

*Get In:*  
*The Inside Story of Labour Under Starmer*  
Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Poggrund  
London: The Bodley Head, 2025, £25, h/b

### **Colin Challen**

One of the earlier books seeking to answer the questions of who and what Keir Starmer is and represents was Oliver Eagleton's *The Starmer Project: A Journey to the Right* (Verso, 2022). Maguire and Poggrund's book is certainly a corrective to the subtitle of Eagleton's book: there was *no* journey to the right; that's where it started. In this regard Tony Blair comes close to the truth, quoted as saying (p. 184):

It's possible his journey isn't like Neil Kinnock, where you start on the left and then you move to the centre. I don't think he really started anywhere except vaguely progressive. And then, very unusually, only when he became leader did he really start to think about politics in a different way.

The main title of Eagleton's book could also be altered, since in the light of *Get In* it may be more accurate to call what happened 'The Starmer Conspiracy.' One shouldn't use the c-word loosely, but *Get In* provides plenty of evidence of clandestine activity, with the aim of deceiving the membership of the Labour Party and ultimately achieving a constitutional coup. The key player in this conspiracy was the man we have now heard so much about, the alleged nemesis of Sue Gray as Starmer's chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney. *Get In* suggests to me that the next book on the Starmer phenomenon might usefully be called the 'The McSweeney Project: Of the Right.'

McSweeney emerges from this book as somebody with a visceral hatred of the left, which developed from his time in Lambeth when 'Red' Ted Knight was council leader, letting the borough go to wrack and ruin. McSweeney was an effective organiser who went on to work for the likes of Margaret Hodge, combating the BNP in Barking. He went on to organise Labour Together, which worked hard to end the then leadership of Jeremy Corbyn whilst, as *Get In* suggests, pretending otherwise.

In finding a replacement for Corbyn, the McSweeney mission was fulfilled by Starmer, who was a credible but highly pliable blank sheet of paper. Brexit aside, who knew what he stood for? As we can now see, his premiership is defining the man, not the other way round. As Blair suggested, the same could be said of his early years as Labour Party leader, as he responded to the trusted voices in his inner circle when he himself floundered, e.g. after losing the Hartlepool by-election in 2021. That level of defeatism wasn't to be countenanced by McSweeney. Clearly, even though Starmer was then intermittently ditching his 10 Corbyn-style leadership contest pledges to the members, he had to appear decisive. One could argue that Starmer's reputation for ruthlessness developed whilst he was Director of Public Prosecutions, gifting him a prosecutorial attitude. In his Labour leadership role this manifested itself in his relentless pursuit of 'anti-Semitism' in Labour's ranks. As the authors suggest, this could be his 'Clause 4 moment', to demonstrate to the public that the party had changed. Barely a speech could go by without mentioning 'change', always meaning 'no longer Corbyn's party'.

Maguire and Pogrud dwell at length on the process of removing Corbyn. The convoluted phone calls, emails and texts of various power brokers seeking resolution of Corbyn's fate illustrate well the equally convoluted and conflicted sensibilities of all those involved – a speciality of internal Labour Party politics. This section of the book effectively describes the culmination of the first part of Starmer's (or McSweeney's) mission – to destroy the prophet of Palestinian liberation and with him a key plank of leftist ideology. Sadly, Maguire and Pogrud do not dwell at any length on an analysis of who was embedded behind Starmer in this task, apart from mentions of the ubiquitous money bag Trevor Chinn and the obsessed Jewish Labour Movement. For them, one suspects, the entire *raison d'être* of Starmer was this single achievement. Perhaps the authors felt we knew enough about it already. Perhaps, too, now that this mission has been accomplished, Starmer's real function is now redundant. He certainly has a redundant air about him, even as he proclaims – as all unpopular leaders do – that 'I'm not rummaging around opinion polls', as Labour support drops.<sup>1</sup>

The Labour Party conference is like an annual plotters' trade fair, where a thousand plots are launched or settled, creating a febrile if not

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://shorturl.at/Ax9oq>> or <<https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/i-m-not-rummaging-around-opinion-polls-starmer-says-as-labour-support-drops/ar-AA1zBQIU>>

feverish atmosphere of intrigue.<sup>2</sup> Into this in 2021 we find McSweeney at his conspiratorial best, seeking through his secret WhatsApp group, 'Project EX', to achieve a change in the rules for the election of party leader – to exclude the possibility of another Corbyn (or possibly a Rayner) ascendancy. Maguire and Pogrund follow the progress of 'Project Ex' – not even Starmer was aware of it until late on – comprising arch pro-Israel agitator Luke Akehurst; the veteran party insider (of Midlands vintage) Labour peer Roy Kennedy (whose wife also made it to the Lords); and Matt Pound, a former employee of Akehurst's outfit 'Labour First'. As Maguire and Pogrund write:

All, to one degree or another, had been schooled in the brutality of grassroots organising by John Spellar, the ageing warhorse of the old right who made a point of reading the Communist *Morning Star* to learn of his enemies' activities, and to celebrate if a hard-left organiser of his acquaintance was on its obituaries page. Margaret McDonagh, Blair's chief bureaucrat, willed them on from afar. (p. 215)

The objective of 'Project Ex' was to organise delegates to support the proposed rule changes. I am sure this exercise will have involved at some point party staff too, herding their constituency delegates in the right direction and sharing intelligence on the recalcitrant. Largely because of the lukewarm response from the trade unions, McSweeney didn't get everything that he asked for, but the changes that were made were sufficient for celebration. The prospects for a Corbynite Second Coming had been greatly diminished.

In the lead-up to the general election in 2024, Starmer was gifted a Tory government in chaos and one wonders who could contradict the old saw that governments lose elections, oppositions don't win them. Maguire and Pogrund's book was completed after a year's work on it by December, 2024, so it doesn't dwell at length on Starmer's victory that year. One feature of that election in constituencies with large Muslim populations was disgust at Israel's over-reaction to the Hamas attack in October 2023. Starmer's only response was Israel 'had a right to defend itself,' a surreal mantra in the circumstances which it appears needed no further or more nuanced explanation. The authors spend a chapter analysing in

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Minkin's monumental study of Labour's plot-fests, *The Blair Supremacy: A study in the politics of Labour's party management*, was reviewed in *Lobster* 82 at <<https://shorturl.at/1PKaV>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/82/the-blair-supremacy-a-study-in-the-politics-of-labours-party-management-by-lewis-minkin/>>.

great depth (as they do so well) the internal reactions to Starmer's highly partisan statements on the subject. But the level of understanding imparted doesn't add or detract from our appreciation of the fact that he is a Zionist to the core, unwilling even to call for a ceasefire. Several seats were lost to non-Labour pro-Palestinian parliamentary candidates as a result. Given the size of his majority in the July election, who cared? McSweeney's concern was with the white working class who had abandoned Labour in the 'red wall' seats. Their values were the ones Starmer had to address.

The great general election victory was the hat trick in McSweeney's illustrious career, no matter that it was built on a slender base of just over 33% of votes cast, with 'fringe' parties and independents making headway. *Get In* tells how victory was achieved by maximising the efficiency of the vote, delivering it where it was needed rather than piling it up where it would make no difference. Social media played its part, micro-targeting individual voters rather than employing looser demographic modelling, although I dare say that still played a part. The only difference between this and what Cambridge Analytica did is that I assume the Labour Party obtained its detailed information on voters legitimately. It did, didn't it? Of course, Reform UK also played into Starmer's hands, hurting the Tories more than Labour. All things considered, I would nevertheless liken the result to the 'just in time' concept in business logistics. All is well when the system works, but its resilience must always be questionable when any perturbations occur, a reliable probability in politics.

The BBC's Laura Kuenssberg is quoted on the book's jacket saying 'Stuffed full of scoops, this is the moment-by-moment story of Labour's dramatic journey back to power, the plots and the personal relationships that drove Starmer into Downing Street, revealing who's really in charge.' She's right – it shows that it wasn't Starmer who was very much in charge, and its moment-by-moment dissection of his rise to power also contains the seeds of his descent. His epitaph, if he's really, *really* lucky will be 'He was vaguely progressive.' OK, add a question mark.

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