then some people were concerned about allowing in women. Here are some

views from a newspaper article in 1967. We couldn't relax if women were there. There's often swearing.

There are no real facilities. Women would never fit in. Janet McCall now Stevens joined a firm of brokers in 1978 as the first woman there. She spoke to James Menendez. It was very different. I'd been to an all-girls school. I literally was taking my A-levels and somebody from the Stock Exchange came in and spoke to us about potential careers which was quite interesting in itself that somebody came to an all-girls school to talk about it which I thought actually in 1978 was probably quite a good thing. So I started with 14 boys and they were just like brothers really. Good fun. We all used to climb in the back of the transit van together with our jobbing books. We just got on with it. And what was the atmosphere like on the trading floor itself? I mean that can be quite an aggressive atmosphere, can't it? I mean how did people treat you there? A lot of sense of humour, a lot of banter, a lot of jokes. You did need to have a good sense of humour because obviously you couldn't take comments too seriously otherwise that could have effected you but really I found it a great place to be and work. I really did find it was really good being in that environment. It was noteworthy enough. You're getting the job that appeared in the press. I mean it is almost breathtaking now in 2023 to read the comments. What did the article say about you? So when I obviously was made a dealer and made sort of news

the articles that were written were as they are in the paper very much about my appearance, what earrings I was wearing. I mean I think one article says shapely and sultry which you know is just incredible but the interesting thing is they also said I had no special boyfriend and at that time I was actually living with my boyfriend so that caused a bit of a problem. And they had done their research had they? No they had done. I mean looking back it was hilarious really. Yeah I mean there's no way you can imagine anyone saying that now. Did you though feel that you had to prove yourself that you had to work a bit harder than your male colleagues? Yeah definitely yeah I think you know it was told to me on more than one occasion that it's no good just being as good as everybody else you know you have to be better and so I did everything quicker. I tried to be quicker and better at everything and it paid off in the long run you know made me work very very hard which I would have done anyway but it made me feel like I had sort of competition and I guess maybe I'm the sort of person that thrives a bit on on that but it was definitely it was harder to prove yourself because obviously they're experimenting with you so I was kind of a guinea pig if it had failed that wouldn't have been good for the future because obviously I've got a daughter now who's an investment manager and you saw paved the way I think and if I'd failed then that wouldn't have been good for the future.

Janet Stevens talking to James Menendez

And that is all from us for now but the Global News podcast will be back very soon.

This edition was mixed by Sam Dickinson and produced by Emma Joseph, our editors Karen Martin, I'm Oliver Conway. Until next time goodbye.

In 1996 one law changed welfare in the US by adding work requirements and letting for-profit companies run welfare offices. What happened next is complicated.

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