

Keir Starmer: From 'Marxist' to 'Cop in an expensive suit' - Mark Kosman



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By Mark Kosman

Three months on from Sir Keir Starmer's accession to the Labour leadership, we now have a better idea of how he wants to lead what is still officially called 'Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition'. It appears that Sir Keir intends to combine a 'forensic', lawyerly critique of the government's many failings with what he calls 'constructive' support for the most hard-right Tory administration since the 1930s.[1]

The extent of this support was confirmed in Starmer's response to Boris Johnson's announcement of the ending of the national lockdown on 23 June. In his brief statement in Parliament, Starmer managed to reassure Johnson that he supported the government's approach to the pandemic no less than five times.[2]

We may never know exactly how many people have died as a direct result of Johnson's coronavirus policies. But Anthony Costello, a former director of the World Health Organisation, says that, out of 65,000 UK deaths, 'we could have prevented about 50,000' if we'd gone into lockdown earlier.[3] Despite this, Starmer still says that 'the government is trying to do the right thing,' even claiming that Johnson's reckless decision to end the lockdown is 'an important step in the fight against this virus'![4]

It's not just Johnson that Starmer wishes to reassure. He's also keen to reassure the entire British establishment that the Labour Party will continue to be a 'most loyal' opposition. So, when asked what he thought of the Black Lives Matter proposal to defund the police in order to spend more on education and other provisions that offer people real alternatives to crime, his response was unequivocal:

I was director of public prosecutions for five years, I worked with police forces across England and Wales, bringing thousands of people to court, so my support for the police is very, very strong ... I don't have any truck with what [Black Lives Matter] is saying about defunding the police or anything else. That's just nonsense.

[5]

The reaction of UK Black Lives Matter to this comment was to dismiss Starmer as just 'a cop in an expensive suit'.^[6] This was an incisive and memorable response. But it's interesting to note that Starmer's comment is in striking contrast to what he said back in 1986 when writing about police attacks on pickets during the printers' bitter dispute with Rupert Murdoch over his Wapping print plant.

Back then, according to Starmer's former Highgate housemate, 'he used to run an organisation called *Socialist Alternatives* from our house.'^[7] *Socialist Alternatives* was the publication of the British section of the pro-self-management, ex-Trotskyist group, the International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency, and Starmer's contributions to the magazine included an article about the Wapping dispute in which he denounced the use of 'paramilitary' policing methods. He then said:

This leads to the question of the role the police should play, if any, in civil society. Who are they protecting and from what?

[8]

Starmer's comments appear to raise the issue of abolishing the police not just defunding them. According to one of his old lawyer friends, back in 1986, Starmer also advocated a 'thorough critique of the prison system and how it didn't work.'^[9]

This suggests that, in his youth, Starmer thought it was, at least, possible to create a society which did not require the threat of police and prisons to maintain social relations. Indeed, in *Socialist Alternatives*, the young Starmer wrote earnestly about the creation of a 'self-managing socialism' that would be 'based on democratic control of production for "use" rather than "profit".'^[10]

Starmer's subsequent depressing trajectory from 'Marxist' radical to cynical careerist is not uncommon on the British left. One of his own top advisers, Simon Fletcher, used to belong to the Trotskyist group, Socialist Action.^[11] And even Boris Johnson has an adviser, Munira Mirza, who is herself closely associated with the ex-Trotskyists of the former Revolutionary Communist Party.^[12]

What is less common is Starmer's trajectory from a lawyer who genuinely supported left-wing activism to one who became head of the Crown Prosecution Service – an organisation whose only interest in such activism is a determination to contain and prevent it.

Even his biggest fans at the *New Statesman* have pointed out that, under Starmer's leadership, *the CPS charged anti-austerity protesters for staging a sit-in at Fortnum & Mason in 2012; one academic accused Starmer, who once defended the rights of acid house ravers, of criminalising peaceful assembly and protests.*^[13]

A more thorough critique of the Labour leader's grim record can be found at the Verso blog. In 'The Case Against Keir Starmer', Oliver Eagleton runs through Starmer's dubious positions on the Iraq War, Trident, state surveillance, Julian Assange and welfare cuts, as well as his apparent reluctance to prosecute the police officers who killed Jean Charles de Menezes and Ian Tomlinson. Eagleton writes:

[As head of the CPS, Starmer] drew up rules that gave police officers more power to arrest demonstrators, in an attempt to crack down on 'significant disruption' after the 2010 student protests. Officers were encouraged to arrest those 'equipped with clothes or masks to prevent identification,

items that could be considered body protection, or an item that can be used as a weapon'. Appended to these instructions was a warning: 'criminals bent on disruption and disorder...will not get an easy ride'.

As commentators noted at the time, the vagueness of these guidelines equipped police with the authority to jail anyone wearing a scarf (since it could be used to 'prevent identification') or carrying a placard (which has on various occasions been classified as 'weapon'), while the ban on body protection criminalised attempts to defend oneself from police violence. Sir Keir's stern treatment of protesters tallied with his response to the London riots, when he stressed the necessity of rapid sentencing, and made a personal appearance in court to praise the judges who were handing down harsh penalties. ...

As well as taking 'tough stances' in the courtroom, Sir Keir's CPS advised undercover police officers on how to infiltrate left-wing campaign groups via a 'domestic extremism' specialist. When it was alleged that, as part of this operation, numerous undercover agents had broken the law, given false evidence in court, and formed sexual relationships with activists in order to spy on them, the CPS launched an investigation into covert policing that was widely considered to be a whitewash. It admitted no systemic failings on the part of the CPS, offered no apology to the victims, and declined to re-open cases in which undercover policework may have led to wrongful convictions. [14]

One thing that this article misses is that this undercover police work didn't just devastate the private lives of activists, it also sabotaged Starmer's legal work with the most famous of these activists, Helen Steel and Dave Morris.

'TOO POWERLESS TO SPEAK OUT'

These two so-called 'McLibel' defendants fought and won a decade-long legal dispute with McDonalds – a case which not only made legal history but also made Starmer's reputation as a progressive lawyer. But, as another interesting blog post on Starmer's record points out:

Starmer advised the McLibel defendants after they were prosecuted for distributing a leaflet co-written by undercover officer Bob Lambert. Starmer's sagely wisdom will have been undermined due to being pre-empted – it was seen by John Dines, the live-in boyfriend of defendant Helen Steel, who was also an undercover police officer. But in his supine position before the counter-democratic, judiciary-nobbling secret police, Starmer appears to show that there are few as zealous as those who've converted.

Maybe that's too harsh. Maybe he's too dim to realise how he's been duped and puppeted. Or maybe he's too powerless to speak out, or even speak out about the fact that he can't speak out. [15]

The anonymous author of this post is clearly upset about Starmer's failure to confront either the British establishment, or its secret police, even when these police had broken the law by sabotaging his own legal advice.

So, is Starmer a 'zealous' convert to the establishment? Is he just a 'dupe and puppet'? Or is he just 'too powerless to speak out'?

Well, there's certainly no question that he has become a convert to the establishment. Not only has he accepted a knighthood but he's been a member of the pro-US, pro-market think tank, the Trilateral Commission, since 2018. Other members of this rather secretive organisation include not only Henry Kissinger but as many as seven former heads of the CIA and various other US intelligence agencies. [16]

The head of the UK's intelligence agency, MI5, is Jonathan Evans who was particularly grateful to Starmer for his decision not to prosecute MI5 for their role in the CIA's overseas torture programme.

The investigative journalist, Matt Kennard, has revealed that Starmer met Evans socially in the week before he announced his resignation from the CPS in April 2013.[17] By October, Starmer had left the CPS and, by December 2013, he'd become an adviser to Labour and was well on his way to being offered the safe seat of Holborn and St. Pancras.[18] Once elected to Parliament, in 2015, he was immediately touted as a prospective new Labour leader in the media before becoming Shadow Immigration Minister.[19]

So, is Starmer also a 'dupe and puppet' helped onto the Labour front bench – and now its leadership – by the secret services? Perhaps, but we may never have any real evidence of this. So, rather than exploring conspiracy theories, our time would be better spent exploring why the new social movements that Starmer wrote about in *Socialist Alternatives* failed to do what he proposed at the time, that is 'to ally with the fighting section of the working class.'[20]

Of course, if such a fighting working class movement had arisen, the present-day Starmer would have no hesitation denouncing it, just as he denounced Black Lives Matter's calls to defund the police. But the younger Starmer would have had a different approach and might have continued to make a positive contribution to such a potentially revolutionary movement rather than wasting his talents trying to change capitalism from within.

And, finally, is Starmer still 'too powerless to speak out'? Well, in a sense, yes.

On 9 June, Richard Horton, the editor of the renowned medical journal, the *Lancet*, wrote these powerful words:

Over 40,000 mostly preventable deaths in the UK caused by the most appalling failure of government. Why aren't people protesting more? We are living through a humanitarian catastrophe. And yet no accountability. Britain feels truly broken.[21]

We don't need satire. We don't need humour. We don't need mockery. We need organisation. We need alternatives. We need rebellion. Against a government that has fostered corruption, collusion, and criminality. A government that has presided over the avoidable deaths of thousands.[22]

I don't understand the passivity of my fellow countrymen and countrywomen. Why are you not more angry? Why are you allowing this government to orchestrate the deaths of your citizens, your families, your neighbours? This is a mass delusion. Resist. Resist. Rebel.'[23]

Starmer has never been quite this passionate about anything but, as a younger activist, he would, at least, have been able to appreciate and echo Horton's truth-telling. However, now, as an older professional politician – one who is completely integrated into the establishment – he is simply unable to face up to the truth of modern Britain, let alone 'speak out' about it.

One might even be tempted to feel sorry for him, except that his witch-hunt against the left, both inside and outside the Labour Party, has probably only just started. If Starmer is prepared to smear his fellow front-bencher, Rebecca Long-Bailey, as a purveyor of 'anti-Semitic conspiracy theories', he won't hesitate to slander and persecute any and all genuinely left-wing activists.[24]

This 'cop in an expensive suit' is, at present, no threat to the Tory government. But, allied both with that government and with his friends in the police, he could easily become a very serious threat to those of us on the genuine left.

NOTES

1. 'Keir Starmer: "The government has been slow in nearly all of the major decisions,"' 'Financial Times', 7/5/20.
2. 'Covid-19 Update', Hansard, 23/6/20.
3. 'Former WHO director Anthony Costello: "Opening pubs before schools says something about our priorities",' 'Guardian', 5/7/20.
4. 'Covid-19 Update', Hansard, 23/6/20.
5. 'Slapped Down - Black Lives Matter say "cop in expensive suit" Keir Starmer has "no right to tell us" not to demand police are abolished,' 'The Sun', 29/6/20.
6. 'Black Lives Matter UK criticises Labour Leader Keir Starmer for dismissing calls to defund the police,' 'Evening Standard', 30/6/20.
7. 'Profile: Keir Starmer', BBC Radio 4, 5mins 25 secs, 26/9/09.
8. 'Wapping: End of the Street,' 'Socialist Alternatives,' April/May 1987, p7 (<https://britishpabloism.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/socialist-alternativ...>).
On page 4 of this same issue of 'Socialist Alternatives', we find another article which argues that for the Palestinians 'a strong armed defence is more necessary than ever to prevent a holocaust at the hands of either the Zionists or the reactionary Arabs.' It is sobering to note that if anyone used these words in today's Labour Party, they would be at risk of suspension for the supposedly anti-Semitic crime of 'drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.'
9. 'What does Keir Starmer believe?' 'Prospect', 28/2/20.
10. 'Wapping: End of the Street,' 'Socialist Alternatives,' April/May 1987, p8; 'Unions for a New Pluralism,' 'Socialist Alternatives,' Dec 1986/Jan 1987, p26-7 (<https://britishpabloism.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/socialist-alternativ...>).
11. 'What does the new leader's office say about Keir Starmer?,' Labour List, 6/5/20; 'Simon Fletcher: From communism to Jeremy Corbyn's consigliere,' 'Independent', 18/9/20.
12. 'How a fringe sect from the 1980s influenced No 10's attitude to racism,' 'Guardian', 23/6/20.
13. 'Keir Starmer: The Sensible Radical,' 'New Statesman', 31/3/20.
14. 'The case against Keir Starmer,' Verso Blog, 27/1/20 (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4555-the-case-against-keir-starmer>)
15. 'Ratcliffe Trial: Prosecutors and Police Conspired,' Bristling Badger Blog, 10/8/13 (<http://bristlingbadger.blogspot.com/2013/08/ratcliffe-trial-prosecutors-...>). See also: Paul Lewis and Rob Evans, 'Undercover: The True Story of Britain's Secret Police,' 2012, Ch.5.
16. 'April 2018 European Membership List,' Trilateral Commission, p6 ([http://trilateral.org/download/files/membership/EU%20LIST%204_18\(3\).pdf](http://trilateral.org/download/files/membership/EU%20LIST%204_18(3).pdf)); 'June 2020 Membership List,' Trilateral Commission, p6, ([http://trilateral.org/download/files/TC-MEMBERSHIP-LIST-\(MASTER-9-JUNE-2020\).pdf](http://trilateral.org/download/files/TC-MEMBERSHIP-LIST-(MASTER-9-JUNE-2020).pdf)). A recent Trilateral Commission brochure says that the organisation hopes to give 'inspiration and reassurance to those who have traditionally looked to the United States and its allies as democratic models by underscoring the continued commitment of its member states to democracy, the rule of law, and free and open markets.' 'Democracies under Stress,' Trilateral Commission, 8/19.
17. 'Five questions for new Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer about his UK and US national security establishment links,' The Grayzone, 5/6/20 (<https://thegrayzone.com/2020/06/05/five-questions-for-new-labour-leader-...>).
18. 'Keir Starmer takes Labour adviser role and hints at career as MP,' 'Guardian', 28/12/13.
19. 'Labour activists urge Keir Starmer to stand for party leadership,' 'Guardian'.
20. 'Wapping: End of the Street,' 'Socialist Alternatives,' April/May 1987, p8.
21. <https://twitter.com/richardhorton1/status/1270455968699240448>
22. <https://twitter.com/richardhorton1/status/1270473958094225408>.
23. <https://twitter.com/richardhorton1/status/1270475064463540229>.
24. 'Long-Bailey sacked for sharing "anti-Semitic article",' BBC News, 25/6/20. It is, at least, *theoretically* possible that Rebecca Long-Bailey has some unconscious anti-Semitism and that

this is why she forwarded an article that contained a single sentence that claimed that the Israelis had taught a particular choke hold to the US police. But that same sentence was immediately followed by another which stated that 'the Israeli police has denied this.' So, it's hard to see how any reasonable observer could see Long-Bailey's tweet as evidence that she herself was a critic of Israel, let alone that she harboured any anti-Semitism (which is, of course, a completely different thing from being a critic of Israel). Needless to say, the priority of Starmer and the media is neither to understand nor to confront real anti-Semitism, rather they just want any excuse to silence the left. (The text of the original 'Independent' article is available at: <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-independent-1029/20200625/28238122181...>.)