



Starmer's awful autumn

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Emma Kilheeney McSherry summarises two disastrous weeks for Keir Starmer

Sir Keir Starmer enacted a major reshuffle of his cabinet following the resignation on 5 September of Angela Rayner, deputy prime minister (PM) and deputy leader of the Labour Party. Less than 1 week later, on 11 September, he was forced to sack Lord Mandelson, British ambassador to the USA. Then on 15 September, Paul Ovenden – one of Starmer's most important advisers – was forced to resign from his position over a scandal.

Rayner's resignation

Angela Rayner resigned from Starmer's government after an investigation – led by Sir Laurie Magnus, Starmer's adviser on ministerial standards – found that Rayner had breached the ministerial code by failing to pay the necessary tax on the second home she purchased in Hove. In resigning, Rayner said she 'took full responsibility for this error'. Her resignation triggered a cabinet reshuffle, to replace her as deputy PM and secretary of state for housing (Table 1).

Separately, the Labour Party began the process of replacing Rayner as deputy leader of the party. Two

Table 1 Significant changes to Starmer's cabinet after the September reshuffle

MP	Previous position	New position in cabinet
David Lammy	Foreign secretary	Deputy prime minister, lord chancellor and secretary of state for justice
Yvette Cooper	Home secretary	Foreign secretary
Shabana Mahmood	Lord chancellor and secretary of state for justice	Home secretary
Darren Jones	Chief secretary to the Treasury	Chief secretary to the prime minister and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Pat McFadden	Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	Secretary of state for work and pensions
Peter Kyle	Secretary of state for science, innovation and technology	Secretary of state for business and trade
Liz Kendall	Secretary of state for work and pensions	Secretary of state for science, innovation and technology
Steve Reed	Secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs	Secretary of state for housing, communities and local government
Lucy Powell	Leader of the House of Commons	None

MPs secured the support of the necessary 80 MPs to progress to the next round of the deputy leadership election:

- Bridget Phillipson, education secretary.
- Lucy Powell, who had been sacked by Starmer days earlier during the cabinet reshuffle.

To proceed to the party members' vote, Phillipson and Powell need to secure the support of either 5% of constituency Labour parties or three affiliated groups, including two trade unions.

Having been sacked from her position as leader of the House of Commons, Powell is not bound by collective cabinet ministerial responsibility, unlike Phillipson, and she is therefore much freer to criticise Starmer and his government during her campaign to become deputy leader of the party.

David Lammy will remain deputy PM after the new deputy leader of the Labour Party is selected.

Mandelson's sacking

Details released in the media about the extent of Lord Mandelson's close friendship with convicted sex offender, Jeffrey Epstein, led to Starmer's decision to sack him. This was influenced by the chief whip, Jonathan Reynolds, who informed Starmer that over 50 Labour MPs were requesting that Mandelson should be sacked. The sacking left Starmer without a permanent ambassador to the USA during President Trump's state visit to the UK in mid-September. More significantly, Trump got on well with Mandelson, and his departure could have repercussions on future UK-US relations.

Ovenden's resignation

Paul Ovenden, Starmer's director of strategy and former director of communications, was forced to resign as one of the PM's key personal advisers after it was revealed that he had made inappropriate comments of a sexual nature about MP Diane Abbott during a meeting in 2017, while he was working as a Labour press officer. Ovenden released a statement saying he resigned to protect the reputation of Starmer

and to avoid the story distracting from the work of the government.

This resignation is problematic for Starmer, ahead of the Labour Party's annual conference in Liverpool in October, because Ovenden was one of Starmer's key speechwriters and he played a central role in preparing Starmer for election debates.

Why is this so damaging?

Starmer had defended Rayner during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) 2 days before she was forced to resign and the following week, also during PMQs, he defended Mandelson, less than 24 hours before sacking him. In the House of Commons, Starmer endured a 3-hour emergency debate to explain what he knew about Mandelson's relationship with Epstein, after admitting he was aware of their association before appointing him.

Starmer's handling of these crises led to questions being raised about his political judgement and whether he was the right person to lead the Labour Party. While there is no mechanism to trigger a binding vote of no confidence in a Labour leader, an alternative candidate to lead the party could be nominated with the support of 20% of Labour MPs – currently a total of 80. More realistically, if the party remains unhappy with the PM, he could be pressurised into resigning.

Weblinks

Read about the cabinet reshuffle in more detail:

<https://tinyurl.com/559dfdmw>

Listen to 'The Mandelson Misjudgement' podcast, produced by the Institute for Government:

<https://tinyurl.com/p4ap28n5>

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