

Starmer faces potential leadership challenge from Blairite Health Secretary Wes Streeting

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The crisis engulfing Britain's Labour government escalated Wednesday amid reports that Health Secretary Wes Streeting, a leading Blairite, is preparing to resign to launch a leadership challenge against Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

The *Times* reported Streeting's move Wednesday morning, just minutes before the monarch, King Charles III, outlined in his King's Speech the legislative agenda Starmer is putting forward for the new session of Parliament. Streeting held a 16-minute meeting—described as a “showdown”—with Starmer in Downing Street just prior to both attending Parliament to hear the speech.

Despite Starmer saying on Wednesday he had “confidence” in Streeting as health minister, the *Financial Times* reported a “senior minister close to Starmer” saying “it was ‘plausible to likely’ that Streeting would resign his ministerial role and formally announce a challenge on Thursday.”

A leadership challenge has been trailed for months, with many MPs fearing for their careers given Labour's lagging behind the far-right Reform UK in the polls. Labour's rout in the local elections across England last week, and in those to the devolved Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, intensified those concerns. General Election polling in the aftermath shows Reform on 28 percent—12 points ahead of Labour.

The defeat triggered a steady stream of ultimately 91 MPs (around a quarter of the parliamentary party) declaring that Starmer should either go immediately or announce his departure to prepare an “orderly transition” to a new leadership. Further weakening the prime minister, a handful of junior ministers—some of them allies of Streeting—resigned.

Starmer used a speech on Monday to make clear he would not resign, doubling down at Tuesday's weekly Cabinet meeting, telling ministers to put up or shut up: “The Labour Party has a process for challenging a leader and that has not been triggered... The country expects us to get on with governing. That is what I am doing and what we must do as a cabinet.” He immediately moved on to the next business,

refusing to allow any discussion on the matter.

According to sources, Streeting had already begun “ringing round MPs” to secure the 81 nominations required to trigger a leadership contest. It is not clear if he has been successful. According to one Starmer-supporting Cabinet minister, “We know Wes will go over the top tomorrow but he doesn't have the numbers... he's currently only on about 30.”

Starmer insists that him continuing as prime minister is in the interests of the financial oligarchy, which backed him into power based on his promise of restoring “stability” after years of political turmoil under the Conservatives. He declared Monday, “I take responsibility for navigating us through a world that is more dangerous than at any time in my life. And I take responsibility for not walking away. Not plunging our country into chaos.”

Under Labour's leadership contest rules, an incumbent leader is automatically included—provided they choose to stand—and does not require nominations to field a challenge. In response to MPs demanding his head, a group of 111 Labour MPs have signed a letter backing the prime minister.

But Starmer, hated by millions for his continuation of the austerity and militarist agenda of the Tories—and with Labour on the verge of oblivion—is in no position to dictate what happens.

Such is the concern in ruling circles that Buckingham Palace raised with the government whether the King's Speech should even go ahead. That such a move—with vast constitutional implications—was even raised by the monarchy, ever attuned to threats to the bourgeoisie, points to a severe crisis of rule.

Politico reported one source saying, “It is very embarrassing for the king that his government is such a shambles that he has to read out something that may or may not still be the government's program by the end of the week.” Another person familiar with the matter revealed the Palace had to be “told [by the government] that it was constitutionally correct for the king to open parliament on Wednesday as planned”.

The move by Labour's Blairites to replace Starmer with Streeting is aimed at heading off any candidate from the "soft left", who would likely have the backing of the majority of Labour's MPs. Andy Burnham, the Greater Manchester mayor, is the runaway "soft left" preference, but he is not currently an MP and so currently ineligible.

The *Financial Times* noted that in Burnham's absence, if Streeting enlisted "enough support among MPs to launch a challenge, he would face competition from at least one candidate from the centre-left." Among the names cited were Ed Miliband, now energy secretary and a former party leader (2010-2015), and Angela Rayner, Starmer's former deputy prime minister, who remains under investigation over her tax affairs.

The Labour "left" is just as worried as Starmer about maintaining economic stability for the capitalist class, while also concerned to give the affair a more "democratic" façade.

"Left" John McDonnell—Jeremy Corbyn's former Shadow Chancellor—who suffered two coups at the hands of the Blairites before meekly handing the leadership of the party to Starmer—bleated on Tuesday on X, "I called for time for serious discussion, no precipitous coup & fully democratic process if leadership election."

Socialist Campaign Group secretary Richard Burgon chimed in, "we need an orderly timetable for Keir's departure and a proper democratic leadership election — not a Wes Streeting-organised palace coup."

The demand for an "orderly" transition to a new leader is shared by the *Financial Times*, which opines that if Starmer must leave, his commitment to the economic "stability" of the City of London must be preserved. Above all, there must be no "relaxation of [Chancellor Rachel] Reeves' 'ironclad' fiscal rules." On this basis, in what could be Starmer's last significant act, his King's Speech agenda offered no respite to a working class being crushed by a cost of living crisis much worsened by the Iran war.

The newspaper noted dismay in the bond markets Tuesday after calls mounted among MPs for Starmer's removal, with the UK's benchmark 10-year borrowing costs rising above 5 percent, to their highest level since 2008. It warned, "Yields on 30-year gilts climbed as high as 5.81 percent, the highest since 1998."

Under these conditions, it is only the Blairites who think the promotion of Streeting into Downing Street is a viable strategy. A Streeting premiership would only accelerate the UK's crisis of rule.

Largely disliked even in Labour's ranks, he is hated by millions of workers due to his constant attacks on the National Health Service and its 1.4 million workers. Fifty thousand resident doctors are currently battling Streeting's

attempts to keep pay well below the benchmark of 20 years ago, and senior doctors are balloting for industrial action this week.

At the last election, Streeting only kept his east London seat by 500 votes, nearly losing it to a candidate fighting on a pro-Palestine ticket, who ran against Streeting's backing of Israel's Gaza genocide.

Moreover, the scandal surrounding New Labour architect Peter Mandelson's connections to convicted billionaire paedophile Jeffrey Epstein has recently highlighted the close political relationship between Mandelson and Streeting. Mandelson mentored Streeting for years as a true-blue Blairite, with Streeting referring to the man who boasted of being "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich" as a "legend".

The fact that this man could conceivably become Labour leader and prime minister points to the putrid state of the Labour Party, and its advanced stage of political collapse. The grave danger is that its death agony is currently preparing the way for even more right-wing forces in Reform UK and the Tories.

As the WSWS explained in its May 8 Perspective, this "is a devastating indictment of what has passed for the 'left'," above all Jeremy Corbyn, and his "repeated sabotage of the striving by workers for a left-wing alternative."

Corbyn made a rare effort to pick up his pen this week, issuing a few pro-forma criticisms of Starmer in a *Tribune* article before concluding "we have hope on our side."

Writing as the leader of Your Party—but referring to himself only as "the Member of Parliament for Islington North and a member of the Independent Alliance group of MPs"—he barely referenced the dismal election campaign (centred on backing Independents and Greens) of his organisation, which has all but ceased to exist within six months of its founding conference.



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