Season 2 Episode 6: Lockdowns For Thee, But Not for Me

HUNT: Well, Jackie, it's been a long season of Scandalized already and I think we deserve a break. So how about a work trip to Napa Valley?

KETTLER: Well, some of these scandals we've been covering are making a glass of wine. Sound pretty good about now, so I'm in.

HUNT: While we're there, actually, we could consider stopping by an award winning restaurant. I've heard a lot about the French Laundry. We could sample the Regi Royale Ozata Kaviar, the Applewood smoked Amish green circle Poularde, or perhaps even the Manila Mango Makrut lime Gelée.

KETTLER: Well, I don't know what most of those things are, but I'm sure they're very tasty.

HUNT: Well, the French Laundry has won three Michelin stars, so I'm guessing whatever we eat will probably be great. And best of all, they're pre-fixed dinners start out at a very reasonable $425 per person.

KETTLER: We're on public radio, Charlie. I don't think that's in our budget.

HUNT: Party pooper. The price tag, though, for this restaurant was not a problem for one large group of diners who a few years ago decided to hold a birthday party at the French Laundry for the head lobbyist of a major California interest group. The merriment and conversation was reportedly quite loud. The wine was flowing and the caviar was doing whatever it is that caviar does. I've never had it. But the reason this dinner is on our radar is because one particular non lobbyist guest who got a great deal of attention for attending this party was Gavin Newsom, the governor of California.

KETTLER: I mean, lobbyists tend to get a bad rap, and they are actually a pretty important part of how state governments work. Right? Charlie. They provide key policy information and expertise, but the public generally doesn't really like lobbyists.

HUNT: No, not so much.

KETTLER: So politically, it's probably not the best look for a governor to party with a bunch of lobbyists at a restaurant that 99% of Californians can't afford. And political

science, we often refer to elected officials as elites. And this isn't really helping Newsom seem like a normal, down to earth guy.

HUNT: Maybe so, Jackie and I can see why you'd think this is where this is going. But it turns out the real scandal was a key piece of information I've left out of the story. This big, crowded birthday dinner, which appears to have been mostly indoors with nary a face mask in sight, took place in November of 2020 at the height of the Covid 19 pandemic.

KETTLER: Uh oh.

HUNT: From Boise State Public Radio. This is scandalized. I'm Charlie Hunt.

KETTLER: And I'm Jackie Kettler. Today on the show, we're taking the term political party to a whole new level.

HUNT: We'll dive into the details of Governor Newsom's ill advised evening out at the height of the Covid restrictions, the more brazen version that took place across the pond, and why these politicians tendency to bend the rules left the rest of us feeling more than a little betrayed.

KETTLER: Charlie, it's kind of a drag that this podcast so often takes us back to 2020, but I guess it was an important year.

HUNT: A pretty stressful one too, I would say. Between the tragedy and lifestyle changes that came with the pandemic, wildfire smoke that blotted out the sun, the George Floyd protests, plus maybe the most contentious presidential election of our lives. It was a lot. Everybody was a little on edge, which might help explain some of the poor political decision making that took place during this time. So it's November 6th, 2020, just three days after the 2020 election, and Governor Newsom and his wife joined a party of at least 12 people at the French Laundry for the 50th birthday of lobbyist Jason Kinney, who, in addition to being a state lobbyist, had been a longtime political adviser and friend of Newsoms. State guidance on in-person gatherings at the time strongly discouraged mixing more than three households.

KETTLER: It's important to remember that different states had very different sets of guidelines at this time, there was no single nationwide approach like in other countries. Some states had more restrictions like mask mandates, strict limits on in-person gatherings, and forced business closures, while others either had more relaxed versions

of these guidelines or lifted them much sooner in an effort to reopen their states. But by just about any measure, California was one of the most restrictive states throughout the pandemic. In fact, California was the very first state in March of 2020 to issue a statewide stay at home order.

HUNT: It's true. And even Newsom himself later reported feeling a little uncomfortable with the gathering when he arrived at the dinner, acknowledging that they were at least pushing the limits of what public health guidelines suggested.

NEWSOM: And as soon as I sat down at the larger table, I realized it was a little larger group than I had anticipated, and I made a bad mistake. Instead of sitting down, uh, I should have stood up and walked back, got in my car and drove back to my house.

HUNT: The story breaks in the San Francisco Chronicle a week after the dinner takes place. Initially, pretty much everybody involved defends themselves in the same way. Governor Newsom's spokesman says that Newsom and his wife paid for their own meals and followed public health guidelines in the restaurant's protocols. Quote, all in line with the state's rules for restaurant operation. The governor's office confirmed he was there and said the dinner was held outdoors. Quote. The restaurant was open for normal dining, consistent with state and county health guidance. A spokesperson for Jason Kinney, the lobbyist whose birthday it was. Called it a, quote, small, intimate, 12 person dinner held outdoors. Even a spokesperson for the French Laundry piped up, saying that the restaurant follows all state and county health rules and requires every party that dines there to do the same. Governor Newsom at least, seemed to grasp the severity of the public relations dumpster fire here and apologized in a public briefing later that day.

NEWSOM: And so I want to apologize to you because I need to preach and practice, not just preach and not practice. And I've done my best to do that. We're all human. We all fall short sometimes. I shouldn't have been there. I should have turned back around. And so when that happens, you got to you pay the price, but you also own the mistake and you don't ever make it again. And you have my word on that.

HUNT: So apologies are good. But unfortunately for Newsom, a couple elements of the story ended up making things even worse and might help explain why the story stayed in the news for so long, especially compared with some other public health slip ups by other American officials during the pandemic. For one thing, the story about the dinner broke in the media on the same day that Newsom's administration issued new guidance urging Californians to limit contact with anyone outside their immediate family.

Guidance Newsom and his dinner companions surely would have been in violation of at the French Laundry.

KETTLER: This is obviously one of the most unfortunate parts of this, which is the hypocrisy, right? As Governor, Newsom is the face of pandemic restrictions in California, but he is also a well-known national figure. And then here he is, at the very least, pushing those restrictions to the absolute limit.

MEDIA CLIP: Tricia Cahoe is a private chef in San Mateo. She says she was disappointed by the governor's participation in a recent birthday party at the French Laundry, a Napa Valley restaurant one of the most expensive on the West Coast.

MEDIA CLIP: He's implemented rules that we would gladly follow, but I don't think he's setting the best example. I think it's highly hypocritical of him.

HUNT: Things got worse for Newsom just a few days after the initial story broke.

MEDIA CLIP: Fox 11 in Los Angeles obtained these photos of the governor and his wife at a party in what the restaurant calls an outdoor section.

MEDIA CLIP: And it's now really calling into question just how honest he was the other day when he said that dinner was outside.

HUNT: In the photo, Newsom and his wife are seated at this large table with at least a dozen people. The guests are closely packed together and nobody is wearing a mask. Meanwhile, the table is surrounded on three sides by walls, and the fourth side, which has a sliding glass door, is facing outdoors. Believe it or not, this technically qualified as outdoor dining under California's guidelines at the time, but the eyewitness who snapped the photo told journalists that even this guideline wasn't followed.

MEDIA CLIP: We spoke with a woman who happened to be at the restaurant the same night, and she snapped these photos. The woman we spoke with says at one point those doors were closed because of noise complaints about the group.

MEDIA CLIP: It got louder and louder, and so they had some sliding glass doors that they were able to close. So then it was just a closed off room, but you could still hear them. That's how loud they were.

KETTLER: I too do not really enjoy being seated near rowdy tables at a restaurant. So I can sympathize. But more importantly, if this first hand report is right, then at least for part of the meal, this wasn't an outdoor dinner at all, was it?

HUNT: Sure doesn't sound like it. And even more new details from the photos made things even worse for Newsom. So, Jackie, you'll remember I mentioned that this was a birthday dinner for a state lobbyist, but it turns out these weren't just any lobbyists.

MEDIA CLIP: And earlier this morning, because of those photos we obtained, we were able to identify two people at that dinner. And one of them is the CEO of the California Medical Association. The other is one of the top lobbyists for the California Medical Association. The CMA represents 50,000 frontline doctors and their interests in the state Capitol, and for their CEO to be at that dinner, violating those rules right next to the governor. That's causing a whole new wave of fallout.

KETTLER: Yikes. You'd think these folks would have known better.

HUNT: Nope. Not a very good look. Among other guidance, the CMA as an organization had sponsored a mask wearing ad campaign in California earlier that summer. All in all, the incident amounts to a major headache for one of the highest profile governors in the country.

MEDIA CLIP: The governor has this dinner a couple of weeks ago where he's violating all the rules that he's pushing on us every day. Wear a mask. Wasn't wearing a mask. Social distance wasn't social distancing, don't mix with households, was mixed with a bunch of different households. And that's something he's really been stressing as we head into the Thanksgiving holiday. So he's losing a lot of credibility with Californians out here who are feeling, why should I have to follow these rules if our state leader isn't going to.

KETTLER: So Charlie, let's get into some of the consequences of this and maybe why it was such a big deal. This means it's time to bring in our old pal George Costanza.

CONSTANZA: Was that wrong? Should I not have done that?

KETTLER: Maybe. Let's start with the laws and guidelines and whether they were really followed. You know, it can be difficult to put ourselves back in our own shoes from 2020, but especially in a place like California, which had much stricter standards than a lot of other states. It's easy to see why this would have ruffled some feathers.

HUNT: Yeah. Although the most common defense that was used for this incident was that technically nobody broke the law. Right. This is a defense we've seen before in other scandals. You'll recall all those quotes I read from the governor, from the CMA, from the French Laundry. All of them said that the dinner was held in accordance with state and county guidelines. But the reality is a little more complicated. So here's the kind of public health guidance that would have applied to Newsom's group at the restaurant at this time in 2020. So in California, masks were required indoors around Non-household members. Whenever people couldn't keep their distance, diners were exempt while eating or drinking, but only if they could stay at least six feet from people outside their household. But this guidance was complicated by the four tiered, color coded system that varied by county, depending on how serious the localized outbreak was in that part of California. So purple, for example, meant that the outbreak was widespread, with high rates of new cases and a test positivity rate of more than 8%, which would have indicated that there were a lot of folks with the virus who didn't know they had it all the way down to a yellow or a minimal outbreak. And at this time, Napa County, which is where the French Laundry is located, was at orange or moderate status, meaning it could have been a whole lot worse, which is something Newsom pointed to. And so what this meant was that indoor and outdoor dining was technically allowed under certain caps for numbers of people.

KETTLER: Well, in defense of the governor. I mean, I'm honestly confused here, too. This is one issue with having laws and guidelines for something like this that differs between the state, local governments and even the national level of government, not to mention restaurants own rules. So that is genuinely confusing and complicated. However, maybe important for the governor to figure it out or or recognize it's confusing for everyone else.

HUNT: That's a that's a really good point is like, you know, we were all sort of confused and scared, frankly, during this time. But like, if there's one person in the state you expect to be on top of the rules, it would probably be the governor.

KETTLER: You know, we have a federal system of government, which means we do sometimes see a lot of divergence in policies and and practices across levels of government. So again, I can see where there would be some confusion.

HUNT: Yeah. And so the question of whether Newsom and his fellow diners actually broke the law or violated these guidelines. It's up for debate, right? We we don't have a ton of direct evidence besides these firsthand accounts and the couple of like hastily taken photos that the local news obtained, but sort of regardless of the law. Jackie,

what's probably not up for debate is whether this was a good idea. I think we can say it probably wasn't, right?

KETTLER: Right. It's kind of important for politicians to hold themselves to the standards they're setting for the rest of us. If they're not, it feels like a breach of trust. Plus, other people aren't going to feel the need to follow those guidelines as well. Right, Charlie?

HUNT: Right. And in this particular instance, it was really important that everybody followed the guidelines. Like this wasn't just like an individual choice kind of thing. Like the whole thing was we all have to act together to stop the spread. And then, well, everybody else is acting together? But then the governor goes out and has this dinner.

KETTLER: Yeah. And I'm guessing the fact that it was at a super fancy restaurant with a bunch of lobbyists really didn't help the perception here.

HUNT: Yeah. Not ideal. And Newsom seemed to at least understand why this was a big issue. So, you know, like we mentioned, to his credit, he apologized pretty much right away after the story broke. Um, you know, in fact, Newsom, quite helpfully for us, breaks down the difference we just described where even if the letter of the law was followed or is maybe in dispute, at best, the general ideas and guidelines were definitely not, at least in the public's view.

NEWSOM: You can quibble about the guidelines. Et cetera. Et cetera. But the spirit of what I'm preaching all the time was contradicted, and I got to own that.

HUNT: So, Jackie, it's been a while, but I think now is a really good time to return to a segment from our first season Comeback kids.

MEDIA CLIP: I think we know enough to say with some certainty that New Hampshire tonight has made Bill Clinton the comeback kid.

HUNT: This was obviously not a great story for Newsom. He had never exactly been a wildly popular governor, but his approval ratings had slid quite a bit since the beginning of the pandemic. So there was definitely a serious segment of the public who was pretty frustrated with his leadership. At least this all led, Jackie, to a 2021 effort to conduct what we call a recall election. What do we mean by a recall election? What are they supposed to accomplish?

KETTLER: Recall elections were originally part of the progressive era reforms in the early 1900s as a way to provide citizens with more power over politicians and parties. And if citizens gather enough signatures on a petition, they can actually vote to remove an elected official from office. It's not very often used, but it has importantly been used in California.

HUNT: Yeah, exactly. You had the 2003 recall of Governor Gray Davis, which was successful. This is how we got the Governator Arnold Schwarzenegger. And so this wasn't new for California. But Newsom's recall effort actually was already underway in February 2020 before the pandemic really got going. But the French Laundry incident clearly added fuel to this fire, and probably helped the organizers get the signatures they needed by early 2021.

KETTLER: Because I'm guessing there were plenty of Californians that don't agree with Newsom politically that were upset by him. And now, potentially, he's upsetting even some of his own previous supporters. So was this recall effort successful?

HUNT: It was not. It did not end up being successful. You know, no governor wants to face a recall election. I'm sure this is not something Newsom wanted to deal with, but he actually did survive the recall effort by a pretty comfortable margin and then easily won reelection in 2022. So again. Sure. He didn't want to have to do this, but at least it sort of served as confirmation that he could continue as governor and give him a little bit of legitimacy. Since that time, since his reelection, he has definitely upped his public persona even more. Jackie, it seems likely that he'll run for president. And in a recent memoir about his political ascendancy, Newsom conspicuously did not mention the incident at the French Laundry. Perhaps on purpose, the book only covers the period of his life before he was governor. God help us. The 2028 presidential primaries are just around the corner. Jackie, does this seem like something that is likely to come up again if he runs for president? Or maybe is this kind of in the rearview mirror.

KETTLER: Perhaps where it might really come up would be in the contest for the Democratic nomination, right? In the primary, because this is where other Democrats could use it to hit. You know, as an attack, um, thinking about the hypocrisy of this. And perhaps this is a signal of how he approaches the office.

HUNT: Yeah. Especially, you know, if you're running for president, one of the key things is how are you going to act in a time of crisis? And this was a time of crisis. California's our biggest state. And so you could see the Newsom, you know, governorship as a kind of trial run. So, yeah, I think it's possible that it comes up at the same time. There were

way worse violations than this during this time period. I'm thinking specifically of, you know, the Trump administration holding this really massive gathering at the white House to celebrate the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. Um, and according to a lot of different reporting at this time, uh, more than two dozen attendees, including Trump himself, the first lady, and Republican senators Mike Lee and Thom Tillis. I believe Chris Christie also got really sick as a result of this, they tested positive after the, this celebration. Um, and, you know, they were shaking hands and hugging each other and celebrating and all this stuff. And then the crowd had an indoor reception after the fact. So, you know, none of this, of course, makes what Newsom did. Okay. Uh, but I think it does sort of highlight the partizan elements here and does give Newsom a chance to sort of be like, hey, look, I apologize. Yeah, I was wrong. Let's focus on the real villain here, Donald Trump.

KETTLER: On top of all of this, there's a bigger question about how much these restrictions were asking of us, which makes this maybe not that typical of a scandal. There's been a lot of reassessment in the years since 2020 about whether these kinds of restrictions were wise. Did they help, or where did they end up being more costly than the public health benefits were?

HUNT: Yeah, definitely. A lot of I think particularly around things like, you know, classrooms and schools where even I think a lot of Democrats have done some thinking about whether that was the right thing to do. Newsom himself has recently been acknowledging this quite a bit more in recent years.

MEDIA CLIP: Yeah. Look, everyone's a genius in hindsight. So, you know, coulda, woulda. Well, what would you do differently? I had a whole chapter just about Purell. We were running around doing price gouging legislation against Purell, and everyone was thinking it was a Purell based crisis. I mean, people. Were scrubbing their groceries. Yeah. I mean, ideally we close beaches was insane in hindsight.

HUNT: Hindsight or not, just about everybody involved in this debacle acknowledged that it was a big screw up. But despite how expensive the French Laundry is to eat at the incident, there was chump change compared to what was going on across the pond. Well, Jackie, it's only fair that since we covered a politician on the left that we also cover one on the right. Since there was plenty of pandemic hypocrisy to go around in 2020 and 2021. So let's turn to a conservative, polarizing leader, not of a state, but of a whole country who came into political prominence in 2016. A guy with a big, bombastic personality and a wild mop of blond hair to match.

KETTLER: Him again?

HUNT: Actually, Jackie, we are not for once talking about Donald Trump. The world leader I'm referring to here is Boris Johnson, and the country he led through the pandemic was the United Kingdom. Boris Johnson succeeded Theresa May as prime minister of the U.K. in 2019 as a member of the Conservative Party, but in 2016, he became one of the main public faces of the Brexit campaign, which officially broke the U.K. away from the European Union in early 2020, just a few months into Johnson's tenure as prime minister. But a few short weeks after that, Johnson found himself speaking directly to the British people about something much more serious.

JOHNSON: The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades, and this country is not alone. All over the world, we're seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer. And so tonight, I want to update you on the latest steps we're taking to fight the disease and what you can do to help. From this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction. You must stay at home.

HUNT: The Prime Minister was clear about the very, very limited number of permissible reasons anybody could leave their home.

JOHNSON: Shopping for basic necessities as infrequently as possible. One form of exercise a day, for example, a run, walk or cycle alone or with members of your household. Any medical need to provide care or to help a vulnerable person, and traveling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home. You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say no.

KETTLER: Charlie. I think some of this will sound familiar to American listeners, most of whom probably remember all too well the early days of lockdown. All but seven states in the U.S. also issued stay at home orders, but my recollection is that very few of them were as stringent or lasted quite as long as what the U.K. was doing.

HUNT: You're right, Jackie, and this is an important part of this story. According to Oxford University's Covid 19 government response tracker, England spent 179 days under a stay at home requirement between March 2020 and June 2021. For reference, residents of California, who we've already said was one of the most stringent American states in this category, spent 156 days under lockdown. Our home state of Idaho, Jackie, spent only 37. Not only were the UK's lockdowns more serious, but they were more seriously enforced. By February 2021, police in England and Wales had issued

nearly 70,000 fines, including several hundred fines of 10,000 pounds or more, for organizing gatherings of over 30 people.

JOHNSON: It depends on all of us, the entire country, to follow the advice.

MEDIA CLIP: There will be penalties for those who break these mandatory measures.

HUNT: Meanwhile, families were largely prevented from comforting dying relatives in the hospital and funerals, including the one for Prince Philip when he passed away in early 2021, were capped at 30 mourners.

MEDIA CLIP: Large gatherings were illegal, weddings were banned and funerals could only be attended by those in the same household or close family members.

HUNT: In the end, the UK entered into full lockdown three separate times, once in March 2020, a second time on November 5th. Ironically, just one day before Governor Newsom's dinner at the French Laundry and once more, starting on a date. We've also talked about on the show before. January 6th, 2021.

JOHNSON: With most of the country already under extreme measures, it's clear that we need to do more together to bring this new variant under control while our vaccines are rolled out. We must therefore go into a national lockdown, which is tough enough to contain this variant. That means the government is once again instructing you to stay at home.

HUNT: All of these details, Jackie, especially the Prime Minister's strident instructions to stay home, to not gather with other households and to remain socially distanced are important to remember. As I walk us through what happened on one particular day at ten Downing Street, the Prime Minister's home and office. Essentially the white House of the UK on May 20th, 2020. Late in the afternoon, the government's culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, was giving a daily briefing on the virus and emphasizing that although the lockdown had recently been partially lifted, significant restrictions were still in place.

DOWDEN: You can meet one person outside your household in an outdoor public place.

HUNT: One other person outdoors in a public place two meters apart. What we assume Dowden did not know while he was giving his briefing was that in that very same building, staffers at ten Downing were planning a party that broke essentially all of these rules and which the Prime Minister attended later that night.

MEDIA CLIP: Yet just a few hours before that press conference, the Prime Minister's principal private secretary, one of his most senior civil servants, sent this invitation to over a hundred Downing Street staff. In his email, Martin Reynolds wrote hi all. After what has been an incredibly busy period, it would be nice to make the most of the lovely weather and have some socially distanced drinks in the number ten garden this evening. Please join us from 6 p.m. and bring your own booze.

HUNT: About an hour after Reynolds sends the invite. Ten Downing's communications director, Lee Cain, replies that, quote, A 200 odd person invitation for drinks in the garden of number ten is somewhat of a comms risk in the current environment. Another director at number ten declines over email, telling Reynolds that this is not a good idea.

KETTLER: Yeah it's not.

HUNT: No, I wouldn't say so. I guess they didn't listen, Jackie, because in the late afternoon, as the culture secretary is giving his briefing, warning people to continue to stay home if at all possible, a special adviser at ten Downing warns by WhatsApp that cameras will be leaving after the press conference and that therefore people should avoid, quote, walking around waving bottles of wine, etc.. Reynolds replies we'll do my best.

KETTLER: I mean, I have had those days where I understand that reaction, but oh man.

HUNT: Bad, bad. Look here. Around 6 p.m., the Prime Minister joins 30 to 40 people in the garden, hangs out for around 30 minutes to thank staff, then goes back to his office. Some staff reportedly stayed until late at night, at which time Reynolds message as a colleague about an unrelated story and brags that the British media's focus on that story is, quote, better than them focusing on our drinks, which we seem to have got away with.

KETTLER: So a few dozen high ranking government officials gathering in a huge group in pretty crystal clear violation of the rules, rules that were publicly proclaimed to the media in that very same building where they were planning the party. Man, these guys are putting Gavin Newsom to shame.

HUNT: Yeah. The French Laundry incident looks pretty tame compared with this one. But Jackie, even this was something that maybe the Boris Johnson government could have gotten past if it had only happened once.

KETTLER: Oh, no.

HUNT: It turns out that between May 2020 and April 2021, there are not just 1 or 2, but over a dozen separate parties at number ten that ended up being investigated. One such party that received quite a lot of attention was a birthday party for the Prime Minister himself in June of 2020.

MEDIA CLIP: The Prime Minister has long said my policy on cake is pro having it and pro eating it. So much so he had two on his 56th birthday in June 2020, the first courtesy of a school in Hertfordshire he visited in the morning. Happy birthday Tin Minister. And another when he got back here to the Cabinet Room in Downing Street, the very spot where the Covid rules were signed off, his now wife, Carrie, brought another cake along to a gathering of up to 30 people at around 2:00, which lasted around half an hour. There were sandwiches and picnic food and no discussion about social distancing.

HUNT: This is, of course, in direct contradiction of even the slightly more relaxed restrictions at the time, which said that meetings of a few individuals could happen if they were, quote, reasonably necessary for work purposes. But even here, guidance continued to say that social distancing must be maintained at work, quote, wherever possible. Later that year, a Christmas party on December 18th, 2020 was held in ten Downing Street press office. The party reportedly had 20 to 45 guests. A Secret Santa exchange and staff awards, and some staff stayed past midnight. The very next day after that party, the Prime Minister put London and the southeast of England into a new tier four lockdown condition, the seriousness of which seemed at odds with the raucous party his staff had thrown just hours before.

JOHNSON: We must, I'm afraid, look again at Christmas and, given the early evidence we have on this new variant of the virus, the potential risk it poses it is with a very heavy heart. I must tell you, we cannot continue with Christmas as planned. In England, those living in tier four areas should not mix with anyone outside their own household at Christmas.

KETTLER: Christmas is canceled is not something I'd ever thought I'd hear a politician say. Charlie.

HUNT: Well, in case you thought these parties, Jackie, were on just truly special occasions like Christmas and birthdays, you would be wrong. Many of these parties were for what the Brits call a leaving. Do what we Yanks would call a going away party

for various staff throughout ten Downing Street. The most notable and concerning of these took place on the night before Prince Philip's funeral in April 2021, while the nation was in official mourning. The Telegraph, a conservative friendly UK newspaper, I should add, described, quote, alcohol fueled gatherings in ten Downing Street in which staff brought in alcohol bought at a nearby store that they hid in a suitcase. They played music, danced and somehow broke a swing that was used by Boris Johnson's toddler son. Meanwhile, the next day, and I'll quote the Telegraph article here, the Queen sat alone in the chapel at Windsor Castle during the service in observation of strict social distancing rules, and a photograph of the solitary monarch elicited huge public sympathy, both at home and abroad.

KETTLER: Wow. I mean, the fact that they were bringing in alcohol hid in a suitcase suggests that they knew they were doing something wrong.

HUNT: Absolutely.

KETTLER: And it seems like these parties were almost designed to happen at moments that provided the worst possible optics for the Johnson government. Clearly, now we know what happened at these events, but how did they come to light at the time?

HUNT: Somehow, despite this cavalcade of parties, there weren't any major leaks while these parties were actually happening. But things really begin to unravel in December of 2021. Christmas is just around the corner, But a series of revelations about what happened last Christmas threatened to bring down the entire Johnson government. On November 30th, 2021, the Daily Mirror reports on three Downing Street gatherings in 2020, including the Christmas party. We mentioned that happened on December 18th, just before the Prime Minister canceled Christmas in London and other tier four areas. Johnson and his spokespeople initially rebuffed these reports, saying that no parties had taken place and his staffers and aides had followed the rules at all times. But during the Prime Minister's question period in Parliament, Johnson is grilled by a leader in the Labor Party who is probably also familiar to us. Keir Starmer, the future prime minister.

STARMER: As millions of people were locked down last year, was a Christmas party thrown in Downing Street for dozens of people on December the 18th. The difference seems to be no rules were broken. Well, I've got the rules that were in place at the time, Prime Minister of this party. They're very clear, Mr. Speaker. You must not have a work Christmas lunch or party. Does the Prime Minister really expect the country to believe

that while people were banned from seeing their loved ones at Christmas last year, it was fine for him and his friends to throw a boozy party in Downing Street.

HUNT: Just one week after this exchange, the drip drip turns into a flood. Itv news broadcasted a leaked 47 second clip of a mock press briefing held on December 22nd, 2020. It was being run by Allegra Stratton, the Prime Minister's press secretary, who was seen joking with the PM's media relations staff about the Christmas party that was held just four days earlier.

MEDIA CLIP: I've just seen reports on Twitter that there was a Downing Street Christmas party on Friday night. Do you recognize those reports? I went home. Hold on, hold on. Um. Um, um. Would the Prime Minister condone having a Christmas? What's the answer? I don't know. What's the party was cheese and wine. Cheese and wine. All right. It was a business meeting. Just joking. This is recorded. This fictional party was a business meeting, and it was not socially distanced.

KETTLER: So this is a mock press conference where they're making fun of the idea that someone would ask about this. Yep. And they have no answer for it, which again suggests that they really knew it was wrong. Also referring to it as a business meeting or a fictional party.

HUNT: The party wasn't fictional. It happened.

KETTLER: Yeah. And then sort of reveling in and joking about the fact that it was not socially distanced. Yeah, this is bad.

HUNT: The video was a major enough development to send this boulder of a news story rolling down the hill. And once it gets started, there's no stopping it. The day after this video is leaked, Allegra Stratton resigns from the government.

MEDIA CLIP: The British people have made immense sacrifices in the ongoing battle against Covid 19. I now fear that my comments in the leaked video of the 20th of December last year have become a distraction in that fight. My remarks seemed to make light of the rules. Rules that people were doing everything to obey. That was never my intention. I regret those remarks for the rest of my days, and I offer my profound apologies to all of you at home for them.

HUNT: On the same day as Stratton's teary resignation, Johnson confirms the beginning of a formal investigation headed by Simon Case that would examine the rule breaking at

ten Downing. Case at this point was a cabinet secretary, the head of the Home Civil Service. In other words, the highest ranking civil servant in the country. Case had served as a private secretary to both David Cameron and Theresa May. The two PMs who preceded Johnson.

KETTLER: So this seems like a very reasonable option to head up this investigation. You want to seem above board in instances like this and like you're taking the matter seriously.

HUNT: You sure do. Which makes what came out in the press just ten days later that much more damaging. Another joint investigation between Politico and the Independent on December 17th details another Christmas party that was held exactly one year earlier. The article quotes three officials in the government who were at the party who described it as pardon my French or British. I guess a piss up, which Google tells me is what the Brits often call a heavy drinking session or boozy party. But the big issue for this particular party is where it was held the private office of the Cabinet Secretary. I just mentioned Simon Case.

KETTLER: Wait. So the staff of the guy who's leading the investigation immediately gets called out for his own party scandal?

HUNT: Yes.

KETTLER: How much partying was the government doing?

HUNT: Uh, quite a lot. It turns out most of the reporting here suggests that case himself probably did not break any rules that evening. But still not a great look.

MEDIA CLIP: Because of confidence in this, he has now stepped back from it and Sue gray has been appointed in his place. She is a civil servant whose reputation precedes her. Former special advisers telling me tonight that she is formidable and very, very tough. The Prime Minister will be more nervous tonight, I imagine.

HUNT: Jackie, I could go on like this for several months. In this timeline, each fresh revelation about another party, an immediate denial or assertion that guidance was followed at all times, followed right after that by new evidence that the denial was either misinformed or a downright lie. So instead, I will just cut to the chase. By the time the government investigation by Sue gray and the criminal investigations by the Met Police are through, they've thoroughly cataloged 16 different parties, seven of which the Prime

Minister was present at 126 fines issued to 83 different people in Johnson's administration, including one for Johnson himself and many, many resignations of top government officials. Maybe more importantly, by early 2022, dozens of members of Johnson's own party began to turn on him.

MEDIA CLIP: A lot of people attended events in May 2020. The one I recall attending was my grandmother's funeral. She was a wonderful woman as well as a love for her family. She served her community as a counselor and she served Dartford Conservative Association loyally for many years. The only ten people at the funeral. Many people who loved her had to watch online. I didn't hug my siblings. I didn't hug my parents. I gave a eulogy. And then afterwards, I didn't even go to her house for a cup of tea. I drove back three hours from Kent to Staffordshire. Does the Prime Minister think I'm a fool?

MEDIA CLIP: Ever since he joined the party's candidates list 30 years ago, until we got him into number ten, he has enjoyed my full throated support. But I am deeply concerned by these events. When he kindly invited me to see him ten days ago. I told him that I thought he should think very carefully about what was now in the best interests of our country and of the Conservative Party. And I have to tell him he no longer enjoys my support.

HUNT: And in case you're wondering, these are not just random backbencher members of Parliament. This group includes prominent members of Johnson's party, including his predecessor, who was still a member of Parliament, Theresa May.

MEDIA CLIP: The Covid regulations impose significant restrictions on the freedoms of members of the public. They had a right to expect their Prime Minister to have read the rules, to understand the meaning of the rules and indeed those around them to have done around him, to have done so to and to set an example in following those rules. So either my right hon. Friend had not read the rules or didn't understand what they meant and others around him, or they didn't think the rules applied to number ten, which was it?

HUNT: But the Prime Minister's punishments weren't just political. In April of 2022, Johnson received a distinction he surely wasn't looking for. The first sitting prime minister to be found to have broken the law.

JOHNSON: Today, I've received a fixed penalty notice from the Metropolitan Police relating to an event in Downing Street on the 19th of June 2020. And let me say immediately that I've paid the fine and I once again offer a full apology.

KETTLER: Charlie, you know I like a Good Friday happy hour as much as the next public servant, but the details you've laid out here are so sensational that it leads me to a question that we sometimes ask on the podcast. What were they thinking?

HUNT: Hard to say here. Obviously, there is very little that could justify this sort of series of mistakes. These folks at different points offered a few different excuses that we heard a bit of in the last segment. All of which I would say are scandalized classics that we have heard before. You know, number one, I didn't know. Right.

KETTLER: Always a great one.

HUNT: Always a great one. I had no idea. Um, I personally really liked it was a meeting, not a party. I mean, any meeting with booze is a party, I think. And then my personal favorite, which came from Conor Burns, a conservative MP and ally of Johnson. After the story about Johnson's June 2020 Cabinet Room birthday party came out.

MEDIA CLIP: He. As far as I can see, he was, in a sense, ambushed with a cake. They came to his office with a cake. They sang Happy Birthday. He was there for ten minutes. I don't think most people looking at that at home would characterize that as a party.

HUNT: Jackie, I have a very important question for you. Have you ever been ambushed with a cake?

KETTLER: I don't think so.

HUNT: And which scandal is it covering up for?

KETTLER: Right. You know, this does come up a lot with scandals like this where they blame the staff. Yeah. But after a while, it sounds like it became increasingly not believable that Johnson wasn't aware that he and others were breaking the rules.

HUNT: Yeah, I think, you know, especially in comparison to the Gavin Newsom situation on just about every metric, this violation seems like it was way, way worse. So, you know, for one thing, the British lockdowns, as we mentioned, were more serious and restrictive, which sort of makes the wrongdoing also more serious because they're in even more violation, stricter violation of what the rules were.

KETTLER: This is also for Newsom. There was one event in question. There were loads of parties, Charlie.

HUNT: Yeah. It kept happening time and time again. And so what this does is it makes it a little harder to argue that, you know, as Newsom said, one time lapse in judgment and by all accounts. Right. Like the Newsom thing, that didn't happen again, right? He was he was not stupid enough to let it happen again.

KETTLER: Or at least more discreet.

HUNT: Right. I guess it helped that he got caught the first time. I think the other thing here is that it involves not just the top official, but a lot of the closest advisers. The staff were really involved here. This this brought in more people, which added to another problem here, which is that the parties were larger and they were not always outdoors. So a lot of big problems here.

KETTLER: Right. And it sounds like Newsom maybe bent the truth about the dinner being outdoors, but Johnson and his administration have totally lied about it, right?

HUNT: Yeah. Time and time again. And so, I mean, to borrow a metaphor here, right? Newsom, I feel like, was caught speeding right in his car, going maybe 40mph in a 30 mile per hour zone, and he's let off with a warning. Meanwhile, Johnson and his staff are going 60 in a 30. They do this many, many times and then lie about being in the car in the first place. So on basically every level they screw up. Worse, I think, than Newsom did.

KETTLER: Well, and then there's also the question about the attempts to cover it up.

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, like we said, Newsom apologizes more or less immediately and doesn't deny sort of the basics of the allegations. And, you know, maybe this helped him put the scandal to bed quicker than this one in, in the UK, which becomes this months long national scandal. And although Johnson does apologize many times. There was also this sort of continuous effort to make excuses for what happened.

JOHNSON: No, nobody told me that what we were doing was, as you say, against the rules. I my memory is going out into the garden for about 25 minutes for what I implicitly thought was a work event.

HUNT: And so I think in light of excuses like these that, you know, the oh, I thought it was a work event or like it was a meeting, but with cake. I think all of this comes across with the British public, right, as really hollow sounding. When most of the country was

almost completely confined to their homes for longer periods of time than we ever really experienced here in the States.

KETTLER: An understandable reaction to this.

HUNT: I would say so, yes. So, Jackie, one part of the story that I find really interesting is the comparison between the two different types of governments that we're talking about here, right? That we speak the same language, but our governments work very differently. And the, the impacts that those differences might have had on how these scandals played out. So one thing that I think is important to emphasize here is what's going on in British politics at the time where, you know, after Johnson leaves as prime minister and we'll get to his downfall in just a second, uh, you have this sort of procession of failed successors from different parties. So just to give you an example, in the 20 years before Theresa May is prime Minister, you have three different prime ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. And then in the ten years after that, you have six different prime ministers Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak, Keir Starmer and now Andy Burnham.

KETTLER: Oh boy.

HUNT: It's kind of a wild succession of leaders. I wonder, Jackie, if you feel like this is illustrative, maybe of a key difference in sort of how world leaders operate with Boris Johnson as prime minister. And obviously, Newsom was a governor, but I think more similar in some ways to how we think about presidents in the U.S..

KETTLER: Well, let me dust off my British politics class from 20 years ago to see if we can dig into this.

HUNT: Still more training than I have. So you're our British correspondent here.

KETTLER: Oh, boy. Well, so when we're thinking about the parliamentary system, you have the Fuzed legislative and executive branches, right? When you elect the members of Parliament, they form a government. And so the majority party, the leader of that majority party becomes the Prime Minister.

HUNT: So this is different from you know, we have obviously a completely separate election for the executive branch, for the president, in this case, the elections to Parliament essentially determine who would be the Prime Minister. So like we have, you know, we're recording this just a few days before the midterm elections. This would be

like if the leader of whichever party like Hakeem Jeffries, let's say, if the Democrats win the House, he becomes prime minister in a kind of British system, right.

KETTLER: And becomes head of government in that way. And so the cabinet are all members of Parliament. And this means that it's much easier to see changes in this leadership, which can be a bit wild.

HUNT: It can I mean, it does make it a little easier to have what we would call accountability, right? I mean, you know, a lot of these prime ministers that I just sort of rattled off that we've had over the last ten years have been engulfed in one scandal or another. It makes it easier to kind of change horses without, you know, having to go through an entire new election. Right?

KETTLER: Right. And you don't have to wait several years to hold, you know, for that another election to see a change. You don't have to wait for the next election.

HUNT: And so, you know, our presidential system, there are things on both sides of the ledger, right? Some some advantages and disadvantages. One potential advantage is it's a little more stable, right, in terms of executive power. But there's a reason we have in the U.S. never successfully impeached a president and removed them from office, right? Whereas they've had like, like 16 prime ministers in the last 30 years.

KETTLER: It does mean that in the US, we could be stuck with a very unpopular president for a number of years.

HUNT: It does it until.

KETTLER: Their term ends.

HUNT: And this, Jackie, I think, extends to what really caught my eye as a key difference, which is the specific ways in which Newsom and Johnson were held accountable and responsible. So, you know, both actually faced elections to decide their fates. We talked already about the recall for Newsom, this sort of statewide decision that was held by the voters themselves, and then what's called a vote of no confidence in the UK for for Johnson, which took place in June of 2022 after the dust had settled on this kind of cascade of investigations.

KETTLER: So in a vote of no confidence, there is a vote held in Parliament, but only by members of the Prime Minister's party, since, again, the party is the official governing body that formed the government.

HUNT: Right. So this is again, not like an impeachment vote for the president, where the whole Congress weighs in in this case, right. Johnson is the party leader. He's not elected nationwide. He's just elected by his district. Like, say, Mike Johnson, the speaker for the Republicans in Congress. But this makes the outcome of the vote that happened all that more interesting to me. Johnson does survive the vote of no confidence that happens in 2022, but by a vote of 211 to 148, meaning that over 40% of conservative members of parliament said they had no confidence in him or his government.

KETTLER: Members of his own party. That's pretty incredible compared to, say, Donald Trump's two impeachments were just a small handful of Republicans supported getting rid of him. You know, Charlie, this is all pretty astounding. Almost as astounding as the fact that Johnson still has his job after all this came out.

HUNT: It is, although it didn't last for too long. Even though Johnson technically survives the no confidence vote, he ends up resigning about a month later because of another scandal. In this case, some serious sexual misconduct allegations against Johnson's deputy chief whip, Chris Pincher. Two of Johnson's top cabinet ministers resigned after these new revelations came out, including Rishi Sunak, another future prime minister. Johnson initially said he didn't know about these allegations. Again, another classic. But later evidence came out that he definitely did know about them beforehand. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back. At this point, Johnson hasn't had a positive approval rating since the summer of 2020, and it's plummeted over the course of these investigations. He resigns officially in July of 2022.

JOHNSON: It is clearly now the will of the parliamentary Conservative Party that there should be a new leader of that party, and therefore a new prime minister.

KETTLER: It seems probable here that this final scandal with his deputy whip is what finishes him. But likely, what the bigger problem is for Johnson is that by the time this all comes out, his reputation in the country and within the party is so damaged beyond repair that perhaps there's no coming back from it.

HUNT: Jackie. Never before in our show has the term party favors been more appropriate.

KETTLER: Oh, God. I can't even begin to imagine.

HUNT: So first, Jackie, you know, right off the bat, one thing I did not realize until I did this research for the scandal is that the British press actually refers to this whole saga as Partygate.

KETTLER: What? I did not realize that the gate descriptor put after every scandal had made it across the Atlantic Ocean.

HUNT: Yeah, it's another great legacy for President Nixon. So another important and occasionally amusing element here. It is not just that these lockdown parties were happening or happening frequently. It is that time after time, they were reportedly raucous occasions, according to the Gray Report. So, Jackie, many of the events in question here saw people drinking excessively, something Miss Gray said was, quote, not appropriate in the professional workplace at any time.

KETTLER: I would probably agree with that.

HUNT: In fact, according to the report, quote, every one of the events investigated by the report featured alcohol.

KETTLER: I mean, it was 2020, I suppose.

HUNT: Yeah. That's true, that's true. One great example at a leaving do. I love that they're called that at a leaving do. On June 18th, 2020, the report noted that one attendee got sick after drinking too much like sick, sick, and afterwards, two other attendees got into a minor altercation.

KETTLER: Oh dear.

HUNT: Another one was the morning after the Christmas party. We talked about. On December 18th, a cleaner reported finding red wine had been spilled up the wall and on a number of boxes of photocopier paper.

KETTLER: Oh no. Well, I guess at least it wasn't toilet paper.

HUNT: Yeah, that's a good point. And then on the big party they had the night before Prince Philip's funeral, staff partied until 4:35 a.m..

KETTLER: Oh my God. Like, I mean, I'm just I'm impressed. They have the energy, I suppose. I mean, wow. Okay.

HUNT: Yeah. It's pretty unbelievable. One more. And my personal favorite. A party that, according to Sue Grays report, took place in the flat above ten Downing on November 13th, 2020, with food, alcohol and loud ABBA music. Her report said a meeting, quote unquote, was held in the Downing Street flat involving Johnson and five political special advisers to discuss the resignations of two senior number ten aides that day, Johnson's chief of staff, Dominic Cummings, and the director of communications, Lee Cain. Gray said that the meeting began after 6 p.m.. Johnson joined them at 8 p.m., and the discussions, quote, carried on later into the evening with food and alcohol available.

KETTLER: I mean, maybe this one is a little bit more of an argument that work was actually being done and it wasn't just a party, but okay, at least perhaps we all can agree that ABBA was a great choice.

ABBA: You can dance. You can dance having the time of your life.

HUNT: This episode was written by me, Charlie Hunt, and my co-host, Jackie Cutler. It was produced and edited by me with additional production and editing support from Sidney Snyder. Our theme music is by Dear Room, with other incidental sound from Shutterstock music and blue Dot sessions. Key sources for this episode included the San Francisco Chronicle and Cal Matters for the French Laundry debacle and the BBC, ITV news, The Telegraph, the Daily Mirror and, of course, the official Sue gray report on Partygate.

KETTLER: Next time on Scandalized the politician that couldn't stop sending gross photos and messages.

MEDIA CLIP: It came from Congressman Anthony Weiner's Twitter account over the weekend. A photo of an anonymous man's bulging underwear. The lewd picture, immediately deleted from Weiner's account was sent to this 21 year old Seattle college student, but also available to the public to view on Twitter.

KETTLER: We discuss what this cautionary tale tells us about sex scandals, the shocking transparency of the social media age, and the evolution of the MeToo movement.