

The Starmer Project: A Journey to the Right

Oliver Eagleton

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First impressions can mislead, but the more I discovered here about Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer the more I became convinced that my hunches based on personal glimpses of him were correct.

I saw him initially when as Shadow Brexit minister he shared a London platform with his then leader, Jeremy Corbyn, the man Starmer later deprived of the Commons party whip. The second occasion was on the London Underground just as the former Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) got off at Kentish Town. Neither were the occasion for conversation, but both times he seemed furtive, as though, like a guilty schoolboy, he feared being found out for something unspeakable behind the bicycle sheds.

Oliver Eagleton does not reveal any such personal lapse. But he does trace a pattern of personal ambition, one much boosted by heading the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). In that role he detects compromises with the British and American states many will find objectionable in a Labour leader elected in 2020 on the promise of party unity and progressive, peaceful change.¹

The author shows the idealism of Starmer's Home Counties youth continuing as a barrister, with lots of *pro bono* work for deserving human rights causes. But he then details how his career progression into working with the police in Northern Ireland cemented less humane instincts into the firm grip of the British state and its allies.

When he became DPP in 2008 he worked closely with the Coalition and Conservative governments in the UK and the Obama administration in the US, commending himself as a safe pair of hands on both sides of the Atlantic.

Eagleton's dissection of Starmer's legal career is the most forensic – a characteristic loudly trumpeted by the Labour leader's supporters – I've yet seen. It's almost worth the price of the book in itself. For the author

¹ <<https://keirstarmer.com/plans/10-pledges/>>

relates one example after another in which police and intelligence agency abuse is not prosecuted, lawfare is encouraged and how, in extending the work of the CPS overseas under a Tory government 'as part of this closer alignment between executive and judiciary, Starmer took on himself the responsibilities of a British diplomat'.

Starmer developed a particularly close relationship with President Obama's attorney general Eric Holder.² The author writes:

Holder advised Starmer on how the CPS could best advance US counterterrorism objectives in Africa and the Middle East. Staffers who attended those meetings report that the two men developed a close and mutually admiring relationship. (p. 29)

Eagleton cites one example when Starmer 'worked doggedly to extradite the autistic IT expert Gary McKinnon to the United States. In 2001, McKinnon had gained access to US military databases, exploiting their surprisingly weak security systems to find information about UFOs.'

McKinnon never disclosed his findings to the public, but the embarrassed US government still indicted him for a potential 70-year sentence. Eagleton writes:

Starmer spoke directly to Holder's team about the case and pledged to seal the extradition. McKinnon, whose condition made him especially reliant on his family, was hounded through the courts from 2008 to 2012, becoming increasingly depressed and suicidal as successive appeals were thrown out. Fearing that he could spend the rest of his life in Guantanamo, McKinnon's mother, Janis Sharp, ambushed Starmer in Westminster to plead her case. (p. 30)

Here's her account of what took place as reproduced by Eagleton:

I couldn't understand it. Keir Starmer had written six books on human rights. I had such faith and expected so much more of him as DPP, but when I made a point of speaking to him after the session there was no trace of understanding.

'I'm feeling very uncomfortable,' said Mr Starmer. 'Speaking to you is making me feel very uncomfortable.'

Did he have any idea how that sounded to me, when he was supporting the extradition of my son to some foreign hellhole?

When I told the DPP of the mental torment Gary had been living

² <<https://tinyurl.com/5huut3t7>> or <<https://www.npr.org/2010/02/09/123493667/eric-holder-and-the-politics-of-terrorism-trials?t=1652771076653>>

in for a decade. He responded with the same stock phrases that officialdom used: that it had been through many courts and they had all agreed that extradition should take place. (p. 30)

I quote the McKinnon case at some length because it captures so much of the person who currently leads Labour: an ambitious man knowing on which side of the street the sun shines for career fulfilment and making all the necessary concessions to established orthodoxy to enjoy its warmth.

From that DPP role rather predictably follows membership of the Trilateral Commission,³ close identification with Israel,⁴ and severe intolerance of NATO critics.⁵ The disciplining of Corbyn and many Labour activists is all part of the same forbiddingly repressive picture.⁶

So how in 2020 does such a figure – a neophyte with no previous Labour history before being elected to Parliament five years before – come to head a party that had swept Jeremy Corbyn into its leadership?⁷

According to Eagleton, Corbyn carries some of the responsibility, although in circumstances of Brexit controversy largely of Starmer's making. After leading the improvement in Labour's general election performance in 2017, Corbyn faced the Brexit dilemma: how to maintain the support of his many members who largely supported Remain when many Labour voters wanted out of the European Union.⁸ The author describes the many efforts to deal with this problem in the frenzied Commons atmosphere after the 2017 General Election. Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May was seeking a solution to maintain her occupation of No 10 Downing Street and, like Corbyn, the leadership of

³ <<https://tinyurl.com/56465pr4>> or <<https://freddonaldson.com/2021/03/02/trilateral-commission-current-membership-with-2021-individual-affiliations-and-photos/>
<<https://trilateralmeetings.eu/the-european-group/>>

⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/3xfukzke>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/politics/israel-is-not-an-apartheid-state-says-keir-starmer-as-he-apologises-for-the-corbyn-years-5tTeGqYxJE3DmQdQI2WIss>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/67b8smzk>> or <<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/04/keir-starmer-labour-party-israel-apartheid-palestine-amnesty-report-jewish-chronicle>>

⁵ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-60333340>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/kksw6j3r>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/keir-starmer-labour-mps-nato-momentum-b997737.html>>

⁶ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54986916>>

⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/mrrekmvv>> or <https://medium.com/@pitt_bob/who-funded-keir-starmers-campaign-170a42b43fc0>

⁸ <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster80/lob80-corbyn-left-out.pdf>>

her party.

Starmer worked to prevent any 'soft Brexit' deal with No 10 – and that's not only Eagleton's conclusion. Former Unite union leader Len McCluskey offers chapter and verse on this in his autobiography.⁹ So does May's chief of staff Gavin Barwell who was central to the Government's negotiation with Starmer.¹⁰ What pushy Boris Johnson was then doing to enhance his claim to the top Tory job, equally ambitious Starmer was mirroring in his bid to replace Corbyn.

Eagleton suggests that the leftover coterie of New Labour Remainers – Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, Lord Mandelson – and their media allies had settled upon Starmer as their rightful heir long before the 2019 general election. Starmer had been a member of the 2016 Shadow Cabinet 'chicken coup' that had failed to remove Corbyn. He had backed Owen Smith in the subsequent leadership selection. As Shadow Brexit minister he identified with the well-resourced People's Vote campaign for a second referendum, pursuing that against Corbyn's wishes in the run-up to the 2019 election.¹¹ The author writes:

Of course, in the final months of 2019, Starmer was perfectly open to winning the election for Labour. If the party had entered government on a People's Vote platform, Starmer would have become leader of an invigorated Remain campaign, placing himself in an ideal position to challenge Corbyn for the leadership. But he was also sanguine about the prospect of an electoral meltdown. By that winter, he knew that the chances of a Corbyn victory were vanishingly slim and behind the scenes, Starmer's leadership bid was already under way. (p. 126)

When the General Election defeat duly came, the picture Eagleton paints is of a grief-stricken Labour membership desperately needing a way forward. Who better than a 'grown-up' lawyer, a knight of the realm with good hair and reassuring suits, to dry their tears, take them by the hand and lead them from crushed idealism into winning electoral realism again?

Most of those members know little of the Starmer history Eagleton details here. Nor, in my experience, did many of them *want* to know in

⁹ Len McCluskey, *Always Red*, (New York: OR Books, 2021)

¹⁰ Gavin Barwell, *Chief of Staff: Notes from Downing Street*, (London: Atlantic Books 2021)

¹¹ McCluskey (see note 9)
<<https://tinyurl.com/yckpp5yh>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/07/keir-starmer-battles-to-keep-labour-support-for-peoples-vote-alive>>

their 'Love Corbyn Hate Brexit' infantilism. In the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system that combination was never on offer in 2019, as Starmer and his discreetly assembled leadership campaign team well knew.

As soon as Starmer had been elected from a poor cast of leader wannabes he promptly put the issue of Brexit firmly behind him, quickly followed by the 10 pledges as leadership candidate his wealthy backers had paid to be posted to credulous party members.

But 'Labour anti-semitism', the other issue which had beset Corbyn, still had great political asset value for Starmer, a Zionist with family connections in Israel who had discreetly drawn on the resources of others sharing that political ideology. Membership purges followed under Starmer's loyal new staff at party HQ, including that of Corbyn himself.

Starmer hired a former Israeli Army intelligence man as 'a social listening and organising manager'.¹² We still await the long-promised report of the Forde inquiry into party bureaucrats' factional behaviour under Corbyn.

Among the resurfacing New Labour figures was Deborah Mattinson, the focus-group guru. She became Starmer's director of strategy.¹³ The practice of parachuting leadership favourites into 'safe' seats was revived with disastrous results in Hartlepool in 2021.¹⁴

Events have moved quickly since the publication of *The Starmer*

¹² <<https://www.jonathan-cook.net/2021-01-22/israel-spy-labour-starmer/>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/95f9r74m>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/02/lawyers-complain-to-labour-over-hiring-of-ex-israeli-intelligence-officer>>

¹³ Deborah Mattinson began working for the Labour Party alongside the late Philip (Lord) Gould under the auspices of the Shadow Communications Agency (SCA) when Neil Kinnock was leader.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Gould,_Baron_Gould_of_Brookwood>
<https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/9/archival_objects/454093>
<<https://tinyurl.com/262csv98>> or <https://www.research-live.com/article/news/deborah_mattinson_appointed_labour_head_of_strategy/id/5083542>

In the small world that is Labour politics, Starmer represents one of the constituencies in the borough of Camden. The leader of Camden Council is Georgia Gould, the daughter of Mattinson's former SCA colleague Philip Gould. Her mother, Baroness Rebuck, was one of the Labour peers signing *The Guardian* advertisement in 2019 criticising Jeremy Corbyn during the 'Labour anti-semitism' campaign.

<<https://tinyurl.com/yy7nw3pp>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/labour-peers-advert-guardian-jeremy-corbyn-failed-test-leadership-antisemitism-crisis-1.486555>>

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Hartlepool_by-election>
See also <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4z8hu4>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/may/15/wakefield-labour-party-walks-out-of-final-vote-on-by-election-candidate>>

Project. None of them – the revelations of No 10 hi-jinks during Covid lockdown, fast-rising inflation, dire economic warnings, Tory MPs behaving badly and much more – have seemed to improve Labour’s electoral standing. Even worse has been the impact on the party’s finances and campaigning effort of the shrinking and demoralised Labour membership.

Those remaining members of Labour would do well to read this well-indexed and footnoted evaluation of the man they hope will be the next Prime Minister. When this distressed country urgently needs reforming, radical change, the party has at its head someone held hostage to the declining United States and its obedient British poodle. Eagleton presents an account that forestalls any sense of disappointment or betrayal they may feel in years to come: Starmer’s first loyalty was always to himself.

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