

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8709>



Britain

# Starmer's first hundred days

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV597 - October 2024 -

Publication date: Wednesday 16 October 2024

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

*In just 100 days, the government has taken away winter fuel payments from pensioners, chosen to keep 250,000 children in poverty, and desecrated the value of international law.*

*How much longer will it take for the government to wake up and deliver the change that people expected and still deserve?*

Jeremy Corbyn M.P (12.10.24)

### **1 – A Partnership with Capital in Whose Interests?**

Starmer's immediate slapdown of Transport Secretary Louise Haigh's comments about P&O Ferries being a rogue company sums up the contradictions at the heart of this government [1]. P&O had sacked 800 workers and simply replaced them with much lower-paid ones. Even Grant Shapps, the Tory minister at the time, criticised it. Haigh called for consumers to boycott it and said her department would have nothing to do with it. The problem is that Starmer is keen for DP World, a Dubai-based company, to participate in the big investment summit he is holding next week.

On the one hand, Labour is waxing lyrical about the modest improvement it is legislating for in Britain's extremely oppressive labour laws. On the other, it is basing its whole growth project on a partnership with companies like DP World. Labour ideology claims that this will lead to more tax, better wages, and social spending.

A one-sided partnership with capital has replaced any notion at all of supporting the many rather than the few. Another story in The Guardian today shows how the private equity lobby is apparently being successful in scaling back Chancellor Rachel Reeves's supposed plans to increase capital gains tax on carried interest. Bosses pocket this when they buy up and restructure companies.

The government is hyping this investment conference—which will include another tax-dodging, anti-union business, Amazon—for all that it's worth. Starmer claims all this investment is new and is down to the new government. Hard to believe, given the lead-in time for this level of investment.

### **2 – Political Support for Labour Is Collapsing.**

Already the government's poll ratings have plummeted. A More in Common poll had them barely a couple of points ahead of the Tories. New Ipsos polling reveals Sir Keir's net popularity has fallen to a record low of minus 26 points—worse than Reform leader Nigel Farage. The Labour Party's net popularity also shrank 13.5 points to minus 21 points since the general election.

Although the honeymoon with big business is in full swing, it has ended quickly in public opinion. Despite some early scandals—cutting benefits for single parents and cuddling up to Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone—the Blair government never plunged to these depths. Two major decisions have resonated very negatively with the public: the axing of the winter fuel allowance except for extremely poor pensioners, and the 'freebie' scandal.

### **3 – Freebie Scandal Is Hurting Labour.**

Starmer, Reeves, Rayner, and Cooper have accepted donations for clothes and concerts of over £100k. The Tory press, which hardly attacked Johnson's corruption, have had a field day—just wait until they unearth the first pensioner death from hypothermia.

True, all these donations were declared, but most people just do not see the need for these highly paid politicians not to pay for their spectacles and clothes. Teachers or other workers who are in professional settings do not get free money to buy their suits.

The last time we had an outcry over MPs' expenses, the impact was significant and long-lasting. Starmer's relative political inexperience meant he completely underestimated all this. Even today, in his interview on the BBC podcast, he failed to acknowledge much of an error—loftily putting it down to side winds that all Prime Ministers have to deal with. Paying back less than 10% and promising not to take any more freebies will not stop people at football matches waving banners saying 'Two-tier Keir'.

### **4 – Freezing Out the Pensioners.**

Chancellor Rachel Reeves did not expect such a backlash about the axing of the universal winter fuel allowance. Labour thought everyone would follow the Richard Branson argument—why should millionaires receive a benefit they do not need? Let us target it better so we can save money. Of course, you could make the same argument about all universal benefits and the NHS.

Traditionally, social democrats have argued universal benefits are cheap to administer and avoid the reality that many people do not apply for means-tested benefits. Universal benefits bind people into a common good that involves them, and more progressive taxation would compensate for the Bransons of the world receiving it. We know 800,000 pensioners do not apply for pension credit, so they will not be covered by the safety net.

What is utterly cynical about the whole operation is that Reeves would gain no saving for the public purse at all if all those entitled to pension credit applied for it and then got the fuel allowance. The sums involved are relatively small in any case.

The idea that it is a tough decision is laughable—it is tough if you take on powerful interests like the rich or corporations, not if you target the vulnerable. Unlike with the two-child benefit cap where seven Labour MPs voted against the government, only one did on the fuel issue, although dozens abstained.

### **5 – Internal Democracy Stifled.**

Labour MPs' that voted against the government led to a draconian reaction from the Starmer leadership; all seven were suspended from the Parliamentary Party. This week it emerged that Labour MPs were instructed not to table any amendments to government bills and indeed not to voice open opposition to government policy. Blair was much more supple politically than Starmer on these issues.

The Prime Minister perhaps sees himself continuing his role as the head of the Crown Prosecution Service and views things in a management framework where little debate is allowed once an executive decision is made. Also, the Corbyn interlude has convinced the leadership that the tombstone on that particular project must be firmly cemented in. Blair never had to deal with anything like the Corbyn insurgency.

This anti-democratic, quasi-Stalinist approach has been replicated at a local constituency level too. Local members'

meetings are being tightly controlled with a new agenda system being implemented that limits political discussion and the number of motions that can be raised. Palestine is off the agenda completely. The leadership wants to drive the last remaining Corbynist sympathisers out of the party. Canvassers and leafleters for election campaigns are all that is required. In our local branch, ward meetings with discussion will be conducted on Zoom so they can be more easily controlled, and these will alternate with social meet-ups.

At the September Labour Party conference, a heckler was treated to rough handling and a rather demeaning whipping up of the floor by the Prime Minister. Another delegate leading the Socialist Education Association was unceremoniously booted out of conference for wearing a Palestine solidarity badge. The space for socialist activists inside Labour has been severely reduced. Many activists have left; others are formally holding on to membership but nearly all their political activity is carried out outside the party.

### **6 -No Change on Democratic Rights**

Very little difference can be observed between the Tories and Labour on democratic rights. The repressive legislation on political protest is not going to be repealed by Labour. Not a whisper has been uttered about the abnormally long sentences being given out to eco-activists such as those who threw soup over Van Gogh's Sunflowers.

While Labour has dumped the Rwanda plan, its narrative about stopping the small boats is similar to the Tory one. The focus is on the evil gangsters rather than providing safe and legal routes. So women and children continue to die in the Channel. Detention centres are being expanded despite the abuse and mistreatment reported at many of them. Tory minimum salary levels required for people legally here on work visas to bring their partners into the UK have remained unchanged.

Whereas Taylor Swift, who presumably needed a visa, is given a police escort by Labour, the grandson of Mandela, who was invited here to talk about Palestine solidarity, was refused entry. Starmer remains as firmly tied to US policy as Sunak was. No chance he will follow fellow leaders like Sánchez in Spain in recognising Palestinian statehood now or condemning any Israeli genocidal action.

### **7 – Conflict at the Top**

Much verbiage has been written about the internal squabbles in the leader's staff team. Sue Gray, the super civil servant brought in to create a smooth government apparatus, has been removed. Depending on whom you read, she was accused of micromanagement, taking decisions on whom ministers should appoint without going through Sir Keir, and cutting the pay and limiting the contracts of special advisers... while getting paid more than the PM.

As mentioned above, Starmer likes the technocratic, mission-led approach, and Gray suited the bill. He failed to see that letting Gray fall out with your main consigliere, who spearheaded the election win and helped you smash the left in the party, was probably a bad tactic. McSweeney, whom some commentators have compared to Cummings, is the new Chief of Staff. In the end, Cummings did for Johnson; there are still some on the right of Labour who would happily dispense with Starmer if he steps out of line.

### **8 – Some Positive but Limited Measures.**

It would be unbalanced for socialists not to accept some positive but often limited measures have been taken—the two-party system works on the basis that there are some material differences:

- Hillsborough Law, which sets out a duty of candour on public bodies

- Renters' reform, although not rent controls as exist in some other countries
- Rail nationalisation—but not of the rolling stock
- Lifting the ban on onshore wind farms and the green energy company—although nothing like the £28 billion original plan
- Settling the public sector disputes with above-inflation deals
- Limited some export of arms to Israel but leaving over 80% intact
- Labour laws a step forward but nowhere near enough

9 – **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back with Labour Laws.** It is worthwhile examining the limits of the new labour laws more closely. Individual rights are somewhat restored but the powers unions can use are still much more limited than in other European countries like Italy or France. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) still considers Britain to be in breach of international and EU standards on trade union rights even after Labour's new laws. There is an excellent analysis by Keith Ewing and John Hendy, the leading labour lawyer, in today's Morning Star:

It comes nowhere near the transformational proposals which Labour adopted in 2021 and 2022: A New Deal for Working People (...) The Bill is a bit like Swiss cheese. There are welcome new employment rights and improvements of existing rights. But it does not do nearly enough to remove the restraints on trade unions or to give them the powers they need to make a significant difference to the lives of the millions of workers who are without a voice at work. (...)

Although the Bill gives the Secretary of State and his enforcement officers enforcement powers in relation to a limited range of specified statutory rights, our labour law continues to be bedevilled by weak and inadequate remedies. While trade unions can be restrained by injunction when they break the law, there are no corresponding remedies to employers when they do the same.

It will remain impossible to restrain employers when, for example, they break the law on redundancy or fire-and-rehire consultation or refuse to reinstate an unfairly dismissed worker. Employers will remain free to choose whether to obey the law, and to buy themselves out of trouble if they decide not to do so. The failure to address this fundamental imbalance of power speaks volumes about the content of the Bill.

## 10 – Where Will the Left Opposition to This Government Come From?

In the first hundred days, we have seen unease in the PLP over the two-child cap and the fuel allowance but only seven rebels. The trade unions led the successful passing of an alternative economic approach at the Labour Party conference which included the maintenance of the fuel allowance and a wealth tax but is non-binding and will be ignored by the government. The motion would not have passed if it was down to CLP delegates. This shows the importance of working inside the trade unions.

The NEC election results for the membership section are very revealing. Only 13% of the members voted, showing the rampant depoliticisation but also the fact that the pro-leadership faction also does not lead an army of activists. It does not need to.

About a third of this 13% voted for left candidates, holding on to four of the five reps. Computed into numbers, this equates to between 12,000 and 15,000 people. This means there is now a greater number of left political activists outside Labour than inside.

Outside Labour, nearly all the groups are recruiting, and the Palestine Solidarity and anti-racist campaigns are vibrant, involving people way beyond the usual left milieu. Corbyn is accepting now that he is unlikely to be re-admitted to Labour, and he has semi-organised a group with the four left/Gaza independents and participated in discussions with currents that are looking to set up some sort of broad left party. It is all still very fragmented—for example, there were two left-of-Labour candidates at a recent Coventry council by-election who lost to Labour.

Two major issues arise—how is a left alternative organised democratically rather than as a structureless mash-up between leading personalities or the existing left groups, and secondly, there has to be a distinction between a broad mass party and a revolutionary Marxist one. If people involved in these discussions do not separate out these two sorts of political currents then you will end up in an impasse. Any new formation needs an openly eco-socialist approach and needs to seek common work with people in the Greens and other eco-activists. The Green Party continues to poll well—up three points in the latest Ipsos poll. Diane Abbott, in her autobiography, floats the idea of a progressive Labour/Green alliance.

### **11 – Tory Party Disarray Helps Labour.**

All of Starmer's problems can be relativised to a degree because of the disarray of the Tory Party. We now know their never-ending leadership race will end up with a leader from the right of the party. Whether this will stave off the threat from Reform UK or merely amplify those issues that Farage wins most votes on is difficult to assess.

The Reform UK conference attracted 4,000 people and it is two points up in the polls. If Labour fails to convince people that it is changing their living conditions, then there is plenty of space for the hard right to further progress. Reform is second to Labour in over 80 seats, while in other areas the Greens are becoming the main challenger. Labour's victory was a very thin landslide on a lower vote than Corbyn won. More worrying is the growing influence of the fascist far right. These groups are raising money to support their 'political prisoners' in jail after the attempted pogroms. Tommy Robinson is selling a lot of his book and organising a demonstration on the 26th October which anti-racists are opposing.

### **12 – Bosses with Labour for Now.**

Finally, the bosses are happy enough sticking with the Labour B team for the moment... There are huge bungs of money coming their way as a result of the partnership strategy.

Take the carbon capture deal for Liverpool and Teesside worth around £20 billion. The carbon savings are overestimated by the government and the money could be better spent. A lot of this money will be going directly to the fossil fuel companies [2]

The big property development and building companies are likely also to be the main winners in Labour's housing programme rather than the homeless or those needing social housing rather than affordable or market-priced homes. Changing building planning regulations and new towns will not solve the housing crisis unless there are homes cheap enough to buy or rent. Why would developers ever want housing to become cheap or house prices to decline?

Contradictions run through all of Labour's policies but for the capitalists they look a more reliable pair of hands for now than a Tory Party led by Jenrick or Badenoch.

[AntiCapitalst Resistance](#)

## Starmer's first hundred days

---

PS:

*If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint.* Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

---

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce81p528ejmo>.

[2] See Monbiot's article in The Guardian <https://www.monbiot.com/2024/10/14/money-pit/>).