



By: TA | AP Insight

Starmer's Mandelson nightmare never ends



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer probably wishes he had never heard the name Peter Mandelson.

Starmer is again facing questions over his future. And again, it's do with his misguided decision to appoint a self-professed "best pal" of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein to the plummiest of plum jobs in U.K. diplomacy – ambassador to the United States.

Two months ago when he was **last imperiled** over the appointment in late 2024, it was his judgment that was in question. Enough for some in his Labour Party, including its leader in Scotland, to urge him to stand down.

Now, he's facing **accusations** that he misled Parliament over how Mandelson cleared the official hurdles to get the job in the first place.

If he's found to have done so, he will be on very thin ice, not least because Starmer put integrity at the heart of his pitch to the British electorate at the July 2024 election to replace the scandal-plagued Conservatives.

"Starmer set himself up as the guy who always followed the rules, in stark contrast to, say, Boris Johnson, and he came to power effectively promising to 'drain the swamp'," said Tim Bale, politics professor at Queen Mary University of London.

"Because of that, the latest revelations in the unholy mess created by his ill-judged appointment of Peter Mandelson mean that many voters now see him not only as a liar but as a hypocrite – and hypocrisy is one of the worst sins that any British politician can possibly commit," he added.

The vetting bombshell

On Thursday, **The Guardian** newspaper revealed that Mandelson, 72, failed security vetting before he took up the ambassadorial post in early 2025.

That's a problem for Starmer, who has told Parliament that "full due process" was

observed.

The government stressed that Starmer and other ministers only found out earlier this week that the Foreign Office had cleared Mandelson for the job despite the assessment.

The **fallout** quickly led to the resignation of the Foreign Office's top civil servant, Olly Robbins.

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Starmer is trying to fend off questions about what he did or didn't know about the vetting process, which would have involved an assessment of **Mandelson's suitability** for the role in light of questions over his finances, his relationships, including that with Epstein, and his personality.

People familiar with the vetting process said that is standard practice for ministers not to be told, because of the sensitive personal information involved.

They said the checks don't produce a binary pass or fail, but a risk-based assessment that leaves a final decision to senior officials like Robbins.

Starmer is also facing questions over whether he had effectively given direction to officials to sidestep concerns over Mandelson.

Starmer said he is "absolutely furious" that he was kept in the dark, calling it "staggering" and "unforgivable." He will make a statement to Parliament on Monday.

Robbins, who was effectively fired by Starmer, is due to address lawmakers on Tuesday and may give a very different version of events.

Not Mandelson again

Mandelson was a **high-risk appointment**, given

he had twice resigned from Labour governments for financial or ethical missteps around the turn of the century, and his acquaintance with Epstein, who **died in prison in 2019**.

The **calculation** seemingly made by Starmer was clear: the risk was worth it as Mandelson's lobbying skills and previous trade expertise would help persuade the Trump administration to spare the U.K. from some of the most onerous tariffs.

That appeared to work but by September 2025, the narrative changed after the release of emails that showed that Mandelson had supported Epstein even when he was facing jail for sex offenses.

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However, the release of millions of pages of **Epstein-related documents** by the U.S. Justice Department in January put an end to that.

Starmer's political judgment was questioned after emails in the Epstein files suggested that when Mandelson was a member of the Labour government, in 2009-2010, he had passed on sensitive — and potentially market-moving — government information to the disgraced financier.

British police launched a **criminal probe**, searched Mandelson's two houses in London and western England. **Mandelson was arrested** on Feb. 23 on suspicion of misconduct in public office.

He was released the following morning after more than nine hours of questioning. He has not been charged, has denied any wrongdoing and does not face allegations of sexual misconduct.

Starmer has repeatedly **apologized** to the British public and to the victims of Epstein's sex trafficking for believing what he has termed "Mandelson's lies."

Mandelson nightmare will go on

Despite Starmer's dire personal ratings and the anticipated heavy **electoral defeats** for Labour in a raft of local and regional elections in May, the frenzy around his leadership had died down.

His decision to not get the U.K. directly involved in the war in Iran chimed with the public mood. Now his job is in danger again.



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"This scandal is not ending," said Kemi Badenoch, leader of the main opposition Conservative Party. "He has run out of people to sack, he has run out of places to hide, he has run out of authority. The buck stops with him. His position is untenable and he must go."

Starmer's party commands a large majority in Parliament, so the prime minister's fate depends on what Labour lawmakers think.

On Monday, Starmer will gauge the mood, when he makes his statement. So far, few in his party have said he should go. If more Labour lawmakers put their heads above the parapet following a weekend of campaigning in their local electoral patches, he may be in **real trouble**.

Confidence in a leader can be a fragile thing, no matter how big their majority. Just ask Boris Johnson, who was elected with a thumping majority in 2019 and resigned both as prime minister and as a lawmaker three years later, after a string of scandals.