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**Britain**

# **Starmer's first year – things can only get worse**

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**Sitting in number 10 Downing Street after the government's debacle and U turn over the welfare, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Chief of Staff Morgan McSweeney must have thought: these people are so ungrateful.**

"Here they are taking a wrecking ball to Reeves and Kendall's project to save £5 billion with welfare cuts. But I made these MPs. I ensured nearly every left wing candidate had been eliminated early from any selection process. My team assiduously sifted through thousands of social media posts to smear any lefties. We intervened to fix our candidates or find irregularities to remove the left."

Like his predecessor in the dark arts, Peter Mandelson [\[1\]](#), McSweeney wanted to put even the embers of Corbynism in a sealed tomb.

Electoral wizards and data gurus come unstuck when popular resistance messes up their algorithms and conflict with focus group views. McSweeney and Starmer were convinced cutting welfare was popular with the red wall voters and those tempted to join Reform. They underestimated the experiences of disabled people, their friends and families.

New MPs who have more contact with the public through constituency surgeries began to realise that the vicious cuts to Personal Independence Payments were as bad as cutting pensioners' winter fuel allowances. Their mailboxes were full of outrage and people demonstrated in their towns. It dawned on them that some of their majorities were less than those people receiving PIP payments.

Data people like McSweeney always take snapshots, often from biased questions, and they missed the mass reaction. He had not seen that disabled people and their allies in the labour movement can organise. The U turn was decided not out of any newfound warmth for the difficulties of sick or disabled people but because it looked like it was going to be a parliamentary defeat.

Starmer had relied on tools like Meg Hillier to work out a shoddy compromise, but our Meg does not get popular resistance either. She had refused to lift a finger to support her fellow Hackney MP, Diane Abbott, when McSweeney and his team tried to dump her before the last election.

## Labour's political project

What lies behind the political humiliation and incompetence of the Starmer team shown in this sorry episode? Their political project –openly laid out in the various missions, milestones and manifestos before the July 2024 false landslide – was clear.

They would govern in close partnership with capital, develop policies primarily to facilitate capitalist growth and as a result use the trickle down to improve living standards. The welfare state would be slightly better funded than under the Tories but reformed and digitalised to save money so that capital would not have to be taxed any higher. All the demagoguery about change and a new vision for British people is just flimflam.

Nobody should be surprised at what happened in the first year. Certainly, the Marxist left correctly foresaw the

general direction and predicted the inevitable rise of Reform as Starmer lost support both on his right and left. However, the retreats on even some of the progressive changes we all support on the green economy, trans rights or on scrapping the two child benefit cap have surprised even us. As Steve Coogan, the actor said:

"I knew before the election he was going to be disappointing. He hasn't disappointed me in how disappointing he's been."

Unlike Tory governments there is still an organic link – albeit weakened – between the unions, progressive movements and the Labour party. If the subordinate partnership with capital means Reeves follows the arbitrary fiscal rules about the deficit and public spending, then this potentially creates tension with these currents inside or outside Labour. So, when pensioners and disabled people are put under the bus to make sure the markets are happy even the newly elected army of Starmerite MPs feel the pressure from the labour movement and campaigns.

Starmer, his acolytes and the mainstream media have exaggerated the prime minister's successes in foreign policy. Grovelling before Trump with a royal invitation from Prince Charles is supposed to count as high level diplomacy. A few trade deals here and there are hailed as guaranteeing British growth. Apart from a little wringing of hands over the 'humanitarian' crisis in Gaza or the excesses of West Bank settlers, arms continue to be sold to Israel, and the word genocide cannot be said by any government representative.

While the Spanish social democratic government recognises Palestine statehood the Labour government will only do so if there is an international consensus – meaning if Trump is okay with it. Starmer and his team have also underestimated the strength and depth of the pro-Palestine movement. A generation has taken up the Palestinian flag of resistance as we have seen with the popularity of Kneecap and Bob Vylan.

Consequently, the government is trying to divide and weaken the movement by proscribing the non-violent Palestine Action group as terrorist – equivalent to ISIS. The police has charged leaders of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign for supposedly breaking the new public order regulations at a demonstration earlier this year. Despite this repression a big majority of the British people support Palestinian rights and do not accept the Israeli government's version of reality.

There is no sign of the solidarity movement weakening. Zara Sultana's resignation from Labour and joining up with Corbyn to found a new left party will mean Labour will continue to pay a big political price for its position on Gaza.

## Where is the change?

The government's net approval rating has fallen to a record low of -54. A party that won almost 34 per cent last July has, within a year, fallen among some pollsters to the low 20s. Starmer's personal approval rating is at a record low for a prime minister in their first year when normally there is a honeymoon period.

Most of the progressive policies it has announced such as the proposed new labour laws, the green transition measure, more investment for house building or rail nationalisation do not have an immediate effect on people's standard of living and are already being watered down or are likely, like the housing policy, not to hit their targets. Even the new breakfast clubs and nursery provision are not on stream and will be phased in.

On the other hand the cuts or the failure to end the two child benefit cap do have an immediate effect. The holy grail of economic growth is a mirage. Nothing is done about rising utility bills and despite massive public opinion in favour

of bringing water back into public ownership this has been flatly ruled out in favour of more handouts to the private companies. For the average voter the big change Labour talked about that helped win them the election is a joke as food and housing costs continue to rise.

A survey of Labour members by Labour List indicates an appetite for resetting to the left – which must encourage Rayner's manoeuvres. A Guardian survey found:

“Respondents who felt decidedly negative about the government's first year were split into those who desired a far more radical socialist governing approach and those who felt the government had ignored the will of the public in favour of left-wing concessions.”

The problem for Labour strategists is that it is losing votes to its right to Reform and to its left to the Greens and left independents. Given its overall project of partnership with capital it is difficult to see how it can easily resolve this dilemma. As James Meadway, an economist who has now joined the Green,s notes in his Facebook post:

“The Office of Budget Responsibility long term forecast is a wake up call- the version of broadly social democratic Britain we lived in for 80 years – moderate growth, moderate redistribution and moderate social spending is coming to an end. Mainstream parties have only tweaks, solutions will come from outside establishment, complete overhaul of taxes, benefits, public spending.”

## False excuses

The Labour spin machine has gone into overdrive to provide excuses or fake explanations for why things have gone wrong:

- It's the Tories fault and their fiscal black hole. As though Labour experts had no idea that this
- We have done great things, but we have failed to communicate it well, our narrative is not good, we are not telling a good story. This is the Polly Toynbee line repeated endlessly in her *Guardian* columns. The reality is that the few good things are outweighed by not much changing. You cannot spin reality into something totally different.
- We just need an overall plan. As we explained earlier there is a clear plan to partner capital to create growth.
- The press and media are undermining us. Nothing like the way Corbyn was treated and this is a given for Labour governments. Some parts of the media are still quite soft on Starmer, particularly on foreign policy and this could consolidate if the choice is to be him or a loose cannon like Farage or what is left of the Tories (Kemi Badenoch or a Trumpist Jenrick).
- It is Keir's personal lack of ideology, vision or uncertain political grip. He is technocratic, too pragmatic and not ideological enough. One senior MP said he should get off the f...king plane and start working the tea room in Westminster. He himself said he got distracted by foreign affairs – as if he did not know the Prime Minister's job description. His attempt to contrast Johnson or Truss unruliness has gone too far. There is truth in this, but personal issues are a secondary consideration. Starmer expresses the ideology and policy of the right wing, Labour leadership team. Focusing too much on Starmer the man fails to understand this.
- So some of the Labour left focus on trying to replace him as a strategy. But would a change – which could be Streeting as likely as Rayner or Burnham – really change much? On big questions like Gaza or migrants there is not much difference between the three of them. A variation on this argument is that Labour could be saved against the Reform threat if Rayner won and reset Labour slightly to the -Others blame advisors like McSweeney, but the PM and cabinet decide. Reeves is chosen as another scapegoat but since the tears episode on parliament TV and the support of the bond market her position appears solid even though it boxes Starmer into that alliance... Still others blame a key civil servant like the cabinet secretary.

Another angle is provided by leadership contender, Andy Burnham, Manchester mayor, who says it is over-centralisation. Things would be so much better if they gave more money to mayors (like him). He wrote a piece in the *Guardian* on the 10th July where he openly criticises ministers handling of the welfare reforms. He is careful not to directly name Starmer.

Burnham counterposes the preventative care that is being implemented in Manchester under his watch –greatly exaggerating the impact of this on inequality. Burnham is probably alarmed by Rayner's big role in brokering the deal with the soft left Labour MPs over the welfare reforms.

## What next?

The U turns mean Reeves has to find £6 billion in cuts or tax rises in the Autumn budget. More voices are being raised in the Parliamentary Labour Party and elsewhere (Neil Kinnock) for a wealth tax. Gordon Brown had talked about a tax on the banks and the gambling industry. Angela Rayner in a leaked memo to Reeves gave 6 tax rises she could make.

The New Statesmen – very much of the soft Left – headlined its recent issue with the words – Just Raise Tax. It cannot be excluded that there might be some tax hitting the better off although the smart money is on keeping the current tax thresholds which raises substantial sums without being termed a tax rise.

A big test will be the May 2026 elections in urban centres and devolved parliament elections in Wales and Scotland. Polls suggest Labour could come in third behind Plaid and Reform in Wales. Greens and any new left party could make gains in the cities. A poll has returned 10% support for a Corbyn party. That Labour has officially responded to Zarah Sultana's defection with Yvette Cooper speaking against about it mean that they are aware that the left party is an electoral threat.

Sultana's move, with 70 thousand already signed up online in less than a week, definitely extends the potential reach of this new project. A deal with the Greens to share out seats would increase the potential, and this may be more likely if the left Green, Zack Polanski, wins the leadership election.

Inside Labour membership is still falling and finance has become tighter. It will struggle to mobilise enough members to canvass in the upcoming elections. According to LabourList, the party is unable to balance its books this year, and will need "at least £4m" to fight elections in 2026.

Could poor electoral results next May lead to a leadership election? Labour is notoriously more cautious than the Tories in replacing sitting leaders. What counts in the PLP is whether enough MPs think they have a better chance of holding their seats in the next election with Starmer in post. Angela Rayner's role as mediator with the soft left and other backbenchers in the recent welfare cuts fiasco has consolidated her position. She even has negotiated a Deputy Leader's office with 30 staff.

While there is no need to be neutral in any forthcoming leadership battle between Rayner and Streeter, it would be a mistake for the radical or Marxist left to focus their attention on that choice. We need to accompany and participate in resistance to this pro-capitalist government whether this is a union struggle, a campaign or a political alternative like the new Left grouping. As we saw with the partial roll back of PIP cuts, organised resistance on the streets and intervening with the unions and elected representatives can make a difference.

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Source: [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] Now ambassador to the US but Labour's Director of Communications 1985-1990 then held a number of governmental posts during Tony Blair's time as Prime Minister.