DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 11.02.2026 | Michèle Auga

The end of the boys' club

The Epstein affair is putting pressure on Keir Starmer. For now, the British prime minister remains in power — but for how long?

The British public has so far associated the name Jeffrey Epstein primarily with Andrew Mountbatton-Windsor, the former Duke of York, and not with their prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, who does not even appear in the investigation files. Nevertheless, the British head of government came under massive pressure after further allegations were published against his former ambassador to Washington, Peter Mandelson. In a figurative sense, he had to part with his queen on the chessboard.

Morgan McSweeny, not only the chief of staff at Downing Street, but also Starmer's closest advisor and campaign manager during the successful 2024 election campaign, cleared the field. As a result, other figures will be thrown into turmoil and will be unable to hold on to their positions due to their contacts with Peter Mandelson. Mandelson, a veteran of the party and a long-time friend of German social democracy, was considered the main architect of New Labour. He was also co-author of the 1999 Schröder-Blair paper, European Union Trade Commissioner, and British Minister of State for Business under Gordon Brown. Many of his acquaintances and friends, not only in London, will have to face uncomfortable questions. Keir Starmer, however, had knowingly sent him to the US – despite his involvement in the Epstein case – and against the advice of his then Foreign Secretary David Lammy.

While it is virtually the duty of opposition leader Kemi Badenoch to demand Starmer's resignation due to his obvious misjudgement, many members of the ruling party are wondering whether the prime minister either lacked common sense or whether the circle of advisors in Downing Street, who, in their view, were acting with a siege mentality, could actually have been so unscrupulous. For he apparently prioritised the supposed political success of a charm offensive toward Donald Trump over the high risk to his own government. In both cases, Starmer must explain himself.

Shortcomings that are hard to recover from

Just a few days after Starmer admitted in the House of Commons that he had known about Mandelson's ongoing business relationship with Epstein, Starmer's resignation initially seemed a foregone conclusion. Once again, he managed to escape this fate. Starmer, who appeared weary of office, decided to continue for one reason alone: otherwise, the United Kingdom would have been plunged into another crisis of unprecedented proportions. The memories of the Brexit years, Boris Johnson's *Party-Gate* scandal, and Liz Truss' budget mess are still too fresh. The British people were reminded of how volatile the situation in their G7 country is just this past summer. At that time, the British pound lost value on the stock markets simply because Finance Minister Reeves briefly lost her composure and was in tears in the House of Commons. After five prime ministers in ten years, the UK is in need of stability and cannot afford another government crisis that would drive up the cost of necessary borrowing even further. Bankers in the City of London are genuinely afraid of the ruling party drifting back to the left, from whose clutches McSweeny and Starmer had only just managed to free them with great difficulty.

While Scottish First Minister Anas Sarwar, who is in the midst of a very difficult election campaign, has already distanced himself from Starmer, the cabinet in London has backed its leader. Reassuring and cautionary voices have also come from the huge parliamentary group, which has 404 members. Pro-Europeans fear for the 'reset' with the EU. A prolonged period of cabinet reshuffling could jeopardise the ongoing talks with the Commission. The Foreign and Defence Ministries are insisting on continuity in order to better support Ukraine in the important phase of the ongoing negotiations with Russia.

It is primarily the members of the parliamentary group who have a lot at stake and who are primarily responsible for domestic political developments in their constituencies – and not for the appointment of the diplomatic corps. The argument is that an investigation by the Security Committee, which is now beginning, will exonerate Starmer. The supporters of the more right-wing Blue Labour faction around their new Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, who has become known as a hard-line migration manager, have been conspicuously quiet so far. Would she be the one to benefit in a possible power struggle over the succession between the moderate Health Secretary Wes Streeting and the former Work and Pensions Secretary Angela Rayner, who is popular with the left-wing unions?

Starmer may have power, but he lacks authority.

The Starmer government came to power with the promise of transparency and credibility, but squandered the trust placed in it within a few weeks due to a lack of tact. At the same time, it suffers from an immense credibility problem. Starmer's many missteps point to a pattern. Political observers even suspect a 'vacuum' at the centre of the government. The technocrat Starmer lacks not only a vision, a political project, but also political judgment. He is no longer able to control the prevailing narrative or the dynamics within his government. Starmer may have power, but he lacks authority. Instead of using his parliamentary majority, it is becoming a burden to him. In a kind of 'WhatsAppification,' Labour MPs exchange views in reportedly over 100 different groups and repeatedly put programmatic pressure on the cabinet chief.

The acceleration of political developments through social media further reduces the prime minister's control. While Starmer consciously attempted to present himself as a traditional politician (which he never was as a former attorney general), politicians of the old school are struggling in this new reality. Starmer saw himself more as an engineer who wanted to repair *Broken Britain*. Now that this project cannot be turned into a success overnight, he is figuratively standing there naked. The MPs owe him nothing. The majority of them are not represented in the House of Commons because of him or his project, but because people no longer wanted to see *Tories* there. The Prime Minister's lack of charisma did the rest.

The assumption is that no one was ever really interested in what the Epstein case meant for the victims involved.

It is not only the Jeffrey Epstein case that is casting a long shadow over Westminster. Starmer and McSweeney are now paying the price for largely failing to allow a generational change and instead believing they had to rely on the old guard from the Tony Blair era. Hardly any new advisors were appointed – and, above all, very few women. The Peter Mandelson case is therefore also representative of the internal power struggle that continues to rage in the Labour Party between the more right-wing Blairites and the representatives of the so-called soft left. It also raises questions about whether

there was any awareness at all of discrimination and violence against women in the innermost circle of power of Downing Street's notorious boys' club. The assumption is that no one was ever really interested in what the Epstein case meant for the victims involved.

The strategic move against Donald Trump that Mandelson's appointment represented simply seemed more important, more significant. And so the accusations are levelled at a prime minister who, like no other before him, has made a name for himself with the first national strategy against violence against women and is promoting the screening of the series *Adolescence* in England's schools. This does nothing to narrow the credibility gap. Now that his most important figure has left the playing field, Starmer is not yet checkmated – but one more wrong move and the game is over.



Michèle Auga
London

Michèle Auga heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in the UK and Ireland. Previously, she headed the Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe/North America sections of the FES in Berlin as well as the FES offices in Mali, the Palestinian Territories and at the United Nations in New York.