

UK Prime Minister Starmer survives vote to investigate whether he misled parliament, but Mandelson/Epstein crisis deepens

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UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer survived the latest parliamentary confrontation over the Mandelson/Epstein affair this week, but his position is increasingly untenable.

In a House of Commons statement Monday, Starmer defended his handling of his appointment of Peter Mandelson as UK Ambassador to Washington, maintaining that it had been carried out with “full due process”.

Before handing Mandelson the job in December 2024, Starmer was fully aware of his intimate connections with the billionaire child sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, including Mandelson’s continued relationship with the paedophile even after he was convicted and jailed.

As more revelations came out, leading to Mandelson’s arrest, Starmer’s chief of staff Morgan McSweeney resigned in February this year to take the heat off the prime minister.

This month, the *Guardian* revealed that in January last year the UK Security Vetting Service informed the Foreign Office that risk factors involving Mandelson meant his clearance for one of the most critical posts in the state apparatus should be denied.

Starmer found another scapegoat: Sir Olly Robbins, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and head of the diplomatic service, who was sacked. The prime minister insisted he was not told of Mandelson failing vetting until as late as April 14 this year.

This set the stage for Robbins, who appeared last week, his predecessor Philip Barton, and McSweeney to be called to testify before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

Robbins worsened problems for Starmer, telling the committee that FCDO officials were under “constant pressure” from Downing Street over the decision to appoint Mandelson.

Barton said he did not recall being informed of Mandelson’s failed vetting clearance, and largely backed up Starmer’s case, saying that while there was pressure from Downing Street to get Mandelson appointed quickly, this

was not meant to bypass the security vetting of Mandelson.

McSweeney did all he could to exonerate Starmer. Appointing Mandelson “was a serious error of judgment,” he said. “I advised the prime minister in support of that appointment and I was wrong to do so.” McSweeney claimed that he too was largely in the dark about the extent of Mandelson’s association with Epstein, saying, “But as a chief of staff, and if you’re a political adviser, you’re also relying on the information being presented to you.”

Echoing Barton, he said of allegations that Downing Street wanted to avoid vetting Mandelson, “there is a real difference between asking people to act at pace and asking people to lower standards. And we never did that...”

Later Tuesday evening, Conservatives leader Kemi Badenoch, backed by Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey and other opposition parties, forced a vote on whether Starmer should be referred to a detailed inquiry by the Commons Privileges Committee over his claim that Mandelson was appointed according to “due process”.

Four years ago, with Starmer then leader of the opposition, he had pushed a similar motion against Boris Johnson over misleading Parliament about COVID-19 lockdown breaches—specifically the Downing Street “Partygate” scandal. This was after Johnson repeatedly and falsely told the House of Commons that “All guidance was followed”.

The vote on whether to refer Starmer was won comfortably by the prime minister, with a majority of 335 to 223. Such were the stakes that the Labour leader imposed a three-line whip on his MPs, treating the vote as a matter of confidence.

However, Labour has 403 MPs and a current working majority of 165, so a significant number still chose not to back him in the vote. Fifty-three Labour MPs abstained or were absent, such as Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper, who was abroad, while 14 MPs, mainly from the much-reduced Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), voted with the Tories.

The safe “rebellion” by the SCG only underscores their

spinelessness, after capitulating to Starmer all down the line ever since he took over the Labour leadership from former SCG leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in order to remain in the party.

Corbyn's former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell made clear that his voting against Starmer was meant to preserve the Labour Party as a vital prop of British imperialism.

McDonnell declared, "I did that because when someone is under attack like this, they should not run away from the attack; they should face it with confidence... My hon. Friend [Labour MP Karl Turner] knows as well as I do that the Privileges Committee would deal with this matter fairly, and I believe that the Labour Party would come out stronger as a result."

Another SCG member, Nadia Whittome, said, "If we are to preserve what little trust still remains in our political system, it is vital that Ministers demonstrate the utmost transparency." She would have liked "nothing more than for us to be focusing on what the Government has delivered [!] ... Unfortunately, it is because of serious mistakes made by No. 10, such as appointing Peter Mandelson, that those achievements are being overshadowed."

Starmer has been given a very short breathing space. The May 7 local elections are predicted to see Labour fall to as low as fourth place in some polls, with a staggering loss of up to 1,850 seats. The Conservatives will also suffer heavy losses, up to 600 seats.

The main beneficiaries will be the far-right Reform UK, who are set to win up to 1,550 seats, and the Greens, who could gain 500.

How brazen the discussion is in ruling circles of Starmer being removed was revealed in the leaked comments of Sir Christian Turner, Mandelson's successor as US Ambassador.

The *Financial Times* revealed this week that Turner, speaking to a group of UK sixth-form students visiting the US in early February, had told them it was "extraordinary" that the Epstein scandal had "brought down a senior member of the royal family [Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor], a British ambassador to Washington, potentially the prime minister, and yet here in the US, it really hasn't touched anybody".

In an extraordinary breach of protocol, addressing Starmer's premiership, he told the youth that "at one stage he was pretty clearly on the ropes" and his future looked "quite touch and go".

To start the process of removing him would require 80 MPs to declare their opposition in writing, which was "still quite difficult", he continued. Therefore, "The moment I would look to is the May elections. If Labour does very badly... I suspect the party will be able to go over that

threshold and remove him—seems to me to be the conventional thinking."

The *Times* reported Thursday that former deputy prime minister Angela Rayner, a representative of the party's "soft left", is "weighing up mounting a direct challenge" after the results. According to sources, "the strength of an intervention by Rayner, and whether she would call for Starmer to resign, would depend on the scale of the losses."

For the working class, the issue is not the personal fate of Starmer, or his replacement by another right-wing Labourite—whether parading as a "soft-left", or a Blairite such as Wes Streeting, Rachel Reeves or Yvette Cooper. None of these forces will change the fact that Labour is a right-wing, pro-business government of austerity and militarism.

The central danger is that, in the absence of a movement of the working class, based on a socialist programme and independent of any faction of the ruling elite, the main beneficiary of the hostility to the Starmer government to date is Reform UK. Nigel Farage's party has been able to channel discontent behind an anti-immigrant agenda as it prepares to step up the offensive against workers to fund huge increases in military spending.

There is no parliamentary solution to this crisis, with no other party, including the Greens—who present themselves as a left-wing alternative—representing a genuine alternative. The central issue facing workers and youth is building their own party, the Socialist Equality Party.



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