

The case for dismissal

Apologies are the end, going is the start

ARTILLERY ROW

By

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Poor Simon Case. The Cabinet Secretary's defence of himself and the civil service this week was, in essence, that MPs had put Boris Johnson in Number 10, and so could hardly complain that standards of behaviour had gone through the floor. Of course he spent a third of his time dealing with questions of ethics. Haven't you met the prime minister?

And he's right that Johnson has a peculiar ability to corrupt whatever he touches. It will be interesting to see, when the Conservative Party finally manages to throw its leader overboard, how long it takes to clean off the smell. Cabinet ministers who taunt the Labour front bench for having served under Jeremy Corbyn might be wise to start thinking about how they'll defend their own words and deeds under Johnson.

However bad Johnson is, his wickedness doesn't get those around him off the hook

Because however bad Johnson is, his wickedness doesn't get those around him off the hook. They are still responsible for their own actions. And that doesn't just go for politicians. Take the "lying toads", as John McDonnell called them, of the Downing Street press office. Case bridled at the language, but he should be angrier that the basic charge is very hard to deny.

People accuse politicians and those around them of lying all the time. It's lazy, and generally not quite right. They twist, they evade, they obfuscate, they select the facts that support their case. But they are very reluctant to say something they know to be false, especially on the record. Instead they give us lines that sound like denials but aren't: "I haven't heard that"; "We've gone over all this before"; "I wouldn't print that if I were you".

This reluctance isn't because government spin doctors are instinctive noble truth-tellers who spend their weekends as lay preachers. It's because being caught in a lie was, until recently, career-destroying. Civil servants are required to behave with integrity and honesty. "You must set out the facts and relevant issues truthfully," their code says. "You must not deceive or knowingly mislead."

But from the time that the Downing Street parties were first reported at the end of last year until the publication of Sue Gray's report, the prime minister's spokesman and his deputy maintained, again and again, that lockdown rules had been observed at all times. This was untrue, and given that a significant number of the parties happened in the press office, it is inconceivable that no one there was aware of it. Nevertheless, the prime minister's spokesman and his deputy continued to give false answers. They are both still in their posts. The spokesman has apologised for unspecified "failings".

Trust in government does matter

It is essential to the Johnson style of government that we move on from this, rolling our eyes, laughing that nothing really matters and that everyone is the same. But trust in government does matter.

When ministers praise Britain's vaccine roll-out, they should keep in mind that one of the things that made it work was that the vast majority of us trusted our government when it told us the vaccines were safe and necessary. We trusted officials when they told us to wait our turn, or to get our children vaccinated. This didn't happen in every country.

It isn't pleasant, but the only way to guarantee that trust is to demonstrate that when someone is caught deliberately and repeatedly lying, there are serious consequences. That is how the next spokesman will know that they can't do it.

Of course the prime minister is resisting that. He fears the precedent that will be set if people start losing their jobs just because they've done something wrong. But Case doesn't work for the prime minister. He works for us.

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