

Revealed in new book on PM’s first months in power, a bombshell claim from senior Labour insiders...

KEIR STARMER is undeniably a member of the Establishment. He attended a fee-paying school, studied at Oxford, became a successful barrister, was appointed Director of Public Prosecutions, accepted a knighthood, entered the Commons and has now become Prime Minister.

And yet despite having succeeded in life thanks to his own hard work, he seems always to be at pains to distance himself from the Establishment by speaking so often of his ‘working-class’ roots and his socialism. The perception remains of him being a man of contradictions, someone who faces in two directions at once. It makes him hard to fathom. Where exactly does he fit on the political spectrum?

When he was elected as leader of the Labour Party, it was on a prospectus that paid tribute to the Left-wing policies of his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn. Then over the next four years he seemed to renounce Corbynism by tacking towards the centre; under him Labour was rebuilt by those on the party’s Right.

But as soon as power was secured and he fulfilled his dream of becoming prime

‘I think he is just an empty suit, a puppet’

minister, his administration pursued policies of which Corbyn would be far more likely to approve than would a centrist like Tony Blair. Within the first month, nearly £10 billion was lavished on public-sector pay rises, without any conditions. Since then there have been:

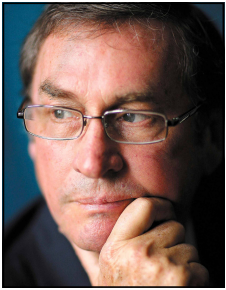
- A further £40 billion of tax rises;
- £70 billion of public spending announcements ranging from railway re-nationalisation to green energy;
- The imposition of VAT on private school fees;
- The promotion of workers’ rights at an estimated cost to businesses of £5 billion per year;
- The reversal of changes made by New Labour and later the Tories to the education system;
- A foreign policy programme that appears to put international court rulings above British interests.

As I have watched this unfold, it has been impossible not to conclude that this government is ideologically extreme. But how many voters who backed Labour knew what to expect from Starmer’s supposedly moderate administration? And how many feel duped? They can be forgiven for any confusion they have experienced.

And yet for those on the Left, what Starmer is doing is not extreme enough. They see him as an opportunist without an ounce of real principle – ‘lacking an essential political identity and little in the way of an intellectual paper trail’, in the words of Jon Cruddas, a Labour MP until the last election. Left-winger Diane Abbott has taken to reminding voters that he has not been a member of the Labour Party for very long and ‘doesn’t have a feel for it’.

Some, such as Starmer’s erstwhile friend Benjamin Schoendorff, feel not just let down but betrayed.

Back in the 1980s, Schoendorff was a fellow student radical at Oxford University and the editor of a hard-Left, neo-Marxist magazine called Socialist Alternatives that Starmer wrote for and was deeply involved in. These days he is withering about his one-time



By **LORD ASHCROFT**
FORMER DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

comrade. ‘I don’t get a sense of intellectual evolution. I think he’s just an empty suit, a puppet, saying whatever he’s been told to say. Every day he insults our intelligence and morals in new ways beyond comprehension.’

This notion is given credence by a former barrister colleague of Starmer’s who doubts that he ever had the ability to be anything other than a follower. ‘The best evidence of his weak personality,’ this person says, ‘is the way he would argue cases in court.’

‘He’d make concessions that were completely wrong just because he thought that was the way the court was thinking. That’s the man through and through. Keir can’t speak with conviction because he has no convictions.

The thing he’s most scared of is being found out for being a mediocre individual. He’s the same in politics as he was as a lawyer.’

Another barrister who saw him in action as an advocate commented bluntly: ‘He’s dull as hell. His submissions were timid. He was reluctant to take a difficult point that might be very significant. He tended to go down the path of least resistance. It was compromise rather than confrontation. It was all derivative and regurgitated. It was an attempt to make a virtue out of blandness.’

‘I have a horrible feeling part of his success was based on the idea that he looks the part subliminally. That’s one of the tricks of the light with Keir. He looks like a matinee idol with that coiffed hair,

but in reality he’s like the deputy manager of the local branch of Barclays Bank.’

Another legal figure who worked with him recalls: ‘I always thought he was just a political wet.’

Starmer’s supporters would contest such charges, arguing that he does have sound political instincts and ideas. How could a man who converted the Labour Party from a Corbynite sect into an election-winning machine be devoid of any political touch? They may have a point.

However, to voters he tends to come across as more of a bureaucrat than a politician – ‘a lawyer not a leader’ in the words of Boris Johnson, or ‘a political robot’ as one member of a TV audience accused him of being.

This is a fear shared in Starmer’s own party. ‘My concern is that Keir hasn’t been able to set out any narrative,’ says a senior Labour figure. ‘Yes, he inherited an unstable underlying situation from the Conservatives, but he did so with great parliamentary strength. Yet he doesn’t know how to handle it.’

‘He’s very inexperienced in parliamentary and political terms. He doesn’t have any history of political campaigning before he

became an MP or of political management, and I think it shows in his record both as Leader of the Opposition and as Prime Minister. His political antennae are very weak, with the result that there has been a series of mistakes.’

In the space of a few months, Labour made enemies of pensioners, farmers, small business owners, big business leaders, free speech advocates, female pensioners and parents who pay school fees, to name just some groups affected by their policies.

And more self-imposed problem areas loom for him, such as his government’s crippling expensive green agenda. Donald Trump’s America has joined China in effectively abandoning climate change targets.

If this is the attitude of the two biggest economies on the planet, many British voters will want to know why the UK economy is so heavily geared towards expensive environmental concerns given the country produces less than 1 per cent of the world’s CO₂ emissions.

As for his relationship with the US president, this could well define Starmer’s premiership. How will he remain on positive terms with Trump in the face of tariffs while simultaneously



Useful: Deputy Angela Rayner

achieving his aim of moving Britain back into the orbit of the EU – Trump’s least favourite trading bloc – in areas such as farming and goods standards?

Trump is also tearing up the diversity, equality and inclusion philosophy, believing it to be a restriction of personal freedom and economic growth. Will Starmer have the courage to mirror the US president by re-examining whether these concepts have enhanced the productivity of the civil service, universities and businesses in Britain?

WHERE Starmer positions himself politically will be vital as Britain faces the fascinating prospect of the traditional two-party system disintegrating. The rise of Reform UK has transformed UK politics into a three-horse race between itself, Labour and the Conservatives. And Labour is as much in the firing line of this mini

Biding his time? Streeting (pictured with Starmer) is being touted by some as the next leader

political revolution as the Conservatives, perhaps more so.

Large numbers of voters still believe that the last Tory government damaged the economy, unnecessarily pursued expensive net zero policies and facilitated high immigration long before Labour was in power.

In many ways, Labour’s stance in these three areas is seen merely as a continuation of the Tory years.

‘We treat the Tories and Labour as the uniparty,’ says Reform leader Nigel Farage. ‘There’s nothing between them. Should Labour be worried about us? They should be terrified.’

Last July, Reform came second in 98 constituencies – 89 of which are held by Labour.

As a new party, Reform UK has the reputation of being a ‘clean skin’. With trust in both mainstream parties slipping, it has the potential to shake up the entire system.

Internal rows last month may have done the new party some damage. Yet it is undeniable that, when compared with the traditional organisations, Reform UK has the aura of an exciting start-up business and, in Farage, the advantage of a household name running it.

Farage says that Starmer will struggle because, as a member of the metropolitan elite, he does not connect with Labour’s base.

‘Because so many events are beyond a prime minister’s control, the only way they can get through governing is by having some underlying ideology. But his is based around a vague world order, and the law, and this is part of his metropolitan outlook.

He seems wholly unconcerned with the immigration issue. He’s making a mistake. Ukip did far more harm to Labour in the 2015 General Election than it did to the Tories. Those who are the most patriotic, the most socially conservative and the most concerned about the effect of mass immigration are traditional Labour voters.’

He predicts that one issue will soon tower above most others.

‘Labour’s energy policy is going to be the next Brexit,’ says Farage. ‘The public will wake up to how much they’ve been paying on their bills. We have the most expensive electricity in the world. Under Starmer, we’re de-industrialising. Wait until people realise the only beneficiary is China.’

The arrival of an insurgent political party in Britain leads to other, more fundamental questions. According to the French writer

significant following by using the media to present himself as a political outsider who is ready to break the existing monopoly. So far, his approach has produced some remarkable results, with Reform surging in the polls and having a greater number of members than the Conservative Party.

Elon Musk, though unelected, is the ultimate example of those who fit the ‘unconventional’ mould. As the owner of Twitter (now X), he has used that channel to further many of his aims – notably, in British politics, by tracking and attacking Starmer and sometimes humiliating him on to the back foot.

By comparison, Starmer runs the risk of looking like a figure from another age. These days personality matters more than ever in politics. Yet his temperament does not lend itself to flamboyance, humour, exhibitionism, great flights of oratory or much else that is truly memorable.

Rather, he is a man who likes to be in control, who doesn’t like being thwarted, who can be stubborn.

He also has to be scripted, as he struggles to speak off the cuff. This makes it difficult for him to emote. He comes across as rigid. His lack of warmth makes it hard for voters to relate to him.

Even if he is essentially decent, his path would be easier if he had a coherent political credo to sell – a set of ideas that could be called Starmerism. But if such a thing exists, most Labour parliamentarians have so far found defining it to be a challenge.

There is no consensus on what it means beyond woolly talk of the centre-Left and social democracy, leading some to reason that he is

‘Comes across as dismissive and self-important’

Michel Houellebecq, people no longer want to be represented by professional politicians.

In the digital age, the leaders of established parties are being rejected in favour of those who seem less conventional. Donald Trump and Argentina’s Javier Milei are examples of unorthodox figures who cater to the needs and wants of modern electorates.

In Britain, Farage has built up a

a somewhat apolitical politician. Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch’s view, according to an ally, is that he’s odd – ‘very partisan, more so than average’, yet he doesn’t seem to like politics at all. Facing him across the despatch box each week at Prime Minister’s Questions in the Commons chamber, she is said to be unimpressed by his performance.

‘He simply does not like answering questions. He feels he is being put on trial. But he comes across as dismissive and self-important. The lawyer in him is absolutely terrified of saying anything that could be prosecuted later. He prefers to be the prosecutor asking questions not answering them.’

Badenoch thinks he may have ended up in politics simply because he wasn’t sure what to do after being Director of Public Prosecutions. On that, it should also be said that he may have used up whatever human capital he has so far relied on as the former DPP – a fact that he referred to so often during the election campaign that, like his harping on about his father being a tool-maker, it became a standing joke.

But his professed ignorance of two high-profile Crown Prosecution Service cases while in post – Jimmy Savile and Mohamed Al Fayed, both accused of sexual exploitation of women but never

‘There has been a series of mistakes’

brought to trial – has come back to bite him. The grooming gang scandal involving groups of largely Pakistani men, which also surfaced during his time as DPP, remains a running sore.

On a different front, since becoming prime minister, his judgment has come into question for allowing the convicted fraudster Louise Haigh into his Cabinet. Ten years earlier she had pleaded guilty to reporting the loss of her mobile phone in a mugging when in fact it was still in her possession. She was given a conditional discharge. When the incident resurfaced after Starmer appointed her his Transport Secretary, she resigned, the first minister to leave his Cabinet.

But much about the story was odd. In her resignation letter, Haigh stated that Starmer knew of her fraud conviction when he appointed her. Downing Street’s explanation was that ‘new information’ had come to light, yet when asked about this new information, Starmer stonewalled, saying: ‘I’m not going to disclose private conversations.’

All this begged the question: if he knew about her conviction, why appoint her? And if he did not know, why was he so surprisingly badly informed?

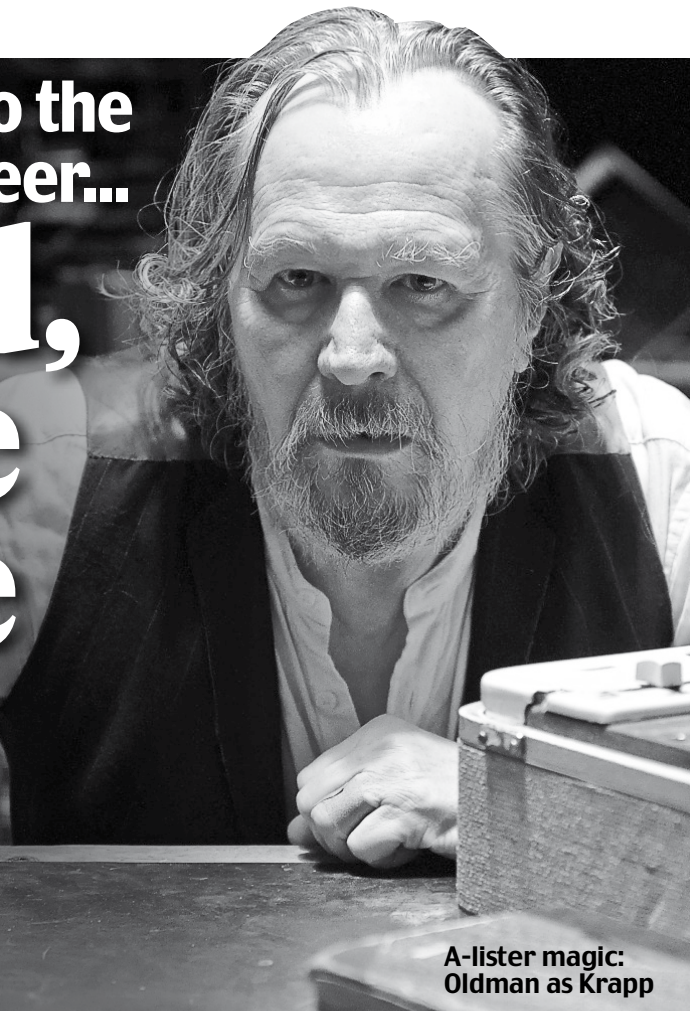
ATTENTION IS already turning to who could succeed Starmer as Labour leader, whether via a coup (though this is far from straightforward under Labour Party rules) or in an orderly fashion.

The two names mentioned most often are Labour’s Deputy Leader, Angela Rayner, and the Health Secretary, Wes Streeting.

Both are seen as good communicators who have made their way to the top table through talent, perseverance and luck. Rayner is

As *Slow Horses* star returns to the theatre that launched his career...

Dishevelled, rueful... the perfect role for Gary Oldman



A-list magic: Oldman as Krapp

GARY Oldman's surprise appearance at York's Theatre Royal actually makes perfect sense. The Hollywood star has chosen to make his stage comeback - after 37 years - in Samuel Beckett's monologue about a rueful old git surveying the paltry wreckage of his life.

The character is a perfect counterpart for the dishevelment of Oldman's other rueful old git, Jackson Lamb, in Apple TV's *Slow Horses*.

Just like Lamb, the significantly named Krapp is a man who has given up on personal appearances and raised a solitary finger to decorum, with his smelly feet, greasy hair and unguarded flatulence.

But there's more. York's Theatre Royal is where Oldman began his career in 1979 - including winning the coveted role of the cat in the theatre's annual pantomime alongside the city's legendary dame Berwick Kaler.

And even after a successful career in Hollywood, at 67 he



Patrick Marmion

First night review

KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

Theatre Royal, York
★★★★☆

must have some regrets - just like 69-year-old Krapp.

Beckett's old codger recalls the pain of lost loves, a taste for one tippie too many, and professional disappointments. Oldman - married nearly as often as Henry VIII and a self-confessed former lush - can surely relate to some of that.

As a spectacle, there's not much on offer - although directing and designing the show, as well as acting in it, the star ensures he's surrounded by an impressively packed attic junkyard.

Wearing the waistcoat and collarless shirt of a music-hall clown, his real-life paunch

means he's oven-ready for the part - even if his actorly jog off stage belies his character's heavy, breathless entry up a flight of stairs.

And he uses his A-list magic to transform the normal running time of 30 minutes into a stately 55. That's almost doubling the length of the show, thanks to some faintly camp pigeon-like cooing, much staring into space, some rifling through boxes of tapes, and vividly munching a number of bananas.

ALWAYS one to push boundaries and innovate, Oldman tackles his bananas from the bottom up, peeling from the end. Astonishing. And there's me wrenching at the stalk all these years. My relationship with the fruit will never be the same.

At one point, he stands suddenly to look up the word 'viduity' (the state of being a widow). But otherwise, his role is almost entirely sedentary and, in all honesty, unchallenging. He spends

much of the time listening to himself on his tapes. The height of drama comes at the end when he issues a contemptuous snort after hearing his younger self lament: 'My best years are gone... but I wouldn't want them back.'

Even so, he manages what seems like a damp eye at recollections of time spent with a lover on a boat in the sun - a tenderness not easily transmitted in the huge Victorian cavern of the Theatre Royal.

The play's brevity makes his enterprise low risk, too. He'll surely be in bed by nine.

So what's in it for Oldman? Nearly four decades since he last took to the stage, after cutting his teeth at London's Royal Court Theatre and with the Royal Shakespeare Company, could it be that playing Beckett's derelict old geezer is, in fact, a dry run for another derelict old geezer - Shakespeare's Jack Falstaff? Or should it be Jackson Falstaff? Producers would fight for that.

The play runs until May 17.

Alive, dog lost for 529 days in Oz wilderness

By Matt Jones

A RUNAWAY miniature dachshund has been found alive and well after surviving 529 days in the Australian wilderness.

Valerie ran away from her owners' campsite on Kangaroo Island, off the coast of South Australia, in November 2023 and has defied incredible odds by living off the land ever since.

Few expected the little 8lb dog to survive for long after her owners' initial week-long search, but a series of sightings and the sound of her bark have kept the faint hopes alive.

Members of Kangala Wildlife Rescue said they had travelled 3,000 miles searching for the dachshund. The team used traps, treats and scent reminders of Valerie's home - including



Survivor: Dachshund Valerie

a T-shirt belonging to owner Georgia Gardner, 24 - along with cameras. They set up a caged area with her bedding from home and dog food, and waited weeks for her to take the bait.

Valerie is now set for a heart-warming reunion with Ms Gardner and partner Josh Fishlock, of Albury, New South Wales.

After footage of Valerie was captured by the cameras last month, Ms Gardner said: 'It's absolutely unbelievable she has survived a year and a half out there in the wild. She's an absolute princess who rides in a car seat and only wears the colour pink.'

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politically to the Left of Morgan McSweeney, Starmer's hugely influential chief of staff, and therefore not part of his team, which puts a target on her back. But she's useful to Starmer. And necessary, in some respects.

Who can say whether she could move against him one day? For now, the thinking seems to be that from his perspective it is safer to keep her on the front bench rather than the back benches.

Streeting is seen as a more serious figure, although, as one of his friends tells me, his motivations may not be entirely altruistic.

'Wes's one ambition is for him and his boyfriend to be the first gay couple in No. 10,' reports this parliamentarian.

Even if this is true, there is more to him than that, as a senior Labour figure explains, and the danger he poses to Starmer's leadership is significant.

'Starmer is in hock to a factional group in Labour which has a different agenda from his own,' says this person. 'So far,

Starmer's been happy to use that. He positioned himself as centre-Left but I would say he's not very fixed in that at all, whereas McSweeney and his allies in the party are fixed in what they want. Their agenda is different and the candidate they'd like to roll it out is Streeting. He is the guy they want [as leader].

'The Blairites were never keen on Keir to start with. They were always suspicious of him. Then, as far as they were concerned, he came good and they were very happy about that and came to love him dearly, but it was always a very transactional and conditional love.

'It would take a lot to dislodge Keir, but it's not just a question of personal ambition and individuals. It's also about the people like McSweeney who are currently running the Keir show. In the longer term, Wes is their guy, not Keir.'

Another former colleague adds: 'Keir is brittle, literal, process-driven. He's very good at holding a line in public, but he can't do what Wes Streeting can do, which is to expand on a point off the cuff

and jump back and forth. Keir can't go off his brief. He's very limited in that sense.'

Assuming that Starmer wishes to lead the Labour Party into the next General Election, which must take place by the summer of 2029, two factors are in his favour: he has time and he has a parliamentary majority that should allow him a tremendous amount of latitude. This is a luxurious position for any premier to be in.

And yet it's hard to ignore the fact that the 2024 election result was less a positive endorsement of him and the Labour Party and more an anti-Tory vote.

The turnout was not quite 60 per cent and Labour's share of the vote was a mere 33.7 per cent, the lowest of any majority party on record. Put another way, 80 per cent of registered voters did not back Labour at the ballot box.

The feeling has persisted ever since the General Election that Starmer is an accidental prime minister, a leader who is in power because of his opponents' weaknesses rather than as a result of his own

strengths. It is not difficult to imagine confidence in him draining away rapidly should events overtake him and he falls victim to the curse of matters moving beyond his control.

■ **LORD Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft.**

■ **ADAPTED from Red Flag:**

The Uneasy Advance Of Sir Keir Starmer, by Michael Ashcroft (Biteback, £16.99), to be published April 29.
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