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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o273

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o273>

Published: 01 February 2022

Gray report: “Failures of leadership and judgement”

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The image of Queen Elizabeth II sitting alone in a black facemask at the funeral of her husband of 75 years in April 2021 captures both a moment of private grief and an act of great moral leadership. In stark contrast, the interim report of civil servant Sue Gray on the parties in Downing Street during lockdown sketches a repeated pattern of possible lawbreaking and a culture of decadence and debauchery at the heart of government during the country’s gravest peacetime crisis in recent history.¹ Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister’s response when invited to respond in Parliament yesterday—denial, defiance, and (eventually) a promise of a bureaucratic “fix”—was both morally and politically inept.

176 000 people in the UK—likely an underestimate—have died from covid-19.² Many of those deaths occurred in horrific circumstances without loved ones physically present. 10 760 children have lost a care giver to the disease.³ Health and care staff have worked themselves to exhaustion, placed themselves and their families at risk, and sustained lasting moral injury while trying to provide high quality, compassionate care to large numbers of sick and dying people in a fragmented, underfunded, and understaffed service.

3.7 million people are formally classified as clinically vulnerable.⁴ Until covid-19 is eliminated, or its prevalence falls substantially, their lives will remain compromised in ways unimaginable a few years ago. According to the Office of National Statistics, 1.3 million people—2% of the population—have symptoms of long covid, and only a small fraction of these have been able to access the assessment and treatment they need.⁵

Boris Johnson’s poor leadership as prime minister was evident from the very start of this pandemic. In early 2020 he missed five consecutive emergency meetings at which plans and decisions for an escalating public health threat should have been made.⁶ He drove, or at the very least acquiesced with, a “too little, too late” emergency response.⁷ He boasted of shaking hands with covid-19 patients on the very day the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE) advised people not to do so.⁸ He oversaw a culture of disaster capitalism in which contracts for personal protective equipment were passed to politically connected suppliers with a shocking lack of due diligence.⁹

Mr Johnson, on behalf of all those who are bereaved, chronically sick, clinically vulnerable, the frontline workers, and ordinary citizens who made sacrifices large and small for the greater good and will continue to do so, I say that your behaviour and attitude do not live up to even the lowest expectations of your office. You do not speak for us. You cannot lead us when you have set such a poor example.

Competing interests: none declared.

Provenance and peer review: commissioned, not peer reviewed.

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