

## **Bad Labour**

### *Keir Starmer: The Biography*

Tom Baldwin

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### **John Newsinger**

**A**t the recent election Labour only secured 33.7% of votes nationally, and half the number of people voted for Keir Starmer in his own constituency as they did in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, he became Prime Minister with a 174 seat majority in the Commons. The size of that majority has meant that he has already been able to reduce it – by suspending 7 left-wing Labour MPs for having the temerity to vote to end child poverty now! But who is Keir Starmer and what can we expect from his government? Tom Baldwin's biography is a very sympathetic account of the man's rise to power. The book actually comes with a recommendation from Alastair Campbell no less, who praises it as 'a serious and informed book about a serious politician'. Despite this unfortunate recommendation from such a tainted, indeed poisonous source, let us consider what Baldwin actually has to say.

As Starmer himself continually points out, he was the son of a toolmaker, coming from a working class background; never really well-off but certainly never poor. Indeed, his father was self-employed for a while, with his own workshop. He went to a grammar school that became an independent fee-paying school while he was there, but was one of a number of students allowed to stay on without paying fees. His father was a Labour Party supporter and the young Starmer was a member of the Labour Party Young Socialists. By the time of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike, he was a student at Leeds University and a member of their Labour Club. However, Starmer never really got actively involved in the massive solidarity campaign that rallied to the miners' cause, although, according to Baldwin, he 'went on demonstrations and gave money to support miners' families'. (p. 72)

He graduated with a law degree in 1985 and went on to do postgraduate

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<sup>1</sup> In the Holborn and St Pancras constituency, Starmer polled 36,641 votes in 2019 <<https://members.parliament.uk/constituency/3536/election/397>>. In 2024 this was drastically reduced to 18,884 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/constituencies/E14001290>>.

studies at St Edmund Hall, Oxford University. Here he seems to have become more politically active, moving to the left, motivated perhaps by the students at St Edmund Hall voting 'to order an additional copy of the *Sun* every day' to show their solidarity with Rupert Murdoch during the Wapping dispute. (p. 79) The young Starmer actually became a legal observer on the Wapping picket line, seeing at first hand the brutal methods used by the police in the service of the Murdoch press. This seems to have initiated a period of involvement with the Left, with left-wing causes, civil liberties and human rights issues. Most remarkable in many ways was Starmer's involvement with the semi-Trotskyist International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency (Pabloites) in 1986 and 1987. And he was not just a rank and file member but was actually involved in editing and contributing to its short-lived journal, *Socialist Alternative*.<sup>2</sup> It seems safe to assume that this would have made him of interest to MI5. His subsequent involvement with the Haldane Society and the journal *Socialist Lawyer* would have likely sustained this interest, along with his impressive involvement in such legal cases as the 'McLibel' affair.

This was a very different Starmer from the man who is today Prime Minister. As Baldwin points out, at this time Starmer 'went into court on behalf of environment campaigners living in trees to stop bulldozers moving in to build new roads [. . .] he represented a Saudi dissident fighting extradition to the US on terrorism charges [. . .] he defended a peace campaigner who had climbed over the fence of an American air base and also defaced the flag of the United States'. In this last case, Starmer actually told the court 'that protecting "American sensitivities"' had to be weighed against 'what was essential to protect the rights of peaceful protest in a free and democratic society'. (p. 133). He worked for Amnesty International and was widely regarded as a legal authority on human rights, publishing extensively in the area. When did he begin his shift to the right and what prompted it? Baldwin does not really address this issue head on. Indeed one cannot help feeling that he sees merely as Starmer growing up and becoming more sensible, more pragmatic, more realistic about politics.

Starmer welcomed the election of the New Labour government in 1997, although he was to later oppose the invasion of Iraq and took part in the great 15 February 2003 protest demonstration. According to Baldwin, even at the time Starmer 'never doubted the then prime minister's sincerity' and was moreover fully behind New Labour's interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. (p. 145) What seems to have been the first indication of a shift in his position came from his work related to Northern Ireland, where Starmer helped overturn

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<sup>2</sup> *Socialist Alternative*, including Starmer's contributions, can still be found online.

British soldier Lee Clegg's conviction for murder. (Clegg and his fellow Paratroopers had shot up a car of joy-riders in West Belfast, an incident in which seventeen-year-old Martin Peake and eighteen-year-old Karen Reilly were killed.) And then, in 2003, he became an adviser to the Northern Irish Policing Board. According to Baldwin, the five years Starmer spent working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) 'left a deep impression on him'. Indeed, he became friends with – and has since kept in touch with – his PSNI liaison officer, Inspector Shepherd, who even sent Starmer's son 'his old RUC baton' as a present! (p. 149) It was here, apparently, that Starmer learned to balance pragmatism with such concerns as human rights and civil liberties. One person who was particularly impressed by Starmer's performance in Northern Ireland was Ian Paisley Jr, the Democratic Unionist leader – although, for some reason, Baldwin makes no reference to this.<sup>3</sup> He still took up human rights causes, however, even while he was supposedly embracing pragmatism in Northern Ireland.

It is still astonishing that in 2008, after a career as a human rights and civil liberties defence lawyer, Starmer was installed by the New Labour government as Director of Public Prosecutions. How did he convince NewLab that he could be relied on to ensure that the law continued to serve the interests of the British State (specifically) and of the Establishment (more generally)? His MI5 clearance would make most interesting reading, to put it mildly. And he continued as DPP under the Cameron-Osborne Austerity government until November 2013.

One point worth making here is that Starmer seems to have had no problem implementing the 27% cut to his department's budget imposed by the Tories, cuts that according to Michael Ashcroft had 'the inevitable consequence that staff numbers were cut radically as well'.<sup>4</sup> Rare praise from Ashcroft! The impact of these and other cuts to the justice system are still being felt today.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Paisley Jr, Starmer 'gave us the tools and the arguments and the defence lines to allow us to say that the water cannon are necessary or plastic bullets are allowed. They are still permissible today . . . . And all police officers in Northern Ireland carry a gun. [. . . ] I would say his lasting legacy is that you can have all these accoutrements to policing provided they meet human rights guidelines effectively and he provided the board with the arguments to do that and the legal cover to do it'. See Oliver Eagleton, *The Starmer Project: A Journey to the Right*, (London: Verso, 2022) p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ashcroft, *Red Knight: The Unauthorised Biography of Sir Keir Starmer* (London: Biteback, 2021) p. 160. Ashcroft's biography provided Boris Johnson's Tories with the unfounded allegation that Starmer was responsible for the failure to prosecute Jimmy Savile. In a remarkable but not untypical display of sleight of hand, Ashcroft wrote that Starmer was not personally responsible for the CPS decision in 2009 not to prosecute Savile, but that nevertheless it was 'ultimately his responsibility'. (p. 175). Such subtlety was, of course, completely lost on Johnson.

Baldwin acknowledges that Starmer has come in for a lot of criticism for his performance as DPP, that he effectively betrayed his earlier career as a champion of human rights and civil liberties. He writes of various controversies being 'woven together with some thin threads into a left-wing conspiracy theory in which Starmer is presented as an agent of the security state or even Anglo-American intelligence organisations'. These are, he insists, 'insidiously effective smears'. (p. 163)

On the contrary, the argument that Starmer's so-called 'pragmatism' led to him wholeheartedly embracing the interests of the British state and its role as a client of the United States, seems overwhelming. The best account of this is provided by Oliver Eagleton in his book, *The Starmer Project*, published in 2022 – essential reading for anyone concerned to understand Starmer's time at the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), his overall trajectory and the politics of Bad Labour. The contrast between Baldwin's sneering condescension towards Starmer's critics and Eagleton's forensic indictment of Starmer's trajectory is stark. According to Baldwin, Starmer certainly succeeded in breaking 'a few of those bleeding liberal hearts' while he was DPP, with his 'left-wing critics' claiming that he had 'turned into a willing accomplice of a Tory-led government and an instrument of an authoritarian security state'. (pp. 158, 160) Part of the problem with Baldwin's account is that he wants to deny this, while at the same time regarding it as not such a bad thing anyway! Much more convincing is Eagleton's judgement that by 2010 Starmer had 'embraced a right-wing statist-Atlanticism' and that this completed his 'journey from underdog defence lawyer to decorated Knight of the Realm', a journey that Starmer himself, and his biographer, have both tried to cover up. Eagleton writes most compellingly of how Starmer 'famously told journalists that he opposed harsh sentences in response to the 2011 riots, when in fact he had taken concrete steps to increase their severity'; of how 'Starmer's CPS was singularly responsible for [Julian Assange's] seven year confinement in the Ecuadorian Embassy'; of how, in the Ian Tomlinson case,<sup>5</sup> Starmer was guilty of 'dragging his heels over the investigations, finding arbitrary reasons to forego prosecution, refusing to challenge the Met's falsehoods' and so on and on. Eagleton's indictment is absolutely compelling.<sup>6</sup>

Starmer resigned as DPP in November 2013 and was elected to the Commons in the May 2015 general election. Here he had to negotiate the

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Tomlinson was a newspaper vendor who collapsed and died in the City of London, after being struck by a police officer during the 2009 G-20 summit protests. See <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10728685>>.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton (see note 3) pp. 35, 39, 52, 60-61

difficulties caused by the election of a left-winger, Jeremy Corbyn, as leader of the Labour Party in the aftermath of the Conservative victory. Corbyn's election was very much a repudiation of Blairism and New Labour by the party membership. Corbyn promised to end Labour's embrace of neo-liberalism and instead return to Wilsonian reformism on the domestic front. More importantly he was determined to end British subordination to the United States. The great majority of Labour MPs, however, were appalled at this prospect. Baldwin, not very convincingly it has to be said, portrays Starmer as only being very reluctantly drawn into the parliamentary party's war to overthrow Corbyn. The reality was that the promising June 2017 general election result, which saw Labour under Corbyn gain 30 seats with 40% of the vote, seriously concerned most Labour MPs. They were worried that Corbyn might actually win the next general election and consequently set about the task of undermining and removing him. Starmer remained very much in the background throughout all of this.

The Great Anti-Semitism Scam was the chosen instrument for destroying Corbyn and the Labour Left. Baldwin wholeheartedly embraces the Scam, writing that 'Many of the left-wing activists who joined Labour in the Corbyn years were so hostile to the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians that their views had metastasised into forms of prejudice against Jewish people that go back through the centuries and some of humanity's darkest periods of history'. Starmer had apparently considered resigning from Corbyn's shadow cabinet in protest against this anti-Semitism a number of times. (p. 241) This attempt to somehow associate the Left with anti-Semitic pogroms and the Holocaust – and Baldwin is one of many who have tried to do so – is wholly contemptible.

By the time of the December 2019 general election, most Labour MPs were clearly hoping another Conservative victory would finish Corbyn off once and for all. Many of them did their best to facilitate such an outcome, although they certainly never expected the scale of the Tory victory. Nevertheless, the harsh fact remains that in 2019 most Labour MPs preferred Boris Johnson to Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. Going into that election Corbyn faced unprecedented attacks from a united British Right, with the media – including the *Guardian* – against him. Additionally, most Labour MPs – while doing their level best to keep their own seats – did so in the hope that their party would lose the general election. Even with all these obstacles, Labour still got over 32% of the vote. This was only just below the percentage Starmer got against a bitterly divided British Right in 2024. Indeed, Starmer's vote in his own constituency was substantially lower in 2024 (18,884 votes – a 48.9% share of all those cast – and he had a majority of 11,572) than it was under Corbyn's leadership in

2019 (36,641 votes – a 64.5% share of all those cast – which was a majority of 27,763).<sup>7</sup>

On a personal note, I must confess to a certain naivety here with regard to the Labour Party today. Until the scandal surrounding Vaughan Gething, the leader of the Welsh Labour Party and the revelation that he had accepted a donation of £200,000 from a private company, the Dauson Environmental Group, I had been unaware of private companies interfering in internal Labour Party elections. The Dauson company was owned by David Neal, a businessman who had been convicted of environmental crimes and the donation was to help Gething's campaign to secure the leadership of Welsh Labour. My assumption was that this was an unusual situation. Private companies financing the election campaigns of candidates standing for Labour Party positions? Surely not! How out of date my understanding of today's Labour Party was. Baldwin is quite open about the money that poured in to Starmer's campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party. As he reveals, just three 'big donors', 'businessman Trevor Chinn, hedge fund manager Martin Taylor and the media tycoon Clive Hollick', contributed between them 'a total of £455,000' to his campaign for the Labour leadership. (pp. 249, 257) And they were not alone. This raises the question of whether one should consider the Labour Party as still being in any way an actual Labour Party – particularly when its leader was elected using funds provided by rich businessmen! While Labour has always been determined to be of service to big business and the super rich, the fact that they were actively involved in the election of the party leader was still something of a surprise.

One of the lesser-known pressure group/think tanks which supported Starmer's leadership bid was Labour Together, run by Morgan McSweeney. Much of the funding for this outfit came from the aforementioned Taylor, Chinn and Hollick. In 2021 Labour Together was fined £14,000 for not properly declaring 'around £700,000 in donations' (p. 249) – a substantial part which came from the Israel lobby in Britain.<sup>8</sup> Although Baldwin is quite open about the general part played by Labour Together, he omits the questionable funding issue. Mr. McSweeney is now Starmer's right-hand man and head of political strategy at 10 Downing Street. In that role, he is widely believed to be the architect of the ongoing efforts to eliminate the Left from the Labour Party once and for all.

This purge of the Left has been underway for some time and was merely

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<sup>7</sup> For details of the vote in Starmer's constituency, see the Parliamentary webpage for the 2024 results at <<https://members.parliament.uk/constituency/4105/election/422>> and the page for the 2019 results at <<https://members.parliament.uk/constituency/3536/election/397>>.

<sup>8</sup> See 'View from the Bridge' in *Lobster* 88 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/88/the-view-from-the-bridge-51/>> under subhead **The Labour Party and the Israel lobby**.

interrupted by Rishi Sunak calling the election. One example was the effective deselection of Lloyd Russell-Moyle, the left-wing MP for Brighton Kemptown, in May 2024. It is particularly worth noting the fate of Starmer's rival for the leadership, Rebecca Long-Bailey. Less than three months after that contest, she was removed from the shadow front bench. (The ostensible reason for this was her retweeting of a newspaper interview with actress Maxine Peake that was falsely labelled anti-Semitic. But this was more of an eagerly seized pretext than a serious cause for the sack.) Today Long-Bailey is one of the seven Labour MPs suspended from the parliamentary party for voting to end child poverty now.

But, while Starmer has got rid of Corbyn and looks well on the way to finishing off Long-Bailey and various other left MPs, what about his Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner? She was once a friend and ally of Long-Bailey and is still seen as a representative of some sort of residual Labour Left. There can be no doubt that Starmer would like to be rid of her as well, but hers is an elected position and so – for the time being – she is probably safe. What is interesting though is how she has characterised her own role. According to Michael Ashcroft in his biography/character assassination, *Red Queen?*, she has actually described herself as 'John Prescott in a Skirt'.<sup>9</sup> Prescott's role in Blair's New Labour government was to provide some working class trade unionist bluster to cover for relentlessly right-wing, pro-business policies. His reward was a seat in the House of Lords. Starmer's Bad Labour will not need any such cover and so one suspects Rayner's days are numbered, no matter how she compromises her politics.

What can we expect of Starmer's Bad Labour? He promises competence in

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Ashcroft, *Red Queen? The Unauthorised Biography of Angela Rayner*, (London: Biteback, 2024). 'John Prescott in a Skirt' is the title of Chapter 11 of the book. Ashcroft, it is worth noticing, exposed/created the controversy over the sale of Rayner's former council house, insisting that it needed investigation. This was promptly weaponised by the Tories in an attempt to destroy her and indeed a police investigation was launched. (pp. 59-68) She had no case to answer. It is interesting to contrast this with Ashcroft's discussion of Rishi Sunak's failure to declare all of his wife's business interests in his biography/love letter to the great man, *Going for Broke: The Rise of Rishi Sunak* (London: Biteback, 2020). Here he somewhat generously describes this as most likely 'an uncharacteristic oversight or misjudgement. Knowing Sunak, who is generally fastidious, there is no doubt an explanation'. (p. 293). Even more remarkable is his insistence that if Sunak's career ever 'hits the buffers', he will be 'snapped up for primetime television . . . a spot on Strictly Come Dancing seems entirely conceivable'. (p. 31). God help us! Ashcroft has, so far, avoided a biography of the appalling Boris Johnson, although he has published a biography of Carrie Johnson, *First Lady: Intrigue at the Court of Carrie and Boris Johnson*, (London: Biteback, 2022), that puts most of the blame for his incompetence on her. And most recently he has published a laudatory biography of Kemi Badenoch, *Blue Ambition* (London: Biteback 2024). Presumably she is his favourite for the Conservative leadership.

contrast to what the Tories offered, but otherwise we can be absolutely certain that whenever the interests of big business and the super rich require ordinary people to make sacrifices then this is what Bad Labour will impose. And his government is absolutely committed to Britain's role as a satellite of the United States. Despite widespread relief at the demise of the Tories, no one should have any great expectations of Bad Labour.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God: Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism*, published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>