

s there a government within a government in Westminster..

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Nothing about Peter Mandelson's departures from government has ever been quiet. So it is proving again.

As the [Guardian noted yesterday](#), much of what has been said by Keir Starmer and others about his latest sacking turns out to have been untrue.

Last September, Keir Starmer said that:

Full due process was followed during this appointment

And this February, following his departure, he again said:

There was then security vetting carried out independently by the security services, which is an intensive exercise that gave [Mandelson] clearance for the role

It has now transpired that this was not true.

According to the Guardian's report, the substance of which now appears to be correct, Mandelson failed his security vetting when Starmer decided to appoint him as the UK's ambassador to Washington.

The story is that the Foreign Office, under the leadership of civil servant Sir Olly Robbins, whose previous great achievement was to negotiate the UK's exit from the European Union, overruled the failed security vetting and approved his appointment anyway, without apparently telling either the Foreign Secretary at the time, or his successor who is still in office, or the Prime Minister.

All three of them went on to provide assurance that security vetting had been obtained, without ever apparently having checked that this was actually the case.

Robbins was sacked as a result last night. He has obviously been chosen as the government's fall guy.

That said, I think we can be sure that we have not heard the last of this as yet. There are some obvious questions to ask.

The first is why, if, as is widely believed, the Foreign Office did not want Mandelson in Washington, did they cover up the fact that he had failed his security vetting and repeatedly suggest that he might be appointed when that was not the case? The contradictions appear to make no sense.

Secondly, why did the Foreign Office not correct Keir Starmer when they knew that what he was saying to Parliament was wrong? Were they deliberately setting up Starmer to fail in a game of very high-risk political poker?

Thirdly, why did three people appointed to very high political office make statements to Parliament about this appointment without seeking the evidence to support the claims they made? David Lammy was Foreign Secretary when Mandelson was appointed; Yvette Cooper is now; and Keir Starmer must have understood the gravity of this situation, and the transparency that would be demanded of him as a consequence of opposition action to demand disclosure of all the papers surrounding Mandelson's appointment, and yet apparently gave assurances to the House without establishing a basic fact such as whether he had passed his security clearance or not. Their failures are astonishing. Their lack of curiosity in not apparently asking for evidence is amazing.

But, having now looked at the facts and asked the questions, I can now speculate. That speculation revolves around three issues.

The first is straightforward: It has to be wondered whether Lammy, Cooper and most especially Keir Starmer have all lied about this. Did they know the truth but carried on anyway?

The second speculation follows from the first. Who or what has been controlling the agenda? In other words, who was so desperate to have Mandelson in Washington that they were willing to take risks on this scale, and are apparently still willing to do so? Why, in other words, was Mandelson, with his known links to Epstein and his own poor track record, so important that it was necessary for a string of people to prejudice their political careers to secure his appointment to Washington? Who was it that they were collectively appeasing when taking this enormous risk?

Third, assuming instead that the story is true and that the Foreign Office has persistently misled Downing Street, why did it do so, and in whose interests?

What, in other words, is the system that protects civil servants who are lying, by requiring that politicians must accept their word without ever having been provided with the backup data to show that they are telling the truth?

I have to ask the question in that way because, for the story Starmer et al are

suggesting to be true, there must have been deliberate lying at the Foreign Office, and there must have been a block on the disclosure of papers held there being supplied to ministers, presumably for security reasons, even though those ministers had been security cleared and were responsible for the security services. Is there, then, some inner power within the civil service that can decide what is disclosed, which is beyond ministerial control, suggesting that we have a system of government beyond democratic accountability?

I do not know the answers to these questions. I stress, I am speculating.

I think we need to know the answers, and I also think they are vital. The future of Starmer, his government, and even Labour in office might be in doubt as a result of whatever is now revealed about Mandelson's appointment, combined with the total electoral disaster coming Labour's way in only three weeks' time.

Potential revelations to come, around either lying and an elaborate stitch-up, or alternatively a failure to ask appropriate questions by a string of ministers including the Prime Minister, coupled with obvious political incompetence in office, might be enough to bring this Prime Minister down; and with no obvious heir apparent who can command support in this Parliament, potentially bring the Parliament down with it.

But for me, potentially the biggest question of all here is whether there is a government within a government in Westminster which is beyond ministerial reach. Harold Wilson always thought so. Will this debacle prove that? It is the most plausible explanation for what has happened.