

*The Fraud:
Keir Starmer, Morgan McSweeney and the Crisis of British Democracy*
Paul Holden
London:O/R Books, 2025, £20, p/b

Colin Challen

When I searched for this book's accompanying website, www.thefraud.info, topping the results list, ironically, was a gov.uk anti-fraud site, 'Stop. Think Fraud – how to report a scammer'. After reading Holden's book it becomes bruisingly clear that No. 10 is occupied by one of the biggest scammers of them all (as if we didn't know that already, of course). Holden's book is the most revealing and forensic account of Starmer's rise so far. Coming in at 540 pages, excluding footnotes and index (which are on the website), the detail it contains is astonishing. Unsurprisingly, it has not been reviewed in the mainstream media.¹ So be it. In these tumultuous times, who is interested in the story of how the current Labour leader was propelled into office? More people I suspect are now more interested in how soon he will be propelled *out* of office. Having said that, *The Fraud* will become a much consulted reference work on the recent, benighted history of the party. And it begs the question of whether the party will ever recover.

Oliver Eagleton's 2022 *The Starmer Project*, Tom Baldwin's 2024 *Keir Starmer: The Biography* and Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund's *Get In: The Inside Story of Labour Under Starmer*,² have all covered the five or so years leading up to Starmer's 'loveless landslide' in 2024, and the Svengali-like role of Starmer's now chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, and his secretive outfit Labour Together. But not in the granular detail which is Holden's hallmark. He devotes much attention, for example, to the way in which Labour Together failed to report much of its income to the Electoral Commission and hid its true intentions from Labour Party members. Labour Together claimed in public to have a mission to unite the party in the period after the peak of Corbynism. Only a small handful of people were privy to its real mission: to depose Corbyn

¹ You might think its description on the *Guardian* Bookshop's website would have prompted a full review in the paper's editorial pages. 'Based on Labour Party files, including some never before publicly seen, this explosive investigation lays bare the intrigues, stratagems, and deceptions that helped deliver Sir Keir Starmer to Downing Street' is the opening sentence.

² Reviewed by me in *Lobster* 90. See <<https://shorturl.at/mmxqA>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/90/get-in-the-inside-story-of-labour-under-starmer-by-patrick-maguire-and-gabriel-pogrund/>>.

using whatever tools, including astroturf campaigns to besmirch and denigrate the left, with anti-Semitism charges being a key component.

All this is now familiar territory. Indeed, it feels like such a well-worn path, we might prefer to search out new landscapes. That certainly is how the right, and most particularly Starmer's supporters, would choose to leave it. But Holden insists on asking questions, which, at least those members remaining in the Labour Party who feel that their membership means something – like being respected and listened to – might want answered. In a nutshell, there is ample evidence that what can be truly described as a conspiracy took place, which gave birth to a coup. The right in the party's only response now is 'the left hasn't learnt any lessons. It's time to move on'. The problem for the triumphant right is a deep suspicion that the Starmer project was all a bit of a con, which is now unravelling.

It is telling that in such a deep dive into Labour Together's history there is little to report on policy, with one glaring exception: the ten policy pledges Starmer put forward in his bid to win the party leadership in 2020. He claimed the 2019 general election manifesto was his 'foundational document'. This was patently untrue, and all his pledges unwound in quick succession. It seems to me that the only aim of Labour Together was to trample on Corbyn's legacy but without a clear idea of what was meant to replace it.

In a curious and very short review of Holden's book on the *PoliticsHome* website, while namechecking *Get In* by Maguire and Pogrund, the former MP, Blair advisor and left leaning centrist, Jon Cruddas writes:

The story – unprecedented in Labour history – of a leader subcontracting political control to a single faction. Fascinating yet disturbing; page after page [in *Get In*] of stitch-ups and defenestration. The reader could clock why Labour was ill-prepared for government, lacking in narrative or policy. Such difficult work – the hard yards of opposition – distracted from more enjoyable slaughter and bloodletting.³

Cruddas mentions in passing that he had an 'early involvement' with Labour Together. Actually he was a director of the organisation for several years and was one of its early movers. But it seems to have moved on under McSweeney and, when author Holden asked Cruddas about Labour Together's development of covert activities, he looked 'flummoxed'. Sadly, in as much as his previous association with the group will have lent it legitimacy, Cruddas emerges as something of a 'useful idiot' in the pages of *The Fraud*. Perhaps he will correct the record with a longer account of his knowledge of Labour Together. Much the same could be said of Neal Lawson, of Compass fame. An extensive quote

³ <<https://www.politicshome.com/opinion/article/jon-cruddas-reviews-the-fraud>>

captures his sense of betrayal:

Lawson had spent considerable time giving his insights to McSweeney, often in Lawson's own kitchen on the banks of the Thames. Arguably, Labour Together's previous public face was an elaborate act of mimicking the language and philosophy of Compass. Lawson would eventually declare in 2025 that McSweeney had 'ransacked' Compass for content and connections, writing vituperatively about how Labour Together under McSweeney was a 'modern day version of the Militant Tendency, a party within a party, masquerading as something it was not, lying to people about its purpose and then biting the hand that fed it.' The Labour Together Project and the Starmer Project that succeeded it repaid Lawson's generosity in their typical style: betrayal.' (p. 436)⁴

At a later point Lawson found himself, like hundreds of other members, facing the possibility of expulsion from the party on a flimsy charge.

If this book were to be given to every Labour party member (as perhaps it should) I'm sure a very big minority would say 'any chance we could use McSweeney's methods to beat the Tories (or Farage)?' For a significant portion of the membership the tribal impulse to beat the other side (whatever it is these days) will trump concerns about so-called bureaucratic misdemeanours. After all, on the back of such unsavoury behaviour we got back into power, didn't we? Who cares whether Starmer (or his successor) is soiled by political machinations, ain't that the way? Other members, probably fewer in number, would find the book distressing; but they too would stay on in the hope that one day the party might rediscover its core principles. A handful would resign their memberships and perhaps seek out the Greens, or whatever comes from Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's very difficult gestation of 'Your Party' (which will not win a single seat in the next general election). As *The Fraud* points out, of course, a multitude of members have already left Labour.

Is there anything new in all of this? Has Holden revealed a new form of political corruption, unheard of in modern times? Let me say that's not a claim he makes, but his exhaustive (and somewhat exhausting) exhumation of the history of Starmer's rise to power has parallels with Robert Caro's tracing of Lyndon Johnson's own corrupt and corrupting ascent. It takes time and a lot of

⁴ Since the Holden book's publication, Lawson has written a piece for the *Guardian* in which he claims that Labour Together's candidate for leader was really Wes Streeting. But assuming that Labour would lose the election of 2024, they installed Starmer as leader, thinking Streeting would replace him before the succeeding general election. 'Starmer's backers never meant him to be prime minister – his leadership was doomed from the start' at <<https://shorturl.at/sflvG>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/nov/13/keir-starmer-labour-prime-minister-corbyn-mps>>.

devoted energy to write such accounts, and even if authors make mistakes we owe them a debt of gratitude.

The Fraud asks the question 'What's behind Starmer?' And answers 'not very much really'. A useful blank sheet, which has been written on by the usual suspects. And now we must wonder how the Starmer (McSweeney) Project will seek to save itself from annihilation. Holden concludes with this:

Are there any limits to the lengths the Starmer Project might go in order to keep its grip on the power it wrested through a near-decade-long campaign of misdirection, political subterfuge, outright lying, and anti-democratic stitch-ups? (p. 536)

Probably not.

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