



By: **Harvey Morris**

Sentencing of Hong Kong activist overshadows UK's latest China reset



The sentencing of Hong Kong's pro-democracy media publisher **Jimmy Lai** has cast a shadow over the UK's latest China reset just weeks after Prime Minister Keir Starmer was in Beijing to deepen economic ties.

The 78-year-old Lai, a British citizen and long-standing critic of Beijing, was jailed for 20 years in what UK Foreign Secretary **Yvette Cooper** said amounted to a life sentence for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

It was the longest sentence handed down under the former British colony's Beijing-imposed national security law after a trial at which Lai was accused of colluding with foreign forces to mastermind sedition.

Lai's treatment has been condemned internationally by governments and rights groups. It has a particular significance for the UK, however, given his British citizenship and the further erosion of the 'one country, two systems' principle adopted in 1997 when the colony was handed over.

Fresh ammunition for UK's China sceptics

The sentencing provided fresh ammunition for the UK's China sceptics who had opposed Starmer's decision to go ahead with a visit to Beijing in January, the month after Lai was found guilty by a Hong Kong court.

It came at a time when Starmer's leadership was already looking vulnerable amid the latest revelations about the potentially criminal ties between convicted American paedophile Jeffrey Epstein and **Peter Mandelson**, the UK's former ambassador to Washington appointed by the prime minister.

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Conservative opposition leader **Kemi Badenoch** seized on Lai's sentencing to further

question Starmer's judgement and to accuse him of weakness for having failed to secure the Hong Kong activist's release.

But, beyond the further potential damage to Starmer's leadership, where does the Lai affair leave the government's 'no choice' decision to foster better ties with Beijing?

MI5 warns of foreign interference in UK universities

Since the prime minister returned home from his talks with President Xi Jinping with relatively modest benefits to show from the visit, a new warning was issued about the extent of the Chinese threat to British universities.

After they received a briefing last week from the head of the MI5 internal security agency, university leaders were instructed by ministers to report threats of foreign interference directly to the government and security services. The move was seen as principally directed at threats from China.

MI5 director-general Ken McCallum had told vice-chancellors that the tactics of hostile powers included the intimidation of staff, approaches through professional networking sites and financial inducements.

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His warning followed allegations that some universities had censored academic research touching on topics sensitive to China in order to retain a lucrative flow of Chinese students, who represent a quarter of the total at UK institutions.

Education is just one area in which the government has been accused of putting potential economic benefits above security and human rights in its bid to secure a more

productive relationship with Beijing.

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Criticism over China visit and Lai's detention

Just days before his sentencing, the former media boss's British son, **Sebastian Lai**, criticised Starmer for failing to place conditions on his father's release during his China visit.

"The trip was a big thing to have been given away," he told a parliamentary hearing.

He also linked the failure to win his father's release to the ongoing controversy concerning the government's go-ahead for China's new super-embassy in London despite lingering security concerns.

Starmer told parliament this month that in his meeting with President Xi he had pressed for the release of Lai, founder of the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, who had been held for more than five years prior to his sentencing.

Starmer and Xi called for a closer strategic partnership during the first visit to China by a UK prime minister in eight years

He defended his strategy by stressing that engaging at the highest level offered a better chance of progress than refusing to meet - Chinese leaders.

He had ended the visit, however, with Lai still detained and with what opponents dismissed as limited concessions from China, having bowed to Beijing's wishes on its London embassy.

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UK prime minister in eight years.

The immediate tangible benefits for the UK included visa-free access for UK visitors, a halving of tariffs on Scotch whisky and the removal of sanctions on half a dozen parliamentarians, along with the promise of greater access to the Chinese market for the UK's services sector.

UK-China relations at risk of being put back on ice

The challenge for Starmer in the harsh sentencing of Lai is that it will prompt yet another reappraisal of the relationship with China so soon after he was celebrating progress.

The prime minister is generally credited with having been more sure-footed in his dealings on foreign affairs and with leaders such as Donald Trump and Xi Jinping, than he has on issues closer to home.



The government would rapidly engage with China on the Lai case - Yvette Cooper

His government's immediate response to the sentencing, aside from foreign minister Cooper's condemnation, was to expand a **visa programme** for Hong Kong residents seeking to move to the UK.

Almost 170,000 have moved to the UK since 2020 under the British National (Overseas) visa scheme following the imposition of Beijing's national security law.

China's embassy in London condemned the move as further interference in the internal affairs of Hong Kong and China. Continued attempts to play "the BNO trick" were despicable and sinister, a statement said.

Unless such interference ceased, the UK would "only bring shame on itself and suffer the consequences of its own actions."

Cooper said the government would rapidly engage with China on the Lai case, although it was difficult to see what pressure London might exert without putting the strategic partnership goal into reverse.

Short of the unlikely prospect of China commuting the sentence, the UK has limited tools of persuasion at its disposal.

Residents near the new embassy site in London, who continue to oppose the development, are pursuing a judicial review of the go-ahead for the project.

Any government row back on that or other existing bilateral agreements would almost certainly put relations with Beijing back on ice.