

Is Starmer's Recent Donation Controversy the Final Nail in the Coffin for our Trust in Politics?

News of the Labour party's expensive freebies last month has raised questions about the hypocrisy of our latest government. But can the Starmer cabinet's acceptance of lavish gifts really be called a 'scandal'?

After 14 consecutive years of Conservative rule where reputations were shattered by the likes of 'Partygate' and the Downing Street refurbishment controversy, standards in public office were a key debate in the most recent election, in which Sir Kier Starmer (Labour) became Prime Minister. Due to his promised commitment to ending the 'chaos of sleaze' in parliament - which included criticism of Boris Johnson over his extortionate use of the Conservative Party budget to fund refurbishment of the PM's Downing Street flat - hopes were high that Starmer's government would be free of such controversy.

However, in September this year it was discovered that Starmer had accepted over £107,000 of gifts, benefits and hospitality (including expensive football and concert tickets - we're talking corporate box at Arsenal games and Taylor Swift eras tour!) since the 2019 general election. This was discovered after an inquiry into his failure to declare thousands of pounds worth of gifts from party donor Baron Ali which were used to purchase clothes for himself, his wife, and his cabinet members.

But does this actually matter? As George Eaton, senior political editor for *The New Statesman* argues, no parliamentary rules were actually broken here, and there's no evidence suggesting that those offering gifts, like Baron Ali, were asking for favours in return. Therefore, can we actually call this recent series of events a 'scandal' as such? Or is it more of a demonstration of corruption within the wider political lobbying system, extending far beyond the control of the likes of Starmer and Johnson? After all, the vast majority of high-profile politicians accept gifts of some sort, so what's the issue?...

The main problem lies with the distasteful timing of this revelation as the Starmer government push their message of budget austerity: for example, their announcement of cuts to the Winter Fuel Payment and criticism of the impact this may have on elderly citizens. Certainly, alarm bells of hypocrisy are ringing here, as it's clear that the Labour party show no inclination of tightening the purse strings on their own finances, and have no consideration of how unfair this appears to the ordinary working people they are meant to represent. It will be interesting to see how this plays out when the budget

is announced in the near future - how can we expect people to make sacrifices when those insisting they do so are not leading by example?

On a wider scale, this controversy acts as a reminder of corruption within the political system. In his article for *The Conversation*, Sam Power, Lecturer in Politics at The University of Bristol, explains how the gifting epidemic reiterates the way in which 'the very rich have a proximity to power that others simply don't'. Whilst there may be no evidence of a direct link between donations and gifts and pushing certain policies, the current lobbying system results in the same voices and priorities being heard by MPs, and the policy preferences that reflect these seeing higher representation.

Whichever way you see it, it's clear that the UK's system of political financing and lobbying needs a rethink, but just how much of an upheaval this should be is still up for debate. The Labour donation scandal (if we can call it this) and the controversies of previous governments risk the general public's trust in politicians to act in their best interests, in an era where so many are already losing faith in increasingly out-of-touch leadership and policy-making. All in all, these issues beg the question: is a truly representative, hypocrisy-free governing body ever going to be a reality? And I think many of us are tired of waiting to find out, only to be let down again and again.