

MPs: Ditch Keir for a caretaker leader

...as insiders say PM's aide McSweeney is on the brink of quitting

By **Glen Owen** and **Brendan Carlin**

KEIR Starmer should step aside in favour of a caretaker prime minister who would run the country until a leadership contest is held in the summer, Labour MPs have argued.

Despairing Government backbenchers argue that unless the Prime Minister quits over the Peter Mandelson crisis, the party is heading for disaster at the Gorton and Denton by-election later this month – followed by annihilation in May's local elections.

They hope the Cabinet will this week persuade Sir Keir to quit and allow a 'non-contentious'

'Extraordinary times call for extraordinary solutions'

candidate such as Defence Secretary John Healey or Northern Ireland Secretary Hilary Benn to be a temporary replacement.

It came as insiders said Sir Keir's chief of staff Morgan McSweeney – blamed by Labour MPs for 'forcing' the Prime Minister to appoint Mandelson, a friend of Jeffrey Epstein, as US ambassador in 2024 – is on the brink of quitting.

Cabinet Secretary Sir Chris Wormald could also resign.

A source said: 'Morgan going would offer the MPs a sacrifice to try to atone for this disaster. But could Keir survive without him? They should really depart as a package.'

Under the extraordinary caretaker plan, the interim leader would steer Labour beyond the May local elections and then oversee a full-scale party leadership contest in the summer before handing over to the new leader at the party's annual conference in the autumn.

MPs backing the move say it would 'bring stability' to the Government and avoid the 'bloodbath' of a leadership contest before May's elections. It may also appeal to all three of the main leadership contenders – each of whom has reason to want to delay a challenge for the top job.

For Angela Rayner, it would allow HMRC time to finish its lengthy investigation into her tax affairs and, say backers, 'lift a shadow' over her leadership ambitions.

For Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, it could give him a second chance to claim a Commons seat, without which he cannot succeed Sir Keir. Mr Burnham, who was blocked from standing in Gorton and Denton by Labour's ruling



Proof more demure Angela is on the mauve for No10?

FROM loud flares and high-voltage colour clashes to demure mauve and sharp tailoring, Angela Rayner has quietly rewritten her wardrobe rulebook, writes *Eliza Scarborough*.

Not long ago, her look was bold, unapologetic bursts of colour, a flash of rainbow here, a statement suit there, and, inevitably bover boots grounding the ensemble.

But since losing her Cabinet role, something has shifted. And the stand-out shade? It's a strategic shade of mauve.

The proof is in the outfits. Rayner's bold green ME+EM trousers (£225) from September last year have been replaced by a mauve dress from the same brand (£275), worn on January 24.

This new look, all tailored confidence and controlled colour, feels suspiciously like the early scaffolding of a leadership pitch – it may be a wardrobe built for a future Prime Minister.

Could it have something to do with PR supremo Matthew Freud who she recently dined with? Perhaps he told her: keep the colour, lose the chaos, retain the personality and elevate the polish.



Could Rayner be cleared... and end up costing taxman millions?

ANGELA Rayner is said to be on the brink of being exonerated over the stamp duty affair.

However, it is claimed it has not been announced yet because the taxman doesn't want to have to repay millions to others who have been hit with the tax in similar circumstances.

Ms Rayner's leadership prospects are widely thought to hinge on HMRC's investigation into the stamp duty levied on the £800,000 flat she bought in Hove last year: she left the Cabinet after admitting having not paid the extra £40,000

required for a second home. But some of her allies claim she could be cleared on the grounds that Hove was indeed her main home, because her constituency house was owned under a family trust arrangement.

A source said: 'She is off the hook...the delay in announcing her exoneration is because HMRC doesn't want to have to repay all the thousands of people who have been hit with the second-home surcharge in similar circumstances. The bill would run into millions.'



PIVOTAL: Ms Rayner's seaside flat in Hove

National Executive Committee (NEC), is still hoping to secure a constituency in the North West – using the logic that the mood in the party has deteriorated so quickly since he was blocked last month that the NEC would let him stand as Labour's potential 'saviour'.

Meanwhile, Health Secretary

Wes Streeting would be granted the time needed to shake off his perceived closeness to Mandelson, who has long been regarded as his political mentor.

Last night, one senior Labour MP aware of the plotting conceded that it would require Sir Keir to fall on his sword. But the MP told The

Mail on Sunday: 'Extraordinary times call for extraordinary solutions. We can't let Starmer limp on until after the May elections – we need a replacement now to stem what could be disastrous losses for Labour. But equally, we can't have a full-scale election for leader between now and May.' He said

that a respected Cabinet minister without realistic long-term leadership ambitions of their own – 'such as Hilary Benn or John Healey' – would be the ideal interim leader.

The MP added: 'Given the briefing war that's already broken out between Rayner and Streeting, there wouldn't be just blood on the

Feisty she may be... but is the 'insecure, manipulative diva' Rayner really Prime Minister material?



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

FORMER TORY PARTY DEPUTY CHAIRMAN AND AUTHOR OF AGENDA-SETTING ANGELA RAYNER BIOGRAPHY

MY daughter will be running this country in a few years ... she'll be prime minister.' When Angela Rayner's mother Lynne uttered these words during a 2020 interview, even her daughter sniggered. But as the Bob Monkhouse quip has it, she's not laughing now.

The self-styled Queen of the North, who left school aged 16 with no qualifications and a baby on the way, really could follow in the footsteps of Churchill, Attlee, Thatcher and Blair.

But who is Angela Rayner? And is she suited to high office? I first thought of writing her biography in 2022 after she gave an interview at the Edinburgh Festival. It was hard not to be interested in this direct politician who spoke so openly about her tough childhood and tricky path to Westminster.

By then, she was Labour's deputy leader, and often courted controversy. Yet little independent research into her background had been done. In autumn 2023, with the Tory government on thin ice and Rayner now shadow deputy prime minister, I began work.

It was soon clear that what she lacked in academic credentials was made up for in ambition, yet I found her a more brittle personality than some might assume.

SHE was born in Stockport in 1980, the second of three siblings. Her childhood was materially deprived and emotionally fractured. Her mother had bipolar disorder and Rayner helped look after her. Her father had no steady profession.

The family settled on a crime-ridden housing estate and were supported by Giro cheques. Her grandmother, Jean, was a strong influence and Rayner was an enthusiastic Girl Guide. She was bullied at school and by 13 was nightclubbing and 'getting into scrapes'. After giving birth, she got her own council flat, making ends meet by selling flowers in pubs, then at 18 became a private Home Help for six months.

From 2000, she did the same job for Stockport council. She once said she'd been a carer 'for almost

a decade'. In fact, she did the job for a maximum of five years. At Stockport council she joined Unison, and by 2005 was working for it full time. She bought a house in 2007 and met the union's assistant branch secretary Mark Rayner.

Their 17-year age gap was no barrier to love and he steered her through Unison's ranks, ultimately starting her political career. They had two sons, before marrying in 2010. Yet their marriage certificate stated they lived at separate addresses. According to the electoral roll, this continued until 2015, with her brother, Darren, living with Mark and the children from 2010 to 2015.

Neighbours disputed this, saying the Rayners all lived together, while Darren lived in his sister's house. When she re-registered her sons' births in 2010, their new certificates stated Rayner lived at her husband's address, too.

I established the house she'd bought in 2007 was purchased under Margaret Thatcher's right-

to-buy scheme with a £26,000 discount. She sold it in 2015 at a £48,500 profit. In 2023, she said that in government she wanted to cut right-to-buy – but didn't mention that she'd benefited from it.

Wasn't this hypocritical? Had she breached electoral law? And what about her council tax status? Answers were needed. When

'Her default to attack and not explain does not bode well'

my book, *Red Queen?*, was published in 2024, a storm erupted around this story. The police got involved (no action followed) and Rayner said she'd taken independent advice which cleared her of any wrongdoing.

She maintained that I had an

from gaining power. There were also claims that, as the two main candidates suspected of having campaigns ready to go, Ms Rayner and Mr Streeting were already plunging the party into 'civil war'.

Mr Streeting's backers accused Rayner allies of 'fantasy stuff' exaggerations of just how close the Health Secretary was to former Labour grandee Mandelson.

One Streeting ally accused Ms Rayner of 'virtually salivating' before she made her crucial intervention in the Commons last week,

which forced Sir Keir to back down over the release of documents relating to how Mandelson was appointed US ambassador.

By way of return, Ms Rayner's camp has celebrated what they see as the collapse of Mr Streeting's hopes because of his past links to the disgraced New Labour architect. Last night, even one Left-wing MP not aligned to either hopeful joked that Mr Streeting was 'just a pair of smoking boots'.

However, he also suggested that Ms Rayner 'isn't suited to being

prime minister', adding: 'She doesn't have what it takes.'

Separately, former deputy PM Ms Rayner came under fire yesterday after reports she had warned Sir Keir not to appoint Mandelson.

One Labour source said: 'The idea that she was like Cassandra, warning everyone about Mandelson, rings a bit hollow.'

'I know she has the right colour of hair, but she was the one having dinners with him.'

A source close to Ms Rayner said: 'Not true. [That] didn't happen.'

Corbyn and then Starmer, praising centrists Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, while saying 'ideology never put food on my table'.

She is rampantly pro-trades union and untested on global affairs and the economy. And she's also uncompromising. When Tory Esther McVey said parents had the right to take primary school children out of lessons on same-sex relationships, Rayner said she was 'not fit to be an MP'.

Before her spell in government ended last September after failing to pay £40,000 in stamp duty, she found it hard going. As Housing Secretary, she was set the impossible target of overseeing the building of 1.5million homes by 2030. As I revealed, she was so frustrated she threatened to quit.

She was also behind changes to employment rights, which have proved contentious and expensive. It is hard to accept a government in her image wouldn't turn to the Left. Polling I have done

'Impetuous nature could do more harm than good'

suggests she's a more divisive figure than Starmer. Last December, people were twice as likely to say she would make a worse PM than Sir Keir as to say she would be better. But while Tory and Reform UK voters were of that view, Labour supporters were more likely than not to think she would be an improvement.

Voters often say they find her background and blunt approach refreshing. She may be unlikely to win converts to Labour, yet a Rayner premiership could galvanise voters on both sides.

Successful PMs have a certain je ne sais quoi, absent in Rayner. For all her strengths, I can't help wondering whether her lack of experience and impetuous nature would do more harm than good.

Nonetheless, I would still like to have a coffee and a chat with her.

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