

BY NOVEMBER 2015, just six months after being elected as an MP, Angela Rayner's reputation was rising.

She had made a well-received maiden speech in which she expressed her pride at being Ashton-under-Lyne's first ever woman MP, and promised to do 'all in my power' to live up to her predecessors.

'Of course, I could never fill their shoes — mine tend to have three-inch heels and to be rather more colourful — but I walk in their footsteps,' she quipped, adding more seriously: 'I lay claim to being the only Member of Parliament ever to have worked as a home carer.'

'Perhaps I am also the only Member who, at the age of 16 and pregnant, was told in no uncertain terms that I would never amount to anything. If only those people could see me now!'

Summing up, she said: 'I will always tell it how it is — my constituents deserve no less — and I will do so in my own little northern way.'

Her working-class background and straight talking had also caught the attention of the party's recently — and unexpectedly — elected new leader, ardent socialist Jeremy Corbyn.

So it was unfortunate that her penchant for 'telling it how it is' and fondness for 'three-inch heels' should then have conspired to reveal another side to her character.

She'd ordered a pair of £195 novelty Star Wars shoes with four-inch heels in advance, then reacted furiously when she learned the shop had sold out on the day of their release.

The problem was that she aired her grievance, in an error-strewn personal letter to the manager, on House of Commons notepaper — which is strictly against Parliament rules.

'I have been a customer of yours for several years and have bought many thousands of pounds worth of shoes,' she wrote.

'This is not the sort of service I expect. I have only ever brought [sic] your shoes and I am loathed [sic] to do so again, or recommend your shoes to others. I am writing to let you know that treating customers in that way will only cost you more in the long term.'

In fact, the Brighton shop had always allowed customers who turned up at its doors to have first pick of any new range. The manager recalled being so 'shaken' by her letter that he spent some time locating a pair of the Star Wars shoes in Rayner's size.

WHEN he phoned to let her know he'd found some — in China — she apparently ranted at him before abruptly terminating the call.

A relatively trivial incident? Perhaps — but it raised questions about her character. Indeed, one former colleague says that some of Rayner's staff soon began to expect such conduct.

'Angela can be wild at times,' they reflected. 'Her judgment goes. The story about the Star Wars shoes is a classic example. It was literally a case of: "Do you know who I am?"'

'She became so jumped up and entitled. I was appalled at her behaviour, her treatment of people. She was like an unguided missile, with no thought for anyone or for her own position as an elected representative.'

'She was becoming too big for her boots at this point. What's remarkable is that she didn't learn from that.'

Others who worked with Rayner say they also began to detect signs of what they took to be self-importance. One recalls: 'There was a pomposity about her. At the [party] confer-



by Lord Ashcroft

ence in Liverpool, we were walking to a meeting and she suddenly stopped and exclaimed: "Where are all my staff?"

'I explained that everyone was busy with work for the conference, and she said: "Well, they should be here with me. I look like I haven't got any staff. I'm Billy No-Mates, and it doesn't look good."

'She wanted people with her wherever she went — a sort of entourage — to big her up so that people would take notice of her. That was the ego going mad.'

'Staff started to take the mickey behind her back and began calling her The Diva. We'd say: "What's The Diva up to today?" or "You'll never guess what The Diva's doing now!"'

This source continues: 'She was doing this in the constituency as well. Staff complained that it was taking them away from their work — dealing with casework, answering the phone and emails and so on — because they had to nurse-maid Angela constantly.'

'I said to her: "This can't carry on, you need to drive yourself or ask [your husband] Mark to drive you," and she went spare.'

'Then she mentioned [Labour MP] Jo Cox's murder as the understandable reason for her to be accompanied all the time. Of course, it was very difficult to argue with her once Jo Cox's name had been mentioned.'

Rayner's appointment as Shadow Education Secretary in July 2016 was greeted in some quarters with disbelief. Some objected to the fact she had been elevated despite not appearing to have a coherent political philosophy. ('Ideology never put food on my table,' she has often remarked.)

Others thought she would be out of her depth. A political colleague says: 'They respect her, but they cannot respect the way she's prospered. They've almost got more respect for the Corbynistas, who at least have some ideological belief.'

Yet those

Complaint: The £195 Star Wars shoes

Can even Keir Starmer stop the irrepressible rise of the

RED QUEEN?



Promotion: Jeremy Corbyn with Angela Rayner in July 2019

close to Rayner say her underdog status actually spurred her on.

'At every point,' says one former colleague, 'she has been underestimated or patronised, and that puts her in such a position of power. She thrives on it.'

She has certainly proved her detractors wrong. Less than five years after becoming an MP, Rayner was elected deputy leader of the Labour Party, and last year Sir Keir Starmer promised her the post of deputy prime minister in a future Labour government.

Thus, depending on the result of the general election, she is poised to become the second most powerful politician in the country.

SO HOW did Rayner — whose deprived background I will describe in detail in tomorrow's The Mail on Sunday — achieve such a remarkably rapid ascent?

Her first break was to be appointed a shop steward for trade union Unison, while employed as a home help for Stockport Council in Greater Manchester. Over the next 13 years, she rose through the ranks to become the union's North-West convenor, in charge of 200,000 members.

Then, in 2015, with union backing, she won the seat of Ashton-under-Lyne. Jeremy Corbyn is largely responsible for the speed of her climb up the ministerial ladder. After becoming leader, he appointed Rayner a junior whip.

Just a few months later, in January 2016, he made her the Shadow Work and Pensions Minister. It

was a challenging job for someone who'd never passed a GCSE, but she tried her best to familiarise herself with the fiendishly complicated world of annuities, retirement funds and fiscal consolidation. 'She didn't have any affinity

for the subject,' says a former colleague. 'But she made a decent fist of it, because she's good at presenting an image of competence. Some of the meetings she sat in on were turgid, arcane and full of jargon that no sane person

As Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner could soon be one of the most powerful women in Britain. But what do we know about her? A major biography explores her fascinating back story

would understand. She worked hard to give the impression she knew what she was talking about, but it was all an act, really, albeit quite a convincing one.'

During this period, Rayner backed Remain in the Brexit referendum. So did Corbyn, though it was clear he'd campaigned for it only half-heartedly. On June 26,

three days after the referendum, Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn was sacked for telling Corbyn he'd lost confidence in his leadership. Incensed by Benn's departure, a further 19 Shadow Cabinet members resigned.

The following day, Corbyn drew up a list of replacements, and Rayner was made Shadow Minis-

ter for Women and Equalities. When the list was made public, she was addressing a hastily arranged pro-Corbyn rally taking place in Parliament Square.

A senior colleague remembers the event well: 'Jeremy should really have resigned that night, but ... the next I know, Angela's on this stage defending Jeremy

with a fist in the air, like a hard-Left comrade.'

Yet another source says: 'In certain parliamentary circles, they were absolutely livid with her. Some MPs have never forgiven her. There were all these Labour MPs who'd given up their front-bench roles, and this colleague of theirs — who'd only just been elected — was on stage.'

'And then it was like she [pretended] she didn't know what she was doing. She went to see the chief whip in tears, saying: "Some Labour MPs are being horrible to me." It was the first time she'd ever been challenged.'

Rayner was not upset for long: the next day, the Shadow Education Secretary resigned and Corbyn handed her the prestigious post previously held by such heavyweights as Neil Kinnock, Jack Straw and David Blunkett.

Today, some who were close to Corbyn freely admit that, even if Rayner had been a university graduate, it's highly improbable she'd have been given this brief at any other time with so few political miles on the clock.

'Angela was one of several MPs who'd supported Jeremy — and because the Shadow Cabinet had to be filled asap, a whole raft of people were promoted in a way that wouldn't have happened in the normal run of things,' said a senior Labour figure.

'The pressure on Angela was great. To be able to do a job like that a year after becoming an MP, with no experience, is a big ask.'

But Rayner is determined and

ambitious. 'I remember her talking about becoming deputy leader of the Labour Party from as far back as 2016,' says a former colleague. 'She definitely had it in her sights.'

In the meantime, she was making a splash in her new post.

Within a week, she was attacking the Government over teachers' pay and conditions, and refusing to condemn strike action called by the National Union of Teachers. She also raged against grammar schools.

Not everyone was a fan of the articulate and colourfully dressed new Shadow Education Secretary. In 2017, a Sunday newspaper published a leaked copy of a Labour focus-group report, in which Manchester-based voters were asked about Rayner. The responses were said to be 'overwhelmingly negative': she was considered 'not likeable', a 'bit charity-shop-looking' and 'weird'.

Who leaked this information? One former colleague claimed: 'It was deliberately leaked by the leader's [Corbyn's] office to discredit Angela.'

'I don't think it was a political thing — it was more a question of: "Who is she? What does she believe in?"'

'When this story dropped, all hell broke loose. Angela went bonkers. She was ranting and raving to me. I had to comfort her and persuade her not to resign, which she was threatening to do.'

'She was saying: "I've played the game with these bastards and this is what they've done to me." She was terribly hurt — particularly by the "charity shop" description. She repeated it endlessly to me over the next few days.'

But if she'd again shown she was surprisingly vulnerable, Rayner remained bent on raising her profile — giving numerous interviews and even appearing on BBC TV's Have I Got News For You.

A former MP said: 'She started talking about herself in the third person. She kept talking to people about "Project Angela". She'd begun to believe the hype. Even her friends said: "This is ridiculous, she thinks she's going to be a Labour leader."'

But two other colleagues, both of whom have worked closely with her, feel this side of Rayner is largely bravado. Her real problem, they maintain, is a lack of self-esteem which dates back to her difficult childhood.

'She's not a narcissist — she doesn't think the world revolves around her,' said one. 'But she hasn't found a balance yet.'

Although she was increasingly outspoken in public, an ex-colleague claims Rayner barely said a word in the Shadow Cabinet.

'She basically didn't do the work. She didn't go to many meetings and it was a problem. Jeremy's office didn't get on particularly well with her, as she was erratic.'

CORBYN'S exit after Boris Johnson defeated him in the 2019 general election meant the posts of both leader and deputy were up for grabs.

Still only 39, Rayner stood for deputy, a post voted on directly by Labour Party members. This meant Sir Keir Starmer, the new leader, would not be able to sack her.

Running her campaign was Labour MP Sam Tarry, who'd also

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Picture: REUTERS/HANNAH MCKAY

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worked on Jeremy Corbyn's two leadership election campaigns. In July 2020, it was reported that Rayner's marriage had broken down; by the end of the year, it was clear she was in a relationship with Tarry. (They split up at the end of last year.)

From the start, there were tensions between Starmer and his deputy. According to one insider, Rayner maintained a warm friendship with Corbyn behind the scenes, which continued until Starmer suspended him from the party in October 2020.

Nor did it help when her supporters claimed she felt as though she'd had her 'wings clipped' by Starmer and that he'd sidelined her in favour of his 'tight-knit circle of Camden allies'. Later she told a reporter that Starmer does 'cheese me off'.

DISCIPLINE has always been important to him, whereas Rayner has a habit of shooting her mouth off. At the 2021 Labour Party conference fringe meeting, she tore into the Conservatives, saying: 'I'm sick of shouting from the sidelines and I bet you're lot are, too.' Amid yelps and applause from supporters, she added: 'We cannot get any worse than a bunch of scum, homophobic, racist, misogynistic, absolute pile of [inaudible] banana republic, vile, nasty, Etonian [inaudible] piece of scum.'

Starmer was clearly unimpressed. 'Angela said those words; she takes a different approach to me,' he said stiffly later. 'It's not language that I would have used.'

When he did his next reshuffle, he didn't even let her know in advance — she had to find out the details from journalists.

Despite his wary attitude to her, however, she seemed to shine on the rare occasions she has stood in for him at Question Time in the debating chamber. Former Tory MP Nicholas Soames, for one, has nothing but praise for her.

'She's got presence,' he said. 'She's brilliant at the dispatch box. The House loves that she's fiery. Not many MPs have the ability to stand there and be funny and mischievous, but she does.'

Others say it's not just that Rayner acquitted herself well, it's also that Boris Johnson was noticeably diffident when debating with her. As one observer remarked: 'Boris found it hard to

deal with her in the Commons because she comes from a totally different background to him. He was scared of seeming snobbish or misogynistic, so he always had to think carefully about what he said to her. She inhibited him in a way no male opponent did.'

So what does the future hold for Rayner? 'I'm John Prescott in a skirt, me,' she said, referring to the politician who was deputy Labour leader between 1994 and 2007. 'I wear my heart on my sleeve. I think that is a very northern thing.'

She also has no fear about damaging her reputation with the kind of confidences other MPs might prefer to keep private.

Recently, she chose the Financial Times to reveal that she 'didn't have a particularly strong view either way' about Brexit; that she had a £320,000 mortgage; and that in 2010 she borrowed £5,600 to have a breast enhancement operation. 'I had my boob job on my 30th birthday,' she said. 'I'd lost 6st thanks to my personal

trainer, but my boobs just looked like two boiled eggs in socks. You know, like basset hound ears. You can't be 30 and have a chest like an 84-year-old granny.'

Meanwhile, she's done nothing to dampen speculation that she might one day try to become Prime Minister.

'Do you think the United Kingdom is ready for that?' she asked in 2022, adding: 'Try before you buy. Put Keir in as PM and me as

deputy, then see how good I am.

'I reckon I will be good at it. If people are happy, then maybe I'll have a go after him.'

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education spokesperson. On top of that, she has long hair and a penchant for colourful shoes.

Even the Star Wars shoes episode is alluded to, when Abigail breaks House of Commons rules by using official notepaper to book a table at the Ivy restaurant in London.

Another 'coincidence' concerns Abigail's computer password: 'VomitBreath69'. A friend of Rayner's says the MP is known to have used this password as well.

'Angela used to tell a story that when she and [her ex-husband] Mark went on their first date, they had a bad Indian meal and in the hotel room afterwards they were both sick, so "vomit breath" became her Commons password,' says the friend.

Finnegan has only spoken about *Betrayal* once. When asked whether he had based Abigail on Rayner, he said: 'People who read the book will draw their own conclusions about the characters in it and what happens when politicians pursue power ruthlessly.'

Riddle of her ex-aide's thriller

HOW do you take revenge against your ex-boss if you've signed a binding non-disclosure agreement (NDA)?

Matt Finnegan, who was once Angela Rayner's chief adviser, found an ingenious way of doing so.

For two years, he'd written her speeches, crafted policy and helped daily to steer her responses to key issues.

Then in 2017, he left Rayner's office abruptly — while on sick leave with diabetes — in circumstances that have never been made public.

Labour sources say Finnegan was deeply hurt. His subsequent action for 'unfair dismissal and disability discrimination' was settled — but apparently only after then Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell learned that Finnegan had kept numerous texts and emails from Rayner.

'They were considered to be explosive and immensely damaging to her. McDonnell used his influence to knock some sense into Angela's head, and things were then resolved,' said a Labour source.

The Labour Party offered Finnegan

£20,000 on condition he signed an NDA. After that, he published a political thriller — with the title *Betrayal*.

The plot centres on a ruthless Labour MP, Abigail Jeffers, who is caught making a bogus expenses claim for a hotel bill after a drunken one-night stand with a fellow member of the Shadow Cabinet. After the Shadow Chancellor finds out, he tells her to resign.

When he falls into a diabetic coma, Abigail gives him a fatal overdose of insulin to conceal her misdeed. Her crime is eventually discovered by a Daily Mail journalist.

While this story is obviously far-fetched, some of the descriptions of Abigail are all too realistic. Like Rayner, she's a young MP with a Northern seat. She is 'gobby but bright', having 'never had a proper education', and has a child 'whom she gave birth to at the age of 16 and who figured in many of her speeches'.

She was also a Unison shop steward, and soon after her election as an MP, she is promoted to become the Labour Party's

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IN TOMORROW'S **The Mail** ON SUNDAY

How Rayner's headmaster saved her from the bullies

Sidebar... or it didn't happen!

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