

## Niall Ferguson: Epstein Didn't Break Starmer, But It May Finish Him

The British prime minister's unpopularity predates Epstein. What the scandal has done is accelerate the reckoning for a leader short on authority and allies.



BRITAIN'S PRIME MINISTER KEIR STARMER ARRIVES AT WINDSOR CASTLE ON FEBRUARY 11, 2026. (ANDREW MATTHEWS/POOL PHOTO VIA AP)

## By Niall Ferguson

“[Are we the Italians?](#)” was the best British politics meme I’ve seen for a while. (If you missed “[Are we the baddies?](#),” I can’t help you. Do keep up.)

If Sir Keir Starmer is driven from 10 Downing Street by (among other things) the Jeffrey Epstein scandal, it will bring the total number of prime ministers Britain has had in the past 10 years to seven (David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak, and Starmer).

That is certainly reminiscent of Italian politics in the second half of the 20th century. The Italians had seven prime ministers in 10 years not once but twice: in the 1950s and the 1990s. (I won’t list them all; life’s too short. The only name you’d recognize would be Silvio Berlusconi.) But the resemblance is superficial. British politics is much funnier than Italian politics has ever been. It is also much more British to behave this way than most Americans realize.

British readers of a certain age will get the allusion if I say our politics increasingly remind me of the *Carry On* films. Made on low budgets between the 1950s and the 1990s and starring a generation of English comic actors, the *Carry On* films combined seaside slapstick with salacious humor. The best of the genre was [Carry On Up the Khyber](#), a magnificently pre-woke send-up of the British Raj. ([Kenneth Williams](#) steals the show as the Khasi of Kalabar.)

As the last few months of political crisis have unfolded, we have all been watching *Carry On and Keep Calm*. It’s as if the writers decided to reform the old troupe and reenact the politics of the 1970s as a kind of feature-length farce, but with especially preposterous casting. Starmer plays [Harold Wilson](#), the Labour prime minister who is in real life Starmer’s political hero, but who was as artful as Starmer is hapless. Nigel Farage, the beer-swigging, fag-smoking leader of the populist Reform UK, is a very unlikely [Enoch Powell](#)—the austere Cambridge classicist who was Britain’s first anti-immigration

demagogue. At first sight most implausibly of all, Kemi Badenoch—herself the daughter of Nigerians—[plays Margaret Thatcher](#), the free-market Iron Lady who led Britain out of the postwar doldrums.

The [Jeffrey Epstein scandal](#) is, of course, no laughing matter. Young girls were lured by Epstein and his accomplices into sexual exploitation. Crimes were committed. [Lives were destroyed](#). And then there was a sustained cover-up.

And yet the minute the Epstein saga comes into contact with British politics—I leave aside the shameful royal dimension of the [Andrew formerly known as Prince](#)—there is an undeniably farcical aspect.

The most successful farce in the history of London’s West End was [No Sex Please, We’re British](#), which premiered in 1971 and ran until 1987. The humor of the play derives from a hapless newlywed couple who purchase some Scandinavian glassware by mail order, only to have their home instead inundated with Scandinavian pornography—photographs, books, films, and even scantily clad girls. Being English, the couple are desperate to conceal the evidence that they might have any interest whatsoever in sex.

“No Sex Please, I’m Starmer” has summed up the prime minister’s predicament for the past few weeks—which must have felt to him like months.

The backstory begins [in December 2024](#), when Starmer was persuaded to appoint the veteran Labour politician, Lord Peter Mandelson, to be his ambassador to Washington, D.C. The rationale was obvious. As a man famous for his social connections to high society on both sides of the Atlantic—he was cavorting on oligarchs’ yachts while the priggish Starmer was swotting up on human-rights law—Mandelson was seen as the ideal emissary to the court of King Donald I. He was to be Our Man at Mar-a-Lago.

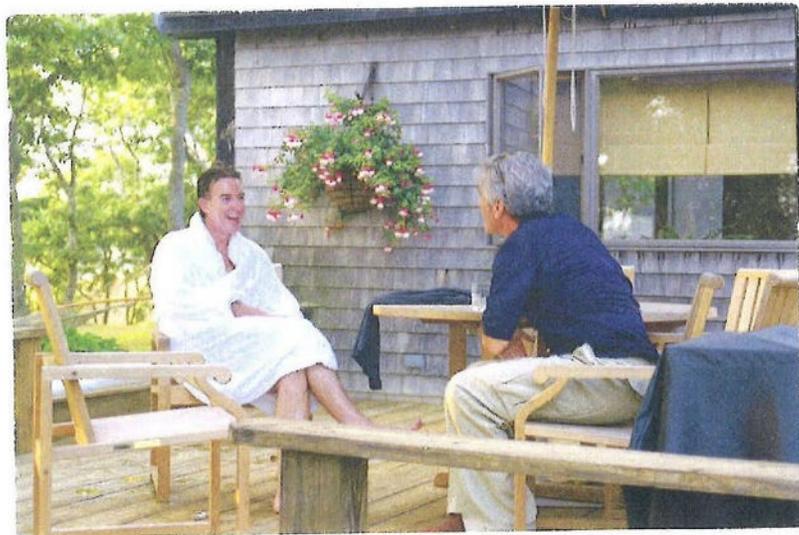
Starmer cannot have been ignorant of Mandelson’s links to Epstein. They had [been covered](#) in the press. Nor was he unaware that Mandelson’s political

career had been interrupted not once but twice by scandalous allegations. But he and his advisers decided it was worth the risk if Mandelson could help keep Trump sweet, at a time when the U.S. president was raining down tariffs on friend and foe alike.

Then came successive releases of the Epstein files by the Justice Department, beginning on December 19. “Still OK for Fri-Sat chez vous?”

Mandelson emailed Epstein on June 17, 2009. He was Britain’s secretary of state for business; Epstein was doing time for procuring minors. This was one of a number of Mandelson’s stays at Epstein residences. In jail but evidently not so deprived of his liberty that he was off email, Epstein was soon trying to set up a meeting between Mandelson and Jes Staley, then a senior executive at J.P. Morgan.

But, wherever he is in the  
world, he remains my  
best pal !



PETER MANDELSON CALLED JEFFREY EPSTEIN HIS “BEST PAL” IN A BIRTHDAY MESSAGE IN 2003. (PHOTOGRAPH: HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM)

That same month, Mandelson passed along UK government information to Epstein. The world was in the depths of the financial crisis, and the British prime minister was being advised to consider selling some government-owned property. “Interesting note that’s gone to the PM,” Mandelson [emailed](#)

[Epstein](#). “What salable assets?” shot back Epstein. Mandelson: “Land, property I guess.”

As in so many cases, Epstein mixed business and pleasure in his correspondence with Mandelson. “Are you sure the backpressure from your lack of sex is not turning your brain into fois [*sic*] gras?” he [asked Mandelson](#) in November 2009. “It’s certainly a serious problem,” Mandelson replied. “Cure coming to London from S’hai next weekend.” In 2010, as a general election neared, [Mandelson wrote](#): “We are praying for a hung parliament. Alternatively, a well-hung young man.”

Clearly, Mandelson—who has long been openly gay—had no interest in Epstein’s conveyor belt of teenage girls. But his friendship with Epstein came with other benefits. In one email, Epstein promised [to wire](#) £3,225 (about \$4,400) to help pay for Mandelson’s boyfriend to train as an osteopath.



PETER MANDELSON WAS FIRED AS THE UNITED KINGDOM’S AMBASSADOR TO THE U.S. OVER HIS TIES TO JEFFREY EPSTEIN. (BEN PRUCHNIE/GETTY IMAGES)

Full disclosure: I have known Peter Mandelson for many years. I have always found him intelligent and entertaining company. His emails to Epstein show,

at best, shockingly poor judgment. But the more consequential lapse in judgment was Starmer's, for hiring him.

From the point of view of British politics, Starmer's error appeared to provide the perfect justification for Labour members of Parliament to do something they were already itching to do: replace the prime minister.



The case for Keir Starmer at the time of the last general election—on July 4, 2024—was that a period of calm, boring, and competent government could revive the UK economy and rebuild public trust in politics. Many Labour MPs elected in the 2024 Labour landslide came into politics to draw a line under what they saw as “Tory sleaze.” Now, they are under attack for what seems to a disillusioned electorate like the same kinds of vice.

Long before the Epstein-Mandelson relationship blew a new hole below the ship of state's waterline, Starmer had already disillusioned many Labour backbenchers. First, he and other ministers were accused of failing to declare gifts and [accepting over](#) £20,000 (about \$27,000) worth of free tickets to see Taylor Swift. Then came a succession of U-turns that made the people sent out to defend him look ridiculous: for example, on winter fuel payments for pensioners, on the two-child benefits limit, on an inheritance tax on agricultural land, and on the scope of digital IDs. Late last year, the chancellor of the Exchequer (equivalent to the U.S. Treasury secretary) was forced into another humiliating flip-flop [on income tax](#). (For the full gory details, I recommend [Tim Shipman](#)'s well-sourced account. The latest U-turn was the [abandonment](#) on Monday of the unhinged and likely illegal plan to delay elections for 30 local councils.)

Now, according to Ipsos, Starmer's approval ratings after 14 months are the lowest at this stage of any prime minister in the past 50 years. Support for Labour has plunged by nearly 14 points, the second-largest decline for a governing party in postwar political history. As [Anand Menon](#) has noted, this government did not need the Epstein files to sink it. For now, Labour

Ministers are rallying around and pledging loyalty. But the prime minister's ordeal is by no means over.

The next test is a special election in the previously safe Labour seat of Gorton and Denton in Manchester, due on February 26. (The reason for the election is that the sitting Labour MP was forced to resign over offensive WhatsApp [messages](#), including some that were antisemitic.) A tight three-way race had been predicted between Labour, the populist Reform UK, and the left-wing Greens. The Mandelson scandal makes it likely that left-leaning voters will gather around the Greens as the better option to “keep Reform out.”

That's one reason Labour is likely to lose this election. Another is that Labour's National Executive Committee, controlled by Starmer and his allies, blocked the popular mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, from being the party's candidate in Gorton and Denton. Why? Because if Burnham made it into the House of Commons, he might challenge Starmer for the Labour leadership.

## **It is now clear that UK politics as a whole has become structurally unstable.**

But this maneuver may not suffice to save Starmer. Losing to the Reform party would be bad enough. However, if Labour are defeated by the Greens, and especially if it falls into third place, Starmer will become even more vulnerable to a coup. Even if he survives this month, there is no respite. Labour seems certain to fare dismally in the Scottish and Welsh parliamentary elections and the English local elections on May 7.

Why has Starmer been able to cling on thus far? Because the only credible alternative leaders have baggage of their own. Ex-deputy leader Angela Rayner [had to resign](#) last year because of her tangled tax affairs. Wes Streeting, the health secretary, is hampered by his own past association with Mandelson. Labour MPs also know that a change of leader would embolden their opponents to demand a fresh general election. Their current large majority in the Commons derives from less than 34 percent of the popular vote—131 seats were decided by fewer than 5,000 votes, including 103 where the Labour margin of victory was less than 5 percent of the vote. A new election would terminate many fledgling political careers.

It used to be thought it was the Conservative Party that had developed a chronic problem of instability at the top. It is now clear that UK politics as a whole has become structurally unstable. The polling expert Joe Slater argues that British politics has entered a “[zombie era](#),” in which no government has a stable base of support. We have left behind the class-based politics of the 20th century, when working-class votes reliably went to Labour, and middle- and upper-class votes to the Tories. Now the entire electorate consists of floating voters, united only by their loathing of the political class.

For further evidence of this public revulsion, we are indebted to [Dominic Cummings](#). Cummings is hardly a dispassionate commentator. The architect of the vote for Brexit in 2016 and of Johnson’s election victory in 2019, he can’t be expected to look on the bright side of Starmer’s life. But his recent research is well worth reading:

The deafening verdict of voters . . . is that Insiders have failed and voters want change—a failure of ideas, institutions, and operational competence, a failure to take or impose responsibility for failure (cf. Iraq, Afghanistan, financial crisis, Covid, Ukraine, etc.). . . .

Insiders’ response to this repeated verdict is a) doubling down on more of the things voters keep rejecting, especially importing men from the worst places on Earth, b) an increasingly deranged discussion among themselves

that “the real problem” is actually the voters, because—fooled by disinformation, “Russian interference,” tech oligarchs, etc.—they have embraced populism, racism, fascism, and c) the solution is to “restore trust” in Insiders’ ideas and institutions and give them more power and money.

MPs are hysterical over Epstein after spending 20 years suppressing investigation and reporting of industrialized child abuse here because it undermines their cross-party consensus on immigration policy. . . . Westminster has made us a tragicomic global internet meme.



Does all this make a victory for Reform inevitable? Is the irrepressible Nigel Farage going to be Britain’s next or next-but-one prime minister? If all you look at are opinion polls, you will think so. The latest MRP poll by [More in Common](#) projects Reform winning 381 out of 650 seats, with a majority of 112 over all the other parties combined. Labour is projected to lose 326 seats, slumping to 85, while the Conservatives lose 51 seats, reducing their Commons presence to just 70.

However, for such a revolutionary result to happen, the election would have to happen now. That is unlikely. Whether Starmer miraculously hangs on or is replaced, Labour MPs are not turkeys in the mood for Thanksgiving. The next election will be in 2028 or 2029. And that gives a lot of time for the novelty of the new party to wear off, much as the novelty of the [Social Democratic Party](#) wore off in the 1980s.



REFORM UK LEADER NIGEL FARAGE ANNOUNCES THE REFORM UK SHADOW CABINET ON FEBRUARY 17, 2026 IN LONDON. (LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES)

There have been many new parties in Britain in my lifetime. Reform UK used to be known as the Brexit Party, so it dates back to 2019; before that was the Referendum Party, [founded by](#) the businessman Jimmy Goldsmith; before that the [UK Independence Party](#), founded in 1993, previously known as the Anti-Federalist League. And those are just the Euroskeptic parties.

The problem with new parties on the right is nearly always the same. It is very hard to keep out the opportunists, cranks, crazies, and outright fascists. It is equally hard to attract genuine political talent. In [last year's local elections](#), Reform won majorities in 10 local councils and attempted to form minority administrations elsewhere. There were bold promises to carry out DOGE-style campaigns against wasteful expenditure. These came to nothing. At the same time, Reform is attracting Tory defectors to an extent that will soon muddy its message of radical change.

Meanwhile, there are many signals in Cummings's research that reinforce my long-standing view that Badenoch, the Conservative leader, should not be written off.

First, as in the United States, British voters' "most important political issue by far is the cost of living." Only Reform voters rank immigration higher as an issue. Second, as Cummings notes, "Voters know almost nothing about [Badenoch]. She's much closer to invisible than I'd realized." As he acknowledges, this is not her fault. "Unlike Starmer," as he says, "there is not a wall of negativity about her. It's more a wall of indifference/blank looks because they don't pay any attention to the Tories." But two things follow. First, Badenoch is right to focus on economic issues in her critique of the government. Second, voters still have an open mind about her. And the Tory brand can recover. It recovered from the policy of appeasement, after all. It recovered [from Suez](#).

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Third, there is "widespread skepticism" about Farage. Here's Cummings again: "A minority are real fans. 'He's right about Brexit. Right about immigration.' 'He's what we need. Not a normal politician. Says what he thinks. He'll be a good PM.' Others think of him as: 'odious,' 'liar,' 'feeds on fear in the news,' 'would be a disaster.' Many are unsure: 'He's right on immigration but what else would he do?' 'What would he do on the cost of

living?’ ‘I’m not sure he could do the job of PM.’ ‘I haven’t made my mind up yet.’”

Based on his past record, Farage has no way to allay these concerns and many ways to exacerbate them. When you want to say that someone is a poor organizer in England, you say, “He couldn’t organize a piss-up in a brewery.” Well, I think that is one thing Farage could organize. But it may be the only thing.

All Britain’s party leaders are unpopular, as a recent [YouGov](#) poll made clear. The better known they become, the worse their net approval. But Starmer is on -47, Farage on -37, and Badenoch on -23. And when voters are asked to assess the leaders on a head-to-head basis, Badenoch beats all comers, as new polling by More in Common reveals. [She beats](#) Starmer 62 to 38, and Farage 64 to 36. She beats the Liberal Democrat and Green leaders, too.

No one, including me, believes that Badenoch can dig the Tories out of the hole dug for her by her predecessors fast enough to win the next election outright. But by 2028 she may well have reestablished her party as the custodian of economic growth, fiscal prudence, and sound money that it was under Thatcher—sufficiently to maintain a respectable body of MPs in the Commons.



CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER KEMI BADENOCH IS THE LEAST UNPOPULAR PARTY LEADER IN BRITAIN. (LUCY NORTH/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES)

How the next election turns out is anybody's guess. Britain now combines a multiparty system with [first-past-the-post](#), constituency-based contests. As the last election demonstrated, modest shifts in sentiment combined with tactical voting—aimed in that case to punish the Tories—can produce huge swings in parliamentary representation. The key thing for the many voters in Britain who want to see economic recovery, low inflation, and sane policies on immigration and energy is to keep Labour, the Lib Dems, the Greens, and the Celtic nationalists out of power. But those same voters are rightly nervous about the idea of Farage as prime minister.

Can Reform and the Tories work together to form a conservative, commonsense government, whether as a party merger, a coalition, or an ad hoc voting arrangement? There is no reason why not. After its formation in 1834, the Conservative Party went through a succession of splits and reformations. It divided in two over Sir Robert Peel's repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846. In 1886 the party formed an alliance with Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain's new Liberal Unionist Party, which had split with the Liberals over [Irish Home Rule](#). In 1912, after 26 years

of working together, the Liberal Unionists and Conservatives merged. For many years thereafter, Conservative candidates ran as Unionists, especially in Scotland.

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In many ways, Brexit was to British politics in the 2010s what Irish Home Rule was in the 1880s or free trade in the 1840s—one of those issues that recasts the political landscape. Its consequences may ultimately be similar. I do not find it difficult to imagine “Conservative Reform” candidates running at the next general election. Nor do I find it difficult to imagine Badenoch ultimately leading a merged party. She is young (46) as well as black, and married to a Scotsman, with three mixed-race children. Britain cannot now unmake itself as a multiracial society. It can only try to make that multiracial society work. Badenoch is the future; Farage the past.

So, are we the Italians? Not really. British politics is just being British. We had three prime ministers [in one year](#) in 2022. Had that happened before? Yes, in 1868, following the passage of the Reform Bill of 1867. (Lord Derby resigned because of ill health in February; [Benjamin Disraeli](#) served until December, when he lost a general election to [William Gladstone](#).) We also had four [prime ministers](#) in two years in 1834-1835 and before that in 1782-1783. And we have had three or four prime ministers in three years on at least six occasions.

If Starmer crashes and burns this year, it will in fact be the third time in British history that we have had seven prime ministers in the space of 10 years. It happened between 1762 and 1770, culminating with the appointment of every American’s favorite prime minister, [Lord North](#). Indeed, we went one better in the period of the Great Reform Bill (the first step toward a modern electoral system) by having no fewer than nine prime ministers in just eight years between 1827 and 1835.

Such gyrations are not a bug but a feature of the Westminster parliamentary system. Far from being zombie politics, a succession of short-lived premierships is just what you'd expect as the electorate grapples with a big, intractable question. Ten years ago, Britons voted for Brexit. Turns out, they are significantly [worse off](#) as a result. What better scapegoat than the political "insiders"?

Carry on, Britain. And keep calm.