

The Mandelson legacy

John Booth

The day after Lord Mandelson was removed by Prime Minister Keir Starmer from his top diplomatic post in Washington DC I received this message from an old journo pal: 'Just seen that "Petie" Mandelson has been sacked as US ambassador. A nation mourns. . .'

One from a former Labour MP said: 'You must feel totally vindicated in your long-held assessment of this appalling creature.'

A retired senior BBC journalist was in touch to say: 'You must have a certain sense of satisfaction now that your man has got his comeuppance.'

These welcome messages took me back 40 years to my first meeting with the then plain Peter Mandelson when he recruited me to be his deputy in the role of Labour's chief press officer. But they have also prompted me to track his influence to the present day and the shambolic government of the Prime Minister who appointed him to his lofty perch in the US capital.

I knew Mandelson to be a lying intriguer and know that he has encouraged generations of young Labour politicians to follow his example. So is it a total coincidence that we now find Labour in such a parlous state?¹ That the man who had arrogantly told a Welsh Valleys audience that Labour voters had nowhere else to go, should be returning from the US in disgrace as the electors of Caerphilly proved just the opposite?² Or that his protégé, Morgan McSweeney, should be revealed as deeply duplicitous in removing Jeremy Corbyn en route to becoming Starmer's main man at No 10?³

I can't claim to have foreseen his career trajectory and the future of Labour when he headhunted me for the Labour HQ spot in 1985. After years in journalism at home and abroad, I'd become the head of external affairs at the National Union of Teachers in the early 1980s to take on such choice Thatcher

¹ <<https://shorturl.at/1zoMz>> or <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/yet-another-blow-for-starmer-as-labour-hit-new-low-in-polls_uk_69008fd7e4b0973a4c0555e1?origin=home-politics-grid-unit>

² <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd9klevy28qo>>

³ This is detailed at great length in Paul Holden's *The Fraud* (London: OR Books, 2025). It is summarised here <<https://shorturl.at/sbaDu>> or <<https://www.doubledown.news/watch/2025/october/1/exposed-starmer-epstein-mandelson-the-real-prime-minister>>.

favourites as Sir Keith Joseph and Sir Rhodes Boyson. This was just a few years before Labour leader Neil Kinnock recruited Mandelson to the new role of director of campaigns and communications in his bid to modernise its message and structure – a mission I thought long overdue.

But the behaviour of Kinnock's appointee as I tried to work with him, and then in my removal less than a year later, convinced me that he was not to be trusted with Labour's future. Not only did he initially refuse to recognise my National Union of Journalists (NUJ) membership, but he lied repeatedly about me and my record at Walworth Road HQ during the lengthy dismissal procedure. Here, for example, is his memo to general secretary Larry Whitty dated 19 September 1986:

'If you are able to see John Booth today please bear in mind the following:

- 1) NUJ Chapel is meeting this morning and we need to see the outcome of that meeting first;
- 2) John has briefed a reporter from the Mail on Sunday on his side of the matter and we should also take this into consideration.

I will be in later this morning and will have a word.'

1) was correct as my fellow NUJ members at Labour HQ had taken a strong stand in my support as had the other unions at party HQ.

2) was totally untrue. During my protracted dismissal procedure, which included being barred from attending party conference, I briefed no media outlet as I knew that would only further jeopardise my position as a party employee.

Mandelson's view of my performance was not shared by the MPs and party staff I'd worked with in by-elections, press launches and on parliamentary candidate training. Nor was it the opinion of Shadow Foreign Secretary Denis Healey who had thanked me warmly for the work I had done for him on a visit to apartheid South Africa.

When my union asked why I was being dismissed, it was told by Mandelson: 'This is not a problem identified at a specific time, nor is it entirely susceptible to description.'

In his convoluted and cack-handed effort to remove me, he warned that if I made a fuss about my sacking I might never work in Britain again. As I recorded in my shorthand note: 'If we have to terminate your contract, I will make any fabrication of the truth and stick by it faithfully.'

In a long career in the rough journalism trade that included *The*

Washington Post while living in DC, I'd never come across such behaviour. Was it just Mandelson bluster or was he really in a position to deliver on such a threat? Either way, I found it a shocking thing to be said to a life-long Labour member and activist who had been headhunted to serve the party. What was such a reference worth in seeking future employment?

In the event, all the intervening years have been spent without one, working by word-of-mouth recommendation as a freelance. Apart from two short spells in Parliament researching for Labour MPs who took a different view of my abilities, my contributions to political life have been voluntary. These have included helping found the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, cycling the West Bank to fundraise for the Medical Aid for Palestinians, being a political educator in several organisations, and writing about politics for sympathetic, but usually impecunious, outlets.

A decade after being sacked in November 1986 I was interviewed by Paul Routledge for his biography of Mandelson. He recounted, among other things, my discovery that Mandelson had maintained links with *The Times* when the party National Executive Committee (NEC) had instructed its staff and members not to deal with Murdoch outlets during the Wapping dispute over union recognition. Routledge didn't use all I'd told him in a lengthy session, but what he published in his 1999 *Mandy* was fair and accurate.

But that wasn't true of Routledge's former *Independent on Sunday* colleague Donald Macintyre. The first I knew of his admiring biography of the man who by then had become Tony Blair's Northern Ireland Secretary was when a friend told me I appeared in it – and in a very damaging way. *Mandelson: The Biography*, published by Rupert Murdoch's HarperCollins imprint, contained some of the false allegations Mandelson had made when sacking me 13 years earlier. Westminster lobby correspondent Macintyre had put none of them to me – a journalistic error for which a junior news reporter would be rightly reproved.

I won damages and costs in the subsequent libel case and the unsold copies of the book were disposed of by BIFFA, the waste management company. But within weeks I lost my Saturday freelance shift on *The Observer* and my one weekday sub-editing stories on *The Guardian*, where years before I'd been a member of staff. Neither involved political journalism. My *Observer* work had included a skydive feature but largely consisted of writing cricket and football round-ups, and sub-editing match reports. At *The Guardian* it had included subbing copy on its City pages, of, among others, Ruth Kelly before she became a Blair Cabinet minister. Needless to say, the warning words of Mandelson from 1986 about my future employability came very much to mind.

My lost annual freelance income from both papers almost exactly matched my libel-winning damages. But I had enough Murdoch money left over to mount a 2001 general election campaign as Genuine Labour candidate in Mandelson's Hartlepool seat. By then Blair had sacked Mandelson a second time over the Hinduja passport scandal. I'd planned to call my Hartlepool campaign HQ Hinduja House, but a Labour friend wisely counselled a change to Honesty House.

I'd three motives for taking on the Prime Minister's close friend and ally.

One, I knew from friends in the North-East, where I'd done my newspaper apprenticeship, that Mandelson was not popular and was seen as an ineffective representative of their interests.

Two, I knew after years of experience I shared with many others working for the party that, in his underhand intriguing, he did not have the best interests of Labour and its supporters at heart.

Three, at the time George W Bush was to be inaugurated US president early in 2001, a friend from my time in Washington DC told me that a Middle East war was likely in the next year or two. How did she know? Her doctor was a military reservist and he had been put on standby for overseas posting there.

My Hartlepool plan was to use my election platform to warn of this coming conflict – but only if I could double-source my friend's tip-off. I couldn't manage that in time, but we now know the Iraq invasion was indeed being planned by US NeoCons long before the September 11 attacks which Bush deployed as its justification.

Those who remember the 2001 general election may remember Mandelson's victory declamation: 'I'm a fighter not a quitter.' It went unreported at the time but I told the Hartlepool voters that this was another Mandelson false promise. So it proved. He duly quit Hartlepool for an EU commissioner job three years later.

Mandelson told the *Hartlepool Mail* before heading for Brussels: 'When I said in the 2001 election that I wanted to serve Hartlepool in Parliament for another full term, I meant it . . . I'll never break my bond with this town.' Twenty-one years later councillors in Hartlepool released him from that commitment when they voted unanimously to end his freedom of the town following the Jeffrey Epstein revelations.⁴

Mandelson's unpopularity in the town had developed long before he jumped ship for Brussels, but in reporting it the editor of the *Hartlepool Mail*

⁴ <<https://shorturl.at/AiL2v>> or <<https://www.martonincleveland.uk/index.php/component/content/article/hartlepool-council-revokes-civic-honour-from-lord-peter-mandelson-amid-epstein-revelations?catid=8&Itemid=101>>

paid for it with his job. Local man Harry Blackwood had risen from a print apprenticeship to run his campaigning daily paper, one which was also read by constituents of Tony Blair in his neighbouring Sedgefield constituency.

After Mandelson was forced to resign from his Cabinet a second time in January 2001, Blackwood's reporters carried out a vox pop in the town. The front-page verdict was clear: 'As Mandelson quits Government post town people tell him . . . WE'VE HAD ENOUGH'.

While the MP had some supporters, he had many more critics. One of them, Eileen Laws, was quoted as saying: 'I think the Government and the town should get rid of him straightaway. He was given a chance last time and now it's started again.'

But it was the editor of the Johnston Press daily who was forced to go and not the MP. Blackwood's protracted defenestration was regularly reported by *Press Gazette*, journalism's trade paper, but it was *The Mail on Sunday* that came to Blackwood's aid with a weekly column in its northern edition when Johnston Press finally ousted him from the editor's chair and into unemployment. By then the paper's deputy editor and several of the paper's reporters had resigned in protest at what they saw as the witch hunt of their boss.⁵

One of the reasons Mandelson felt antipathy to the local paper was his failure to get his businessman friend Leo Gillen elected mayor. The voters preferred Stuart Drummond who doubled as Hartlepool United's mascot, H'Angus the Monkey.

This was just one of Mandelson's many election failures. He boasted full control of Labour's general election campaigns in 1987 and 2010, both of which the party lost. He had a big hand in the 1992 campaign which John Major's Conservatives also won. When he failed to win election to Labour's National Executive Committee in 1997 he said 'runner-up is not a bad result'. Biographer Routledge tells us he was second to bottom. His efforts to persuade the UK to join the Euro and then back a second EU referendum were equally unsuccessful.

So how did this thrice-sacked character come by his reputation for brilliance?

Some speak of his capacity for hard work. But millions put in the hours without the high rewards Mandelson has reportedly accumulated. Kinnock, the leader who launched his Labour career, claimed Mandelson as a close friend

⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/yrx48jw6>> or <<https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2007/news/editor-blackwood-is-sacked-from-mail/> <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2007/news/blackwood-breaks-silence-on-mandelson-pressure/>>

'with a lot of good in him'.⁶ Paul Foot, in reviewing one book about him, put it down to his ability to flatter in the realms where Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch are not uniquely vain.

But Shadow Cabinet member Bryan Gould recounts his suspicion that Mandelson, in the powerful media role Kinnock had granted him, was working against him behind the scenes. He recounts:

A friend of mine at Walworth Road overheard Colin Byrne, the party's deputy communications director, who was generally assumed always to do Peter's doing, 'bad-mouthing' me (his word) to a journalist over the telephone. He was sufficiently concerned to report the matter to me and to authorise me to use his name in raising the matter with Neil. Neil, however, was more concerned to know the identity of my informant than in registering the substance of my complaint.

Gould believed Kinnock to be suffering increasing paranoia 'but also that the walls were whispering all sorts of nonsense to him. This atmosphere of mutual suspicion was very much encouraged, I believe, by the activities of Peter Mandelson'.⁷

John Smith, who succeeded Kinnock after his second general election defeat in 1992, took a different view of the man Kinnock valued so highly. He not only made no use of him but had to counter Mandelson's effort to undermine his leadership.⁸ It was Smith's death in 1994 that reopened the door to Mandelson's advancement. He was also fortunate in that the early deaths of Robin Cook, Derek Fatchett and Mo Mowlam reduced the number of capable Labour figures who might have impeded that progress. By then Mandelson had developed several influential networks of support.

One was at the BBC. John (now Lord) Birt, his former boss at London Weekend Television (LWT), had become Margaret Thatcher's choice as Director-General of the BBC. He brought with him many of Mandelson's former colleagues, including Samir Shah, David Jordan and David Aaronovitch.

All of them moved into the senior positions at the corporation that helped advance Mandelson's strategy of promoting favoured Labour figures – accompanied by his threats to those who didn't report as he wanted. Shah, whose company produced a 1999 Channel 4 film presented by his friendly

⁶ 'The Real Peter Mandelson' at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxaQFpkBoNoX>>. This Juniper film was presented by Donald Macintyre and based on his biography. Juniper's executive producer was Mandelson's friend and current BBC Chair Samir Shah.

⁷ Bryan Gould, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Macmillan, 1995) p. 231.

⁸ Paul Routledge, *Mandy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1999) p. 140 *et seq.*

biographer Macintyre, is currently chair of the BBC. Jordan is the director of editorial policy and standards. Aaronovitch remains a BBC broadcaster and was a strong supporter of the Iraq war as a columnist at *The Guardian* before heading to Murdoch at *The Times*.

Another powerful support network around Mandelson developed when new leader Tony Blair accepted the financial backing of wealthy Israel supporters organised by Michael (later Lord) Levy.⁹ Mandelson already knew many of those supporters having grown up in Hampstead Garden Suburb with a father who worked as advertising director for the *Jewish Chronicle* for 30 years.¹⁰ Their money helped free Blair from dependence on the cash of members and the trade unions, which I knew Mandelson strongly favoured from my dealings with him years before.

Mandelson's long identification with Israel was exemplified, says author David Cronin, when as Business Secretary he:

called for closer commercial relations with the country's 'firm friend' Israel. Jointly addressing 200 British business leaders with Shimon Peres, Mandelson voiced hopes that UK-Israeli trade would exceed £3 billion by 2012. In 2007, this trade was worth £2.3 billion, with Britain the third largest destination for Israeli exports.¹¹

Cronin concludes in his 2011 book:

As Mandelson is a confidant of Tony Blair, it is no surprise that he sought to eulogise Peres, another warmonger, by claiming that the president had displayed 'tireless energy and bravery' in seeking peace. This duplicity is typical of British ministers who criticise Israeli settlements from one side of their mouths and woo Israeli firms (including many operating in the exact same settlements) with the other.

What I hadn't known when working with him was Mandelson's enthusiasm for many things American. (Days before he was sacked he was addressing his friends in one of his many Atlanticist networks by giving the guest lecture at the Ditchley Foundation.¹²)

⁹ Robin Ramsay, 'Blair and Israel' in *Lobster* 43.

¹⁰ Routledge (see note 8) p. 8.

¹¹ David Cronin, *Europe's Alliance With Israel: Aiding the Occupation* (London: Pluto Press 2011) p. 135.

¹² <<https://tinyurl.com/3kdrep7p>> or <<https://www.ditchley.com/news/rt-hon-lord-mandelson-british-ambassador-united-states-delivers-61st-ditchley-annual-lecture>>
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqZ2wRHYwxA>>

A few years later I revealed that he joined fellow Labour right-winger George (now Lord) Robertson as an early recruit to the British American Project for the Successor Generation (BAP)¹³ along with his old LWT colleague Trevor Phillips, for whom Mandelson had been best man.

James Naughtie, who had been political editor of *The Guardian* during Mandelson's first year as Labour's communications chief, was another BAP recruit alongside Jeremy Paxman, who he was soon to join at the BBC. Paxman reportedly apologised to Mandelson after Conservative MP Matthew Parris 'outed' him on Newsnight. The BBC management then placed a protective barrier around Mandelson's private life.¹⁴ Evan Davis was a younger 'fellow' of the BAP who was to build a BBC career in both radio and TV. Former BAP UK committee member Jane Hill remains a BBC newsreader and presenter to this day.

Naughtie chaired the UK end of the transatlantic mutual advancement network that was the UK Government-supported BAP when his opposite number in the US was NeoCon Paul Wolfowitz, a key Republican 'war on terror' figure. Wolfowitz became Pentagon deputy to Donald Rumsfeld with a major role in planning and promoting the invasion of Iraq in the George W Bush administration.

Mandelson was by then strongly supporting Blair in that Murdoch-backed venture. Patrick Wintour, a key Mandelson ally at *The Guardian* where he was its chief political correspondent, led the paper's front page in February 2004 with a story headlined 'Mandelson warns Iraq rebels: Dissident Labour MPs told they are harming PM's integrity and deliberately endangering chances of re-election'.

There is little need here to rehearse the role of Blair, his neighbouring Hartlepool MP friend and their New Labour project in the wars that followed. Another early member of the BAP, Jonathan Powell, played key roles in that highly propagandised conflict and currently works for Starmer. What needs to be remembered as we consider the Mandelson legacy is the resultant public distrust not only of Labour but of our democratic institutions more widely and deeply when Britons are sent to die for a lie.

The years during which Mandelson and Blair had such influence over the party also saw a steady decline both in the number of active Labour party members and the quality of those rising through its ranks. A quick assessment

¹³ On the BAP see <<https://shorturl.at/8Wk0W>> or <<https://www.declassifieduk.org/the-secretive-us-embassy-backed-group-cultivating-the-british-left/>> and <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/06/usa.politics1>>.

¹⁴ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-10973463>>

of the calibre of Starmer's Cabinet – many of them parachuted into safe seats by factional chicanery – makes that abundantly clear.

Blair's assertion that Labour would only 'come of age' when it 'learned to love Peter' could not have proved more wrong: the higher his friend rose, the more he was disliked.

By the time Blair's unpopularity forced him to resign from No 10 and become special envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East, Mandelson had mended some of his broken fences with successor Gordon Brown. He returned from Brussels to join Brown's Labour Cabinet as the unelected Lord Mandelson of Foy and Hartlepool. But he was already working hard for his financial future.

As early as 2002 he had been bankrolled by multi-millionaire Sir Evelyn Rothschild to the tune of £250,000 for his Policy Network 'think-tank'.¹⁵ Over the years he had cultivated other friendships with the world's wealthy.¹⁶

No sooner had Labour been defeated in 2010 than Mandelson launched Global Counsel, a lobbying consultancy.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, it has decided to do without his counsel since the Epstein revelations.¹⁸

So what are we to make of the political impact of Labour's so-called grandee in his switchback career? What legacy does he leave for the country and for the party he claims to love?

When, in 1985, Kinnock invited him into a senior Labour role, Mandelson already had a political hinterland that, with a little due diligence, might have prompted caution. Forty years ago I learned one evening in the *Daily Mirror* offices from an angry Joe Haines, Harold Wilson's former PR man, that Mandelson not only knew owner Robert Maxwell but was complaining directly to him over Haines' head about the paper's Labour coverage.

Mandelson already knew the Maxwell family and even then, while pursuing a career on the back of his Labour affiliation, was becoming more part of their wealthy international network. This was long before we learned about his association with Epstein. Little of this was known to Labour members and supporters, Mandelson operating behind a cloak of secrecy provided by gullible Westminster journalists. Political reporting became the alleged words of 'a Labour insider' and 'a senior party source' – often factional hearsay which denied transparency and accountability to the majority outside the

¹⁵ 'Peter's (new) friends: Who are the insiders keeping his ambitions afloat?', *Evening Standard*, 27 September 2002.

¹⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/Three_Men_One_Yacht_And_A_Big_Scandal/1332191.html>

¹⁷ <<https://www.global-counsel.com/>>

¹⁸ <<https://bmmagazine.co.uk/news/mandelson-epstein-global-counsel-shares/>>

Westminster bubble.

When Routledge reviewed his former colleague's Mandelson biography for *The Spectator* in May 1999 he wrote this:

The overall portrait painted by Macintyre is recognisable. Mandelson is willing to lie, manipulate and intrigue for the aims he sets himself. But his biographer is unwilling to use such horrid words. So when he [Mandelson] leaks an internal document to *The Guardian* and then writes a letter to the paper claiming that 'like any other party member, I have only the *The Guardian* reports to go on', his biographer observes admiringly, 'this was cheek on a grand scale.' I call it deliberate deception.

Routledge captures well the devious methods Mandelson has long employed which I experienced first hand 40 years ago. It may have served him well in building a career of wealth and status. But long before that crashed down to the ground in September, his encouragement of young would-be politicians to emulate him has had disastrous consequences for the party he claims to love and which is now on its electoral knees.

Paul Holden's *The Fraud* details the way the party was undermined during the Corbyn years by promoting the largely media-based 'Labour antisemitism crisis'. Mandelson told a *Jewish Chronicle* event in 2017 that he worked energetically every day to ensure the demise of the Labour leader.¹⁹ Author Holden then goes on to describe how Mandelson's protégé, Morgan McSweeney, and his well-financed and highly factional Labour Together operation moved on to secure the leadership for Starmer.

The epitaph on the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren – 'If you would seek his monument, look around you' – can well be applied to the state of Labour after 40 years in which Mandelson has exercised his cynically manipulative influence. What we see is a deeply corrupted politics barely examined by an uncritical media. The party's membership and morale has collapsed, its presence in Parliament represented by many imposed on communities by the factional network methods Mandelson and his New Labour allies encouraged. All result in the delusional politics inevitable when small networks talk only to themselves. It's the very opposite of the kind of inclusive, principled politics a country in the parlous state of ours needs if it is to survive, let alone prosper.

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¹⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/5cze8b6r>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/lord-mandelson-says-he-is-working-daily-to-bring-down-jeremy-corbyn-gf6bfz8>>

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