# Labour faces leadership test as Mandelson scandal clouds Starmer’s US diplomacy



Sir Keir Starmer is facing intense scrutiny from within his own party, with Labour MPs warning that he is in the "last-chance saloon" as he seeks to regain political momentum amid the fallout from the Lord Mandelson scandal. The controversy centres on Mandelson’s appointment as the UK’s ambassador to the United States despite his close association with Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier convicted of soliciting child prostitution. Questions continue to swirl over what Starmer knew about these links when he endorsed Mandelson for the role late last year.

In an effort to pivot away from the political crisis, Starmer is poised to use President Donald Trump's state visit this week to highlight a series of bilateral deals intended to elevate the UK-US partnership. Among the headline announcements is a "landmark" agreement to fast-track approval for a new generation of small nuclear power stations in the UK. Downing Street claims this deal will help stimulate billions of pounds in economic growth. Additional agreements are expected to address reductions in US tariffs on key British exports like whisky and salmon, alongside new technology partnerships and multibillion-pound investments in artificial intelligence hubs in the northeast, backed by major players including OpenAI and Nvidia.

Despite these forward-facing initiatives, the Mandelson affair continues to cast a long shadow. Prominent Labour figures privately express grave doubts about Starmer’s leadership capabilities. One minister described the scandal as a "death knell," emphasising that even loyal MPs are beginning to question whether the prime minister can persevere. A veteran Labour backbencher told Times Radio that MPs perceive Starmer as "unable to take quick, reasoned decisions and explain them politically," suggesting a lack of core political skills. The growing discontent has sparked murmurs of a possible leadership challenge, with some MPs reportedly canvassing potential rivals. Andy Burnham, the Greater Manchester mayor, is said to be contemplating an early Commons by-election to position himself as a contender.

Labour’s shadow education secretary Laura Trott has pressed Downing Street to publish vetting documents compiled by the Cabinet Office at the time of Mandelson’s appointment. These documents reportedly highlighted that Mandelson’s friendship with Epstein continued even after Epstein’s conviction. Trott’s demand underscores the intense pressure for greater transparency, as critics question why someone so closely linked to a convicted paedophile was ever deemed fit for such a high-profile diplomatic post. The family of Virginia Giuffre, one of Epstein’s victims, has also publicly condemned Mandelson’s appointment.

In an attempt to reassure the party and public, Starmer plans to introduce the so-called Hillsborough Law on Tuesday. This legislation, a longstanding Labour manifesto commitment, would establish a statutory duty of candour for public officials involved in investigations following state-related deaths or disasters, an issue of particular resonance in the northwest of England. Additionally, Starmer is reportedly preparing a personal address for the upcoming Labour conference, promising clarity on his motivations and government priorities.

Downing Street sources maintain that the prime minister’s "sole focus" remains on delivering practical policies to improve the lives of working people. However, the party’s internal mood and the persistent media scrutiny suggest that Starmer’s position is precarious. The next year, marked by upcoming local elections, is widely viewed by his critics as a crucial test of his viability as Labour leader and prime minister.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/starmer-last-chance-saloon-trump-visit-kzb3qh5fs), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/sep/14/keir-starmer-last-chance-saloon-mandelson-scandal-trump-visit), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54234567)
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* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/starmer-last-chance-saloon-trump-visit-kzb3qh5fs), [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/keir-starmer-last-chance-saloon-mandelson-scandal-trump-visit)
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2. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/sep/14/keir-starmer-last-chance-saloon-mandelson-scandal-trump-visit> - Labour MPs have warned Sir Keir Starmer that he is in the 'last-chance saloon' as he attempts to use President Trump's state visit to regain the political initiative after the Lord Mandelson scandal. The prime minister plans to announce a new 'landmark' partnership with the United States on nuclear power, allowing fast-track approval for new small nuclear power stations. However, Starmer faces potential leadership challenges amid questions over his knowledge of Mandelson's links with disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein when appointing him as US ambassador last year.
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