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TIM SHIPMAN

GET IN

The Inside
Story of
Labour
Under
Starmer



**PATRICK MAGUIRE
AND GABRIEL POGRUND**

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Get In is the definitive behind-the-scenes account of Labour's brutal reinvention and dramatic return to power under Keir Starmer.

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GET IN

The Inside Story of Labour Under Starmer

PATRICK MAGUIRE &
GABRIEL POGRUND



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‘Greater love hath no man than this, that he
lay down his friends for his life.’

Jeremy Thorpe after John 15:13

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Prologue

3.30 a.m., 5 July 2024

Enough. She's heard this conversation before. Beating himself up again. Wanting more – needing more. Whenever her husband is alone with him it's like this. Obsessive, never satisfied. Usually he hates talking about politics, but these conversations are an exception. All he wants to do is win. Tonight he has, but still, somehow, it doesn't seem good enough.

Victoria Starmer is watching them going up, the two boys together at last after six weeks apart, heading to the party they always wanted. It's being thrown in her husband's honour and yet now, just as it's real, he's talking like there's nothing to celebrate. Parties like this don't happen often. When this journey began, seven years ago, the smart money was on a party like this never happening again. But when he steps out of the lift on the sixth floor of Tate Modern, hundreds of people will cheer him.

Because it's happened. He's going to be prime minister. Only six other leaders of the Labour Party have ever known that feeling, only three have known this one: to win an election from opposition, everything changing at 10 p.m. on polling day, the impotence giving way to the power and the glory the left so seldom knows in Britain. Only he knows how it feels to win like this. Four years ago, when he took this job, they told him he'd never be here – the colleagues who looked upon him with pity and condescension. There was no party in 2019, when Labour lost nearly as badly as the Conservatives just have. There were times, too, when Keir Starmer told himself he'd never do it.

Now he has, but he can't enjoy it. As they're going up and up, Starmer turns to Morgan Sweeney. He always does, because this Irishman

always has the answers. He's asked McSweeney questions like this so many times – about the numbers he doesn't quite understand. Tonight looks a little different. McSweeney's in a suit: that's new. There's a faint smell of cigar smoke. In victory Labour's campaign director looks like a different man, dressed like he works for winners.

A few hours earlier they'd been apart, awaiting the same moment with their arms around family. Just before 10 p.m., Starmer was in Covent Garden, over the Thames, in a penthouse loaned to him for the campaign, holding his wife and children tightly. McSweeney had been in Labour headquarters, not far away from where they are now, almost inconspicuous in a dense crowd of young advisers who worshipped him like a god. When the hour came they both heard the BBC tell them that the Labour Party had won, and won big, with a landslide majority of 170 seats. Both had wanted more.

They know it's real now, and that's a problem. 'I think we can get a few more seats,' McSweeney says, his voice and the fading red hair betraying where this journey really started, in a small town in West Cork. 'But I don't think we'll get to 1997 numbers.' That's the year they've both been thinking of – the last year a Labour leader, Tony Blair, felt what they're feeling. But Blair felt something more. His majority was bigger – 179 seats. Starmer doesn't like that. People often ask what he really believes. He sometimes struggles to answer. Those who know him have a simple answer. He wants to win. He needs to be the best.

Tonight Starmer has fallen short. It's a small failure, perceptible only to him. But he can't resist. He and McSweeney start moaning. Victoria Starmer has heard enough. She tells them to stop, just as she's had to before, when they spent the night at a friend's wedding talking endlessly about politics. 'You're bringing the mood down,' she says. So they stop, and soon the lift stops too. The doors open onto a room that's waiting for Keir Starmer – a gathering so few people in Britain thought would ever come to pass. Before he takes his first steps into this new reality, Starmer turns again to McSweeney.

'Come and walk through with me.'

'No,' the Irishman says. 'I'm not doing that.'

Starmer walks in, alone. All around him are the people who helped make the unthinkable happen: a sea of smiling faces who for so long, when Labour was still losing, had so little to be happy about. Nobody

says it – not tonight – but they spent the first years of his leadership frowning, too. When he became leader, in the months after Labour’s worst election defeat since 1935, more of these people than he could ever know doubted whether he would lead them to its greatest victory since 1997. For now that doesn’t matter. There’s a deafening cheer.

Starmer makes his way to the middle of the crowd. Before long he realises something is missing. He can’t do this by himself. Not now, after everything they’ve done together. It wouldn’t be right. It has to end like it started. He turns back and he grabs McSweeney, bashful now, and drags him exactly where he doesn’t want to be. Now everyone is cheering both of the men who made it happen. Before long McSweeney slips away, alone, back into the obscurity he knows he’ll never enjoy again.

★

The twisting, implausible story of British politics in the twenty-first century has been told mostly in cliché and hyperbole. In Westminster, a place addicted to instability, what is unsurprising is breathlessly recounted as shocking or astonishing. Recurring and predictable events are described as unprecedented. Forgettable disagreements over unremarkable issues are cast as civil wars. To organise is to plot, and mild dissent is revolutionary insurrection. The truth – inconvenient though it is for political journalists – is that little of what happens in Parliament or to politicians really merits its billing as high drama.

The recent history of the Labour Party is a rare exception. To study the party’s troubled, 124-year life is to categorise different kinds of failure, punctuated intermittently by successes containing failures of their own. In 2020, when Keir Starmer succeeded Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the opposition – the highest honour most of their predecessors ever knew – conventional wisdom dictated that he, too, would fail. This judgement was at once the hardy perennial of British politics, for Labour leaders seldom win, and also a reflection of time and place.

Over the preceding four years, Labour had done things differently. Under Corbyn it was transformed. Its answer to a new age of economic and geopolitical uncertainty was an old gospel of left populism, powered by a mass membership of half a million. Proudly socialist, anti-imperialist, at one with the idealistic activists to whom Labour

leaders had only ever been a disappointment and at odds with the corporate interests to which most mainstream politicians paid loyal obeisance: this was not the sort of opposition Britain had ever known before. Fleetingly, at the general election of 2017, Corbyn looked as if he might remake the country as he had his party. But for a few thousand votes in a few dozen constituencies he might have been prime minister.

He never was. When Britain came to vote again, in 2019, Brexit and accusations of antisemitism against Corbyn had broken the left of the Labour Party. A political project defined for so long by its unbreakable solidarity was shattered by events and the questions it could not answer. Its leader, once a man whose moral clarity seemed to speak for a lost generation, struggled to speak for himself. When Labour lost to Boris Johnson's Conservatives that year it seemed to herald a permanent realignment of British politics. Voters in the very seats the Labour Party had been founded to represent – the old industrial towns of the north and Midlands – instead gave a historic mandate to the party they had once blamed for making them poor. The English suburbs that had once voted for Blair and New Labour had long since turned blue. Scotland, too, seemed lost to nationalism. As McSweeney would say later to friends at a south London dinner table, 'There's something very stubborn about these voters. They're going to be very hard to get back.'

In the aftermath of that defeat, Starmer did not tell Labour members that he would be different. His promise was predictability. To the left, this former human rights barrister said he would preserve the radical spirit of Corbynism. He spoke an idealistic language they understood and he had, after all, served dutifully as Jeremy's shadow Brexit secretary and marched with them as they tried and failed to overturn the result of the EU referendum. To the party's activists he made Ten Pledges, each a commitment to a consensus the British public had rejected: higher taxes on the wealthy, a dovish foreign policy, and a liberal immigration regime.

Labour's establishment – the Blairites and hard-nosed right-wingers the unclubbable Starmer did not know – did not much like that. But Starmer was at least recognisable to these people, too. As a former director of public prosecutions he was, at least, a serious person. It was possible to imagine this square-jawed man of indeterminate middle age addressing the country from outside 10 Downing Street. But really

they expected that Keir Starmer – the prime minister – would stay there, in their imagination, to be replaced in time with a leader who spoke with the self-confidence and fluency this stopgap option could never quite summon.

What they did not imagine was what happened. For this they could hardly be blamed, for so much of what brought it about was withheld from all but two men and their intimates. Even the chosen, secretive few did not dare to dream of the minutes after 10 p.m. on 4 July 2024, when McSweeney stepped out onto the balcony of Labour's headquarters in Southwark. He took a long drag on a cigar and called the man who had asked him, in the summer of 2019, to help make him leader of the Labour Party.

'Congratulations,' McSweeney said to Starmer. 'You're prime minister.'

That night those words had come naturally. Nobody working in British politics in 2019 might have predicted that Labour would win 411 seats to the Conservatives' 121 come the next election. But in a single night Starmer reversed electoral trends that had ossified into the laws of British politics. His Labour Party won in urban England and rural England; in counties that had long since turned true blue, like Essex, Kent, Norfolk, Suffolk, Cornwall, Devon and Dorset; and it once again became the largest party in Scotland. All of this he managed with only 33.7 per cent of the total votes cast, fewer than any winning prime minister in the history of the United Kingdom, and with collapsing support among Labour's old core voters on the liberal left and in British Muslim communities.

By 2024 three Conservative leaders had so spectacularly failed to fulfil the promise of Johnson's mandate – a booming Britain whose poor provinces were levelled up with its wealthy capital – that their defeat seemed all but inevitable. That, however, was never how it had felt to Starmer. Nor McSweeney, who, having come to London as a seventeen-year-old slacker, applied himself with almost deranged intensity to changing a Labour Party whose failures he experienced first-hand. At first a young and unremarkable organiser, sent out by New Labour into a country that was rapidly falling out of love with Blair, a series of historic victories came to bear his fingerprints. What each had in common was the understanding that candidates who did not listen to their voters were doomed to lose.

It was just as unlikely, too, that Angela Rayner should ever know this

feeling. That night the deputy leader of the Labour Party was nearly 200 miles away, awaiting her re-election as an MP in Greater Manchester. Having begun life as the child of a broken home on a Stockport council estate, once mistakenly fed dog food by her illiterate mother, in mere weeks she would be dining with the King at Balmoral as deputy prime minister. Belittled by her own party, maligned by the press, here she was nonetheless, on the cusp of power people like her were never supposed to know – ready, like only a handful of working-class women before her, to change the country at the helm of a Labour government.

So too Sue Gray, the chief of staff who had left school at sixteen for a career cleaning up after the gilded sons of Britain's Civil Service. Now, at last, she had the chance to run a government that did things differently, just as Starmer wanted – planning for the long term, for the public good, pursuing five missions in the national interest, not merely chasing headlines and the affirmation of the press who had made these past few years a misery. This victory was her vindication, too. Only two years earlier she had been hated by Conservative ministers as she investigated their misdeeds, and was pursued by shadowy figures on her own street. Starmer alone seemed to understand and respect her – to want her at his side. Now she held the power in the land that she had watched, resentfully, being wielded by well-heeled men who all seemed to look and sound the same. This government would be *her* government. She had written its script and auditioned its cast of ministers. Here was her chance to prove them wrong. That, at least, was how it felt that night.

Did McSweeney always tell voters the truth about his mission? Did Starmer? For four years that question recurred, asked repeatedly by the politicians and colleagues never invited into the tight and tiny circle of trust that remade the Labour Party and discarded Starmer's principles, so many of which were casually abandoned by the leader they once trusted. The Keir Starmer of 5 July 2024 was not the man who had become Labour leader on 4 April 2020, when he embodied the values of the activist left that had been his making as a lawyer. His utopian promise was that another future was possible. The future he and McSweeney offered was one in which the leader of the Labour Party defined himself against its very identity.

The prime minister's favourite band is the Wedding Present, the indie rockers he came to know when he was at Leeds University in the 1980s. In 'Brassneck', one of their better-known singles, they sing

of asking ‘if the end was worth the means / Was there really no in between?’ The many people whose careers have come to a brutal end at Starmer’s remorseless hand ask the same question, and the British public may in time come to ask it too.

★

This book is the first full account of how these two journeys became one, and returned the Labour Party to power after fourteen years in opposition. Much of this story has necessarily been untold until now. Starmer himself tells a bowdlerised version in which, having reckoned with the electorate’s comprehensive rejection of Corbyn’s Labour by the electorate in 2019, he concluded that his party needed to change and made sure it did – even if that meant expelling Corbyn, the leader he had once called a friend.

McSweeney, who is one of many people to have advised Starmer but is without question the most significant, has never spoken publicly of his work for the man who became prime minister. But there is now an accepted and all but authorised version of his story, too: of the Labour organiser who spent the Corbyn years polling a party membership thought to have been lost to the hard left, concluded Keir Starmer was the man to win them over, and proceeded to execute a seamless strategy to transform their party and make him prime minister in a single term.

Tony Blair tells one version of the Starmer story like this: ‘I think he realised pretty early on that the Labour Party was just in a fundamentally bad position, needed to be shifted, and then he started to do it. It’s possible that his journey isn’t like Neil Kinnock’s, where you start on the left and then you move right. I don’t think he really started anywhere except vaguely progressive. And then, very unusually, only when he was leader did he really start to think about politics in a different way.’ It is at once a faithful retelling of the official history and a glimpse into the private doubts of the politicians who now make up Britain’s government. Many of the current cabinet begin this story at a degree’s remove from the Starmer project, refusing to endorse him for the leadership and nurturing doubts that still endure about what, if anything, his politics represent – and whether, even now, they truly wish for him to lead the Labour Party and the country.

Political histories are written by victors, even in the Labour Party, and in doing so they elide the inconvenient events and people that once stood in the way of their ending. Gambling is recast as strategic genius. Doubters and dissenters, however well reasoned their arguments may have sounded at the time, are maligned as cranks. Tensions evaporate and the most awkward questions that recurred in private go unasked. It is precisely because of the nature of Starmer's victory – its implausibility, the fragility of his electoral mandate, and the sharpness of the contrast between the Labour leader he promised to be in 2020 and the Labour prime minister who went on to govern Britain – that the full story of his leadership to date deserves to be told.

That story, at its heart, is the story of his relationship with McSweeney – and its defining question is whether the man who became prime minister can truly be described as its primary author. So much of what has unfolded under Starmer's leadership departs so dramatically from what he has said publicly and privately at any given point in these five years that even the people who have worked at his right hand in opposition and government question whether he can truly be described as a leader. The prime minister has already contributed extensively to a fine biography by Tom Baldwin. This book does not attempt to retell comprehensively the life story of Starmer the man. Instead it seeks to decode the mystery of Starmer the politician, which by turns deepens and dissipates as one speaks to the many people who have known him professionally throughout his rise to power, and place him in his proper context.

On the morning of that Labour landslide on 5 July, the most fundamental questions about the party's candidate remained unanswered. How did Starmer do what most Labour leaders so singularly fail to do – not only win, but win so convincingly? Why did he do it? How many of the discombobulating changes Labour made under his leadership – how it looked, what it said, who it sought to represent – can really be said to have anything to do with him? These are unusual questions to ask of a leader. For better or worse, the politics of the Labour Party usually bear the imprint of their personality and philosophy. But then Starmer is unusual, because more often than not he projects neither – and often quite deliberately. The only consistent answer shared by the many interviewees whose testimonies inform this book is that he wants, more than anything, to win. 'He is a completely hard bastard,'

says Martin Plaut, a friend from Kentish Town who has watched Starmer on the football pitch as well as the doorstep. ‘He plays to the edge of the rules, really hard.’

Having promised unity with the left, he proceeded to purge the Labour Party with unprecedented vigour. Every principle he said he held dear in 2020 has been ritually disavowed. That year Doreen Lawrence, the Labour peer who channelled her sorrow at the 1993 racist murder of her son Stephen into a campaign for justice championed by Starmer, launched his campaign for the Labour leadership. By 2024 she was complaining: ‘I wish Keir listened to me. There are gatekeepers who stop things from happening.’ Did Britain elect the leader of the Labour Party, or the people leading him? As one senior government adviser said in the first months of Starmer’s premiership: ‘It’s impossible to work out whether Keir realises he is a pawn in a chess game. Or does he like being a pawn in a chess game, provided it makes him powerful?’

★

This account is the product of a year of interviews and contemporaneous conversations with more than a hundred people who played their own part in Labour’s return to government – the advisers closest to Starmer and those who left, his personal friends, members of his shadow cabinet and cabinet, Labour MPs, trade union leaders, and his avowed opponents on the hard left and at the commanding heights of Conservative politics. It draws not only on their recollections as recounted in formal interviews with the authors, and the candid assessments they offered at the time of events, but also their emails, text messages, and other contemporaneous written records that were never intended to be published but reveal far more of the complicated truth of the past five years than any public statement ever will. Memories are often fallible or selective. Conflicting interpretations of the same words or moments abound, even among close friends – all of which are reflected and recorded alongside the facts of this history. Written words, particularly those transmitted digitally, are not so vulnerable to revisionism.

The story unfolds primarily in Westminster, Starmer’s home turf of Kentish Town, and the various corners of central London where

Labour has been headquartered since 2019 – with forays out into the rest of the UK, Ireland, Europe and the Middle East. It will be for others to offer academic analysis of the 2024 result, provide an exhaustive account of the Covid pandemic that so disrupted the first years of Starmer’s leadership, and trace in full the revival of the Scottish Labour Party. The dinner tables of private homes feature more frequently in these pages than the streets of individual constituencies. This, to borrow from the high Tory historian Maurice Cowling, is instead the story of fifty or sixty politicians and advisers in conscious tension with one another. Some win, many more lose: all of their experiences are recorded here.

The events described do not amount to a comprehensive record of British politics during this period, but instead are those the Labour leadership, its servants and its adversaries now recall as formative. Many of these stories have never been told before and in some cases considerable effort has been expended in preventing them from being reported. They have been told as they are told privately, complete with the expletives that illustrate the ferocity of feeling only Labour politics can inspire. Together they record more of the truth of how Morgan McSweeney and many others made Keir Starmer prime minister than has been told before, and how close that story came to ending long before July 2024. This is the story the people who now run Britain tell themselves about their rise to power. As the country makes its uneasy adjustments to a new era of Labour government, it also reveals how its rulers will exercise it – and who those rulers really are.

PART I: ORIGINS

I

The Irishman

It's late afternoon on 2 April 2019 and Jeremy Corbyn is about to come face to face with the conspiracy that will one day destroy him.

He waits in the office of the leader of the opposition – his office – a room that looks nothing like the average Briton's vision of politics. To reach its doors, visitors have to walk away from the chamber of the House of Commons, turn their back on the statues, ministerial cars – on Parliament itself – and instead walk away from history, go underground, up escalators, through cigarette smoke. Once they arrive before the fading red bricks of Norman Shaw Buildings, looming over the Thames like a Victorian sanatorium, they must climb a winding stair to the fifth floor. On this afternoon an Irishman climbs the stairs to that room where Jeremy Corbyn, now in his fourth year as leader of the Labour Party, is waiting for him.

Corbyn does not know him, nor his intentions. Had his staff googled the name they would have read of a baseball pitcher for the reserve team of the Baltimore Orioles. Nor will the visitor reveal those intentions. If he does, his plan is doomed.

Since 2015 almost everybody in the Labour Party has tried to destroy Jeremy Corbyn, the socialist whose politics they dismissed as dangerous and mad. No – everyone in Westminster has tried to destroy Jeremy Corbyn. In 2016 Labour MPs tried to destroy him by demanding his resignation, and he said no. They staged a leadership challenge, and the activists of the Labour Party said no. In 2017 the Conservatives tried to destroy him at the ballot box, and the country said no. By April 2019 dissent against Corbyn seems pointless, self-defeating. The Labour Party now belongs to him, the quiet old man alone at the boardroom table, surrounded by empty cans of Diet Coke. But his visitor today, a man named Morgan McSweeney, thinks otherwise.

In fact, he knows otherwise. He says he's here to tell Corbyn about something called Labour Together. It sounds unthreatening. *Labour Together*. That's the kind of ethos Jeremy likes. In the press, and in the parliamentary bars, they call him a Stalinist. But really he hates conflict. He can't bear to hear his critics accuse him of antisemitism, or read of himself villainised as a friend of terrorists by the newspapers. So when Morgan McSweeney arrives to tell him about Labour Together, he has nothing to fear. McSweeney looks like a whippet in denim, and speaks softly – nothing like the bruisers of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) who make Corbyn's life a constant misery. He talks the leader through some polling, the most detailed ever conducted on the half a million grass-roots members that are Jeremy's pride and joy. Labour Together knows what they think of Europe, of economic policy, of Corbyn himself, and they're happy to let him have the data for free.

It's a generous gesture. Corbyn likes the sound of Labour Together. He listens for a while and endorses their work. Soon he's chatting idly about the Italian Marxist philosopher and politician Antonio Gramsci. He thinks he's in the company of people who respect him, unlike so many others in the Labour Party. It will be eighteen months before he realises he was wrong. Because Morgan McSweeney is not there to help Jeremy. He's there to destroy his politics. And, like everyone else, Jeremy hasn't noticed a thing.

Beside McSweeney sits an aide to Corbyn who scrolls through Jeremy's Facebook page as the discussion rambles aimlessly on. He basks in the affirmation. Like. Like. Like. Labour activists love Jeremy. This is why they'll never be beaten.

Within a year, Corbynism is defeated. Six months later, Corbyn is humiliated: suspended from the party he had led into two elections, never to return.

His guest that day in April 2019, the man from West Cork, was the mastermind of a deception without precedent in British politics. Even the name of Labour Together was a lie. Its mission was division, the inverse of the old prayer of St Francis of Assisi so often invoked in Westminster. Where there was harmony between the Labour Party and its leader, it would bring discord. Where there was truth, it would bring error. Where there was faith, it would bring doubt. Where there was hope, it would bring despair. McSweeney would convince the left-wingers of the Labour membership, who had waited lifetimes to hear

a leader speak with the moral clarity of Jeremy Corbyn, to abandon Corbynism without them ever realising. And he would convince them to make Sir Keir Starmer, the human rights lawyer from north London, the Labour leader who buried the left.

Starmer had become a Labour MP because he wanted to be prime minister. He never knew how to defeat the Corbynites. Nobody did: Starmer had been forced to work with them – as their spokesman on Brexit – instead. He had gritted his teeth as they rowed over the future of Britain in Europe and examined his conscience. ‘They’re just *bastards*, aren’t they?’ his wife, Victoria, would say in unguarded moments. But they were bastards that her husband did not know how to beat.

Until he met Morgan McSweeney.

*

The journey that would eventually take Sir Keir Starmer to 10 Downing Street began twenty-five years before McSweeney’s meeting with Jeremy Corbyn.

It was a heady summer to be young in Ireland in 1994. Jack Charlton had taken a team full of Englishmen in green jerseys across the Atlantic to the World Cup. One afternoon, a seventeen-year-old set out from Cork in the opposite direction. He boarded a Slattery’s coach to London, destined for the Fulham home of an aunt. Thirty-six hours later he arrived in a city whose political class was ill at ease with itself. John Smith, the leader of the Labour Party, had died suddenly of a heart attack. He was a Scotsmen of both the old and Enlightenment schools: hard-living, quick-witted, deep-thinking. His young disciples, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, watched him less with awe and reverence than fear and anxiety. Not of the scale of the challenge before them should Labour return to government under Smith, but the fear that he was not equipped to meet it. That they would lose again, that for all the conciliatory gestures in City boardrooms he was really Old Labour’s last hurrah. On the evening of 11 May, drawn and exhausted, Smith rose to his feet before an audience of donors on Park Lane. ‘The opportunity to serve our country. That is all we ask.’ Twelve hours later, he was dead on the linoleum floor of his Barbican flat. In the weeks that followed, Blair and Brown agonised over who might replace him. It was the younger man who would win, and pull his unwilling party towards

the Third Way and a new Labour: furling the red flag, abandoning its old shibboleths, courting the Conservative press. Neither knew that in those weeks another new chapter in the contested, troubled history of the Labour Party had begun, far away, with the tentative steps of a lazy boy at a bus station.

Had anyone in Cork been told, they would not have believed it. Morgan McSweeney was a slacker. He hated school. He had little time for the political obsessions of his parents, an accountant and a clerical worker. Only the most conscientious student of Irish geography might know Macroom, his home town, site of the fiercest fighting in the Irish Civil War. Tens of thousands of Irishmen without prospects had taken the same journey. None would think their destiny was to change the politics or the history of a country to which they did not belong, just as Blair would soon do. Not the eldest son of Tim and Carmel McSweeney, anyway. The boy Morgan seldom joined them as they canvassed for Fine Gael, the party of Ireland's petit bourgeois. The Blueshirts had been his birthright. In a country run by Fianna Fáil's 'gombeen men' – practitioners of petty, parish-pump corruption – it was not a happy one. Usually they lost: not only elections but the public appointments, money, power.

But the McSweeneys had no choice. Family lore stated that Morgan's grandfather had been an IRA courier as Michael Collins led the fight for independence, bearing messages from Dublin to Cork, evading the Black and Tans. When Collins was martyred after proposing compromise with the British, he stayed loyal. Subterfuge ran in the family. So would politics. As his cousins ran from house to house spreading the gospel of Garret FitzGerald, the short-lived Taoiseach who broke bread with Margaret Thatcher, Morgan stood alone before the wall instead. In his hand was his hurl and sliotar, unloved by the other boys in Macroom, who played in his father's Gaelic football team. All alone he bounced the ball back and forth for hours, as other people made politics happen.

In London he worked on building sites. Winter came and he concluded that he did not much like labouring. He went to university instead. Within twelve months he had dropped out. All alone, he bounced back and forth again. First to California, to live in the presbytery of the church at which his uncle was priest. Then to Israel, adjusting uneasily to the free-market reforms of a young Benjamin Netanyahu, for three months on the kind of kibbutz that was passing

into history. The old collectivist dream of socialism and workers' power was dying in this changing country, just as it had in Britain.

Yet in a factory built by Czech Jews at Sarid, nine miles from Nazareth, the lazy teenager learned to work. He built saw-cutters and grinding wheels. He returned to London not just with a tan but a work ethic. In 1998 aged twenty-one he enrolled at Middlesex University to study for the life he had always avoided in favour of the hurling pitch, the family sweetshop and Liverpool Football Club. As he began his degree in politics and marketing, Blair had been prime minister for just over a year. By then his government had already brokered peace in Northern Ireland.

Inspired, McSweeney joined the Labour Party. His were not the politics of so many of the Irishmen and Irishwomen who found a political home away from home on the British left. His family did not know he had politics at all. But by 2001 he would be working in its headquarters, in the Millbank Tower, on a university placement. Few would remember the skinny kid with the scissors and glue, all alone before a hulking computer called Excalibur. McSweeney's thankless task was to cut up the newspapers, glue their component parts to pieces of card, and feed them into the database built by Peter Mandelson, Blair's close ally and key architect of New Labour, to rebut Conservative attacks. Eventually he went home jobless and waited, alone and bored again, until the landline rang.

'What are you doing?' asked a man from Labour's headquarters in Millbank. It was days before the general election of 2001. Millbank's receptionist had dropped a vase on her foot. Quentin Padgett, Labour's head of facilities, told him that he was now gainfully employed by the Labour Party.

McSweeney manned the entrance through which the aristocracy of New Labour walked. They never said hello. Mandelson does not remember the boy behind the desk. Not once did he look at the young man who one day was to change Labour twice as fast and twice as hard as he had. Members of Blair's cabinet are still bewildered by McSweeney's rise. It would take them a long time to grasp that their former receptionist had bigger plans. One senior Blairite who met him in the Corbyn years said: 'I didn't realise that he was the big brains behind the whole thing. He's quite modest. He talks in numbers . . . he's an unprepossessing character. He's not Peter Mandelson. And he's

not self-promoting.' Blair himself now laughs at the very thought of Mandelson ignoring McSweeney. 'He may have then. He doesn't now.'

Then, everybody did. No minister was to hire him as their special adviser. Nor did he join the golden generation of Young Turks who went on to run the country. He was no Miliband, Balls or Burnham. In Westminster, as in Macroom, other people made politics happen. After New Labour won its second landslide, the hapless Iain Duncan Smith was elected leader of the opposition. When the news reached Millbank, everybody cheered. They punched the air and jumped on their desks. They said the Tories would never win an election again. McSweeney watched, and walked out into the country that Labour would soon begin to lose.

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McSweeney learned his politics street by street. He did not walk the corridors of power but the pavements of places the Blairites who ignored him took for granted. As an organiser, his thankless task was to win the elections whose results the golden generation took as read. First, in 2003, he went to North Wales, grinding votes from tiny towns like Abergale, Ruthin and Colwyn Bay, for a new parliament a hundred miles away in Cardiff. It was lonely work. Most of the people did not care.

He went back to London. He was there, organising the Labour campaign, when the Liberal Democrats struck the first blow against New Labour after the Iraq War in Brent East. There the people did care. Blair, who had a different politics and a different country, had not listened to them. Two years later he went to the people again. They told Blair he had been wrong. Labour lost. He took his punishment. He called it the masochism strategy. He never conceded the point. Blair thought the people were wrong: about Iraq, about the state of their hospitals and schools. In that campaign McSweeney went to Hammersmith, where they voted in a Conservative MP. But it was not enough to oust Labour from power. Blair returned to Downing Street, chastened but comfortable, with the last parliamentary majority any Labour leader would win for nineteen years.

By 2006, the voters wanted Blair to hurt. They took every opportunity to tell him so. On the night of 4 May, New Labour watched its

power base crumble in the local elections – the last set of elections Blair ever fought. The Tories won council after council. In Downing Street they were disconsolate. Even the cabinet minister Tessa Jowell, the high priestess of Blairism, conceded that it was a ‘bloody awful night’. When she picked up the phone to call Labour’s leader of the opposition on Lambeth Council she knew she would hear yet more bad news. Instead, for the first and only time that night, she was told that Labour had won. Wherever the party had stood elsewhere in England, it had gone backwards. But in this pocket of south London they had advanced. ‘Fucking hell,’ said Jowell, in shock.

McSweeney had gone to south London earlier that year. Lambeth’s streets should have been Labour streets: home to the disadvantaged, the Irish, the black. Others, home to young professionals in search of a lively life, were richer but should have been Labour too. Yet by 2006 they had turned against the only party they had ever trusted. For that McSweeney blamed Ted Knight, Labour’s former leader of the council. For eight years under Margaret Thatcher the old Trotskyist had made Lambeth a citadel of righteousness. To McSweeney, Knight was the gombeen man of south London: corrupt, driven by vanity, but protected by his party’s invincibility. Red Ted – as he was known by his many detractors – twinned his borough with Nicaragua. He refused to fly the Union Flag from the town hall, whose offices had been opened to the London Squatters’ Union and School Kids Against the Nazis. He praised the IRA and declared the streets of Clapham and Stockwell a nuclear-free zone. When the Metropolitan Police came out to put down the Brixton riots he denounced them as an ‘occupying army’. When Mrs Thatcher passed a law to restrict his spending he set an illegal budget. Neil Kinnock, who stood helpless before his unruly party and its waves of protest like Canute, said Knight had brought Labour into disrepute. Nevertheless, he persisted, even after his defiance of the Thatcher government saw him disqualified as a councillor. Knight and thirty-one of his comrades walked out of the town hall singing ‘The Red Flag’. His successors urged their constituents to break the law and refuse to pay the poll tax. They opposed the Gulf War. This, said the newspapers, was the Loony Left. But every howl of establishment condemnation hardened their commitment to protest. Knight never listened to Kinnock or the young Lambeth councillors, like Peter Mandelson, who told him that a silent majority of voters did not like what

he did. His Labour Party existed as a red shield for the teeming mass exposed to Thatcherism's hardest edge. To criticise was to collaborate with the cold forces of capitalism that impoverished them.

For years it seemed that Lambeth agreed. But in the council's children's homes his most vulnerable charges had no protection at all. In this corner of Labour London, boys and girls, many of them black, were abused by council employees. Years later an independent inquiry would find that Knight's Lambeth had been so distracted by its protests – the municipal equivalent of a disastrous foreign war – that it had neglected the one responsibility it spoke so proudly and stridently of fulfilling. It had let its most vulnerable people down. Politics infected everything. Corruption, fraud and bullying had been tolerated in the name of a higher cause. Poor children had become 'pawns in a toxic power game with Thatcher's government'. Lambeth had become a 'vicious' place. Whistleblowers were ignored, monstered as collaborators with the enemy. By 2002 its basic services were among the worst in the country, its taxes among the highest. The very name of the borough had become a byword for corruption. So its voters elected a council of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to run what Knight had once called the Socialist Republic of Lambeth.

How the business of local government could have become so dysfunctional that child abuse was allowed to happen, that inquiry said, was 'difficult to comprehend'. Not for McSweeney. Lambeth was not the only council to have overseen child abuse – Islington, led by Margaret Hodge, a woman later elevated to sainthood among Labour moderates, had the same problem – but to the Irishman the answer was simple. The hard left subjugated everything before ideology. Purity mattered above all else. Children had not suffered because of negligence or incompetence. They had been failed, quite deliberately, by an ideological cult. The left valued only themselves, not the voters they served. McSweeney's view was itself extreme by the standards of the Labour mainstream. His, after all, was a party of collectivism and cooperation: the broad church of misty-eyed cliché. Kinnock sung 'The Red Flag' too. This, McSweeney came to believe, was precisely the problem. Too many of his colleagues put the cause before the voter. Ironically, his world view had a certain fanaticism, paranoia and moral certitude in common with Knight's.

Steve Reed, Labour's leader in Lambeth who would pick up the

phone to Tessa Jowell that May night in 2006, agreed. He had hired McSweeney as his organiser. This former publisher, openly gay, might have appeared to be the very image of the kind of cosmopolitan progressive who agreed with Knight. As a teenager, he had campaigned alongside hard-left activists and was sympathetic to their world view. Once he saw what they did in power he turned against them. He recalls now: 'What really disabused me of ideological politics was being elected as a Lambeth councillor in 1998. First I discovered voters weren't at all interested in theoretical politics – they just wanted their streets cleaned and bins emptied; then I got an insight into the absolute chaos that the hard left had left behind at the council – massive debts, failing services, corruption, and a legacy of child abuse.' For all his differences with the left, Blair was not altogether immune from this critique. After Knight's comrades had forfeited control of the council, the local Labour group enjoyed a short-lived renaissance under the stewardship of the party's right wing, regaining a majority in 1998. That result delighted the new occupant of Downing Street. He described its architects as 'more New Labour than New Labour'. Naturally, Blair had meant that as a compliment. The people of Lambeth would soon beg to differ. They rebelled at the earliest opportunity against the party's slick communications but underlying lack of delivery, for which the prime minister himself had become a grim metaphor. By 2006, Reed was once again seeking to return Labour to a majority locally. Blair appeared more consumed by spin and his misadventures in the Middle East than ever. It was the opposite of the unglamorous politics which Reed prized. When local elections came that May, the party's national leader, just like Knight, had given Lambeth's voters every reason to reject Labour. McSweeney should have lost again. Yet despite everything, his campaign told voters that Labour was 'on your side'. He spent hours going door to door on the estates that politicians had forgotten. He asked what worried them. They showed him graffiti, overgrown trees, blinking street lights. He told them that Labour had noticed. In Lambeth its messaging was tailored street by street. Rather than *telling* them that they cared – on protests and on the airwaves – Labour now showed them. Reed and his organiser reported burnt-out cars to the police. By polling day each voter received a tailored postcard, emblazoned with the single policy McSweeney knew would make the difference to their difficult lives, whether saving the leisure centre on the end of the street

or funding repairs on their estate. Those in marginal wards received not only the most hyper-local literature, but the most unsavoury too. After discovering a Lib Dem councillor had sought to purchase a council home under right-to-buy but been rejected on the grounds she did not live there, he deluged addresses with a mock newspaper accusing her of criminality. The ‘fraud special’ was blown out with pictures of the woman’s home and breathlessly accused her party of ‘keeping quiet about fraud’. In tandem residents received ‘Dear neighbour’ leaflets, authored by McSweeney, alerting them to the supposed scandal. By appealing to people’s hyper-local hopes and concerns, McSweeney and Reed gradually shifted the dial. And so when Jowell called late that night, Reed alone could tell her what no other Labour politician in Britain could.

‘I think we’ve won.’

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In the subsequent days, a brooding Blair sent a private note to Reed. ‘You were a beacon of light on a dark night,’ he wrote of Lambeth. New Labour’s darkest hours were still to come. Only in Lambeth had its traditional voters come home. Twelve miles north-east, in Barking and Dagenham, they had sought solace in the open arms of the far right. There, where industrial east London bled into Essex, the British National Party had won eleven of the seats contested. This was Blair’s opposition now. Nick Griffin, a telegenic Cambridge graduate who preferred to package his Holocaust denial with tailored suits and a side parting rather than the shaved heads and tattoos of his predecessors, had told the white men who built cars for Ford and the women who raised their children that New Labour was paying Africans to relocate to Essex. Thousands believed him.

McSweeney was troubled. The founding fathers of New Labour had boasted that the workers of England would never leave them, no matter their overtures to the middle class and moneyed, for they had ‘nowhere else to go’. In fact, once those in Barking and Dagenham abandoned them, the Labour establishment struggled to find them again. Every warning from Margaret Hodge, the MP for Barking, that eight in ten of her voters would support the BNP without tougher measures on immigration seemed to remind those voters that they preferred the BNP.

Jon Cruddas, the member for Dagenham, fretted publicly that New Labour's obsessive focus on Middle England may have brought the far right to 'the verge of a major political breakthrough'. Griffin, by then a habitué of television studios, vowed to oust Hodge from Parliament. This was not an idle threat. By the time the BNP reached its high-water mark in Barking the Labour Party was bargaining with people who had stopped listening, and only condemning itself in the process. And so it sought help.

New Labour still ran the town hall in Barking and Dagenham, if not its streets and estates. Race-relations law obliged it to promote 'good relations between persons of different racial groups'. It interpreted that line of the statute book as a licence to spend public funds to beat the BNP. They paid a campaign consultancy run by David Evans, who had run party headquarters when the young McSweeney worked unnoticed by the other Blairites, to organise the fightback. He, in turn, approached the young man who had won back Lambeth. He arrived, again, on streets scarred by neglect. He walked them, dumbfounded, for months on end. Nothing made sense. Twenty-first-century politicians thought they knew the electorate. They studied every little difference between demographics. Voters were not merely targeted, they were 'segmented'. They determined their views and beliefs by salary, age, tone of skin, degrees of latitude and longitude. A poor black woman in Tottenham would vote Labour, a rich white man in Wiltshire was probably voting Conservative. New Labour tailored its messaging accordingly to the Mondeo Men and Worcester Women who held the key to electoral success.

Dagenham was different. The voters defied segmentation. McSweeney spoke to them on the Becontree estate, once the world's largest municipal housing project for Europe's largest car factory, meeting a new white face at each pebble-dashed semi. All around was squalor. The jobs had gone. Soiled mattresses lay in the street. Heaps of filth were piled high in front gardens. Graffiti lined the walls. Homes that had housed the same east London families for generations – many of whom took advantage of Thatcher's right-to-buy scheme – sank into disrepair, sold to absentee landlords and given over to outsiders they exploited. Places like Becontree had been built for solidarity. McSweeney instead found a nasty enclave of isolation and individualism. Some blamed the migrants who filled the dirty homes around them. They did not

apologise for their racism, for before their eyes was the evidence that proved it to be credible and true. Once they had been Labour. Now they belonged to the BNP. Others spoke in sorrow, not anger. They loathed the party their neighbours lionised. From these doors they saw Griffin was a Nazi, and these voters knew what they thought of Nazis. ‘My father fought against these people,’ many said. Others were less dogmatic than curious. They spoke of their concerns that migrants were hoarding housing stock. Barking was changing faster than they liked. At least the BNP understood that. Perhaps, if another party did, they might be persuaded to vote for them.

These conflicting answers came from the same sorts of people on the same sorts of streets. Sometimes they would come from within the same family. No one segment could staunch New Labour’s slow bleed. McSweeney would have to think again. He focused not on what the voters *believed*, but what they *valued*. To parrot beliefs was easy. It had every appearance of empathy. But in Barking, it had not worked. It was one thing, he thought, for Hodge to speak sympathetically of their beliefs – however contradictory they may have been. To convince them that New Labour and its liberal, internationalist prime minister shared their *values* was quite another. Whatever they believed, the men and women on the Becontree estate loved their country. They wanted security as it changed around them. Even if they did not believe what Nick Griffin believed, his party at least understood what they valued. To McSweeney, the councillors who spoke of resisting neo-Nazism, and the earnest young Labour activists who took the Tube to east London chanting the anti-fascist slogan ‘*No pasarán!*’ – they shall not pass – in the faces of the voters, risked doing more harm than good. At best they were demonstrating that the left did not understand them. At worst they were advertising that they held them in contempt. Labour would have to learn to listen again – to think and talk like the people it had lost.

It was not easy. David Evans told McSweeney there were three kinds of voter: the pioneer, the prospector, and the settler. The pioneers lived a free life. They emphasised individuality. Their social networks were large and lively. ‘Change’ and ‘diversity’ were inherently good. The prospectors prized their self-esteem, and winning the esteem of others. They wanted status, success, money. They consumed

conspicuously. The settlers wanted safety, security, belonging. They valued their home, their family and their immediate neighbourhood. 'Change' was not automatically a good thing. More often than not it was inflicted upon them by other people. Most lived in council houses. McSweeney saw that it was the settlers who felt most unsettled by New Labour. Its politicians were prospectors who struggled to understand why voters felt their way of life was under threat. And so he made them fly the flag, just as he and Steve Reed had done in Lambeth. Labour did not attack the migrants, nor give racism respectability – as Hodge had been accused of doing when she defended 'the legitimate sense of entitlement felt by the indigenous family'. It pursued the rich landlords instead. It cleared their eyesore gardens and charged them for the trouble. 'We know the people of Barking and Dagenham want us to take action on this,' said Liam Smith, the council leader who wore an England rugby shirt as he walked the streets with McSweeney, 'because they have told us it worries them.'

Nick Lowles, of the anti-fascist group Hope Not Hate, recalled: 'The one thing I thought Morgan learnt from that time was the importance of delivery – and delivery for local people, not the political class or activists.' By orienting the council towards people's values, and day-to-day needs, Labour neutered the far right's attacks on the party, creating the conditions for the broader left to mount one of the most successful campaigns in British political history. In 2010, even as Gordon Brown lost the general election, Labour beat the BNP in every ward in Barking and Dagenham.

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McSweeney had won again. Elsewhere in England, Labour lost. Its people were poorer. Even if a global financial crisis had really been to blame, it was Gordon Brown they wanted to punish. New Labour's last prime minister told them he had saved the banks, and the world, just as their worlds, collapsed. His electorate did not thank him. Why would they? By then McSweeney was convinced that The Voter was never wrong. If Labour had lost power in 2010 because the middle ground of Blair's England moved to David Cameron's Conservatives, The Voter had been right. If they blamed Brown for the recession,

thought New Labour too profligate – they could only be right. The Voter was always right.

But in Brown's place Labour had elected Ed Miliband, the archetypal pioneer: intellectually open, well-travelled, content to ride the cultural tides of a changing world. He broke with New Labour and moved his party to the left. Try though he did, he could never reach The Voter. He tried to remake the centre left from on high but beneath him the ground of politics was shifting. Ukip's Nigel Farage spoke for the settler class, pushing relentlessly for tougher measures on migration and speaking a language that Labour's old voters understood. The Conservatives pilloried Miliband as Red Ed. To his left, new movements assailed him for prevaricating on austerity. His flunkies tried to hide the contradictions behind prime ministerial lecterns but The Voter would not be fooled.

McSweeney had spent those years in the foothills of British democracy. At Reed's suggestion he had gone to work for the Local Government Association, imparting his lessons to the leaders of Labour councils. They knew the settlers. Some *were* the settlers. The story of Becontree was playing out in inner cities and small towns in every part of Britain: places fractured, made redundant and changed utterly by globalisation. In 2010, Miliband had briefly flirted with a new movement that sought to recast the Labour Party in the image of the voters it had lost: Blue Labour. Socially conservative, it embraced faith and flag, and said what London liberals did not like to hear on migration and crime. Its economics were interventionist and its exponents attacked billionaires and 'fat-cat bosses'. They were eccentric. The movement's philosopher-king, Maurice Glasman, was the chain-smoking son of a toymaker from a Jewish home in east London. His assistant, an academic called John Clarke, was another Irishman: the son of republicans who had grown up beside a lead mine in County Meath. Labour never swallowed their medicine. In 2015 it lost again.

McSweeney flirted with Blue Labour. He knew Glasman and Clarke. In Dagenham, he had worked with its parliamentary flagbearer, Jon Cruddas, who later joined him during the deputation to Corbyn's office. Still, he was realistic about its appeal to the activists whose instinctive, self-regarding liberalism he had come to know all too well in Lambeth and Barking. When Labour came to elect its next leader he went to manage the doomed campaign of Liz Kendall, a Blairite

shadow minister with no public profile to speak of. She was briefly Blue Labour's great hope, and quietly outsourced her campaign preparations to Glasman's Dalston office.

But Corbyn knew Labour activists even better than McSweeney – who they were, what they believed – because he was one of them. He travelled the country saying what he thought. He did not understand the sterile vernacular of compromise that had become Labour's official language. He railed against austerity and foreign wars with a moral clarity that had been throttled out of politics by New Labour. And those who would choose Miliband's successor – the activists, the trade unionists, the interested public who paid £3 for a vote – loved him for it. Blair had told Kendall to ignore the members. 'She should go over their heads,' he told her team. 'When she does, the members will see that she's appealing to the voters, and they'll vote for her.' To that the Irishman said: 'That's horse shit. Who's ever run a campaign and not talked to the people who have the vote?' Kendall did. And Kendall lost. Corbyn won 60 per cent of Labour members to her 4.5 per cent.

McSweeney was shaken. He had forgotten what it was to lose. In his mind Corbyn's politics were not just wrong. They were evil. The man who had served as Ted Knight's election agent was now leader of the Labour Party. To Corbyn, Knight was not the man whose ideological indulgence had led to the abuse of children. He was 'legendary'. Red Ted was still alive to vote his old friend in, loudly and proudly. Lambeth leftism would become the official alternative offered by Britain's opposition. This was not the politics of place and country McSweeney had taken to the estates of Brixton and Barking. It was the politics of anti-war marches and *Guardian* columnists. It was everything he hated. He was sure that voters would hate it too. He again retreated from Westminster, and looked askance at the Labour MPs who struggled through the stages of political grief. Some bargained with those who had given them Corbyn. 'He's not the Messiah,' said Sir Keir Starmer MP, elected for the first time that summer, of his new leader. 'He would be the first to say he doesn't have all the answers, and if you touch Jeremy you are not healed.' Most of his colleagues could not move beyond denial. They told themselves it would be over by Christmas. But McSweeney knew otherwise. On the Becontree estate he had learned that The Voter could not be wrong. Politicians could

not browbeat them into wisdom. Those who tried were doomed to lose again and again.

The more Labour MPs tried to talk the membership out of their love of Corbyn, the more they lost the argument. A year later they tried to oust Corbyn in a coup. Owen Smith, the cocksure Welshman who was their chosen challenger, called McSweeney. Like the rest of the shadow cabinet, he had resigned after the EU referendum. They did not blame David Cameron, the prime minister who called the referendum, nor did they blame Boris Johnson, Michael Gove or Nigel Farage, who had led the campaign for Brexit. They blamed Corbyn, who could never disguise his Euroscepticism even as he appealed to Labour voters to back Remain. Smith asked McSweeney, who had spent the final days of the referendum campaign at his wife's side in a maternity ward, for advice. McSweeney recoiled. It was all wrong. He had learned from the Kendall disaster. To ignore a Labour membership still loyal to a leader who had given voice to their values, who *embodied* them, was to be destroyed. McSweeney told Smith, whose career as a special adviser to New Labour and lobbyist for the pharmaceutical industry could never endear him to the Corbynites, that he was like a teenager jostling in line for an exclusive nightclub. 'You can queue if you want to,' he said. 'But if you don't have any money, any ID, or the right shoes, then you're going to get to the front and they'll bounce you out the door.' It was not enough that Smith *wanted* to be leader or *thought* he could be leader. To run against the values of the members was a waste of money and a waste of time. Smith ignored him. He stood anyway. He likened Corbyn's supporters to a 'parasite' corrupting their 'host body'. Like Kendall, he was beaten badly. Corbyn won 61 per cent of the vote. Grief-stricken, MPs resigned themselves to his invincibility.

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McSweeney thought otherwise. Before long he was drawn to a new project. Labour for the Common Good had been set up by John Clarke, the Blue Labour man from Meath, in 2015. Soon it would be renamed Labour Together, a name that so appealed to Corbyn's dislike of confrontation he embraced the group. 'I welcome Labour Together as a new initiative that explores a new kind of way to do

politics,’ he said. He did not realise they saw him as the enemy. With Corbyn – the candidate of the activist left, of the young idealists, of the metropolitan minorities and middle class – in the ascendant, Clarke knew that Blue Labour’s brand was spent. Even those sympathetic to it – like McSweeney’s mentors Steve Reed and Jon Cruddas, and the young Wigan MP Lisa Nandy – knew they would not beat the left with politics of hard borders and English flags. One involved described Labour Together as ‘Blue Labour without the accidental incel vibe, and the side order of racism’. Bernard Donoughue, who wrote policy for Harold Wilson and James Callaghan in Downing Street, was its first donor.

Their brief was in the name that Corbyn misunderstood: to hold together a party fractured in an instant by his politics. Its money came from two men with lots of it. The first was Sir Trevor Chinn, a multi-millionaire Jewish philanthropist who had made his fortune from the sale of the Royal Automobile Club and grew to love the trade union shop stewards who worked for him. To Chinn, politics was about people. But he feared Corbyn. Chinn had once been targeted for assassination by Al Qaeda. He had great concerns about the election of an outspoken opponent of the Jewish state as Labour leader. The second was Martin Taylor. He had grown up in a poor house in Greenwich, the son of a Labour councillor, and became a hedge fund manager whose computers expended so much energy in making money that he would work dressed in cycling gear, to better withstand the heat. Where Chinn literally embraced politicians, Taylor did his politics from a distance, via cheque. Only a tiny circle of people knew the extent of his tribal loyalties. Privately, he spoke of his ‘West Ham’ test, where people in politics were judged less on their love of the game and more their fealty to the club, the cause, the badge – that is, to Labour. Both men wanted to save their party from a politics they feared would make it unelectable.

They sent for McSweeney. At first he refused to join them. Labour had become a basket case. From the offices of the Local Government Association, the political equivalent of a birdwatcher’s hide, he could wait and see as the contagion of Corbynism seeped through the roots of the party in the country. Obsessed, he read their tweets and watched them organise. But he needed security for his wife and baby. In a paper written for Labour Together in December 2016, after Corbyn had

won his second leadership election, McSweeney made no secret of the group's potential: 'You want it to be a project that not only points the Labour Party back towards the road to government, but drives it there.' Yet he doubted that Labour Together was ready to play 'a covert but leading organisational role' in opposing the hard left. Too many people in the Labour Party had reconciled themselves to a 'gradual decline'. 'Many MPs and councillors,' McSweeney complained, were 'approaching the crisis the party is in as an era that needs to be endured and which will eventually pass'. He regarded that as a dangerous mindset. Nor could McSweeney run Labour Together – which possessed not even an office – until it decided whether it was a think tank, which held no interest for him, or a resistance movement, willing to disguise its true aims and allies.

But in 2017, McSweeney was ready. He had already proven that the party was not entirely lost to Corbynism. He knew it existed beyond Westminster as a matryoshka doll of boards and committees, all elected by activists. Blair and Brown had ignored them. Power had been wielded from Downing Street. Now, deep in the wilderness of opposition, every vote mattered. Every committee in every constituency party, no matter how small; every delegate to every conference, no matter how obscure; every activist seeking election at every level of the Labour Party was now conscripted into its civil war. By 2016, as MPs collapsed into nervous exhaustion, those who cared to look could already see that Corbyn was neither omnipotent nor omnipresent in the committee rooms and working men's clubs in which the democratic battles for the party's future would really be won. That summer McSweeney pushed his friends on the party's ruling National Executive Committee to hold elections to the board of the London Labour Party before the members who had joined to vote for Jeremy would be eligible. These polls were not usually seen by their participants as a generational struggle for the soul of the British centre left. But this was a committee that the Corbynites were yet to win. If they did, then they would control the selection of candidates for the capital's local councils in May 2017. McSweeney feared this would open the door not just to another Ted Knight, but 'twenty militant Lambeths' controlled by the hard left. Corbynites would also adjudicate on questions of internal discipline and propriety. In November, the results were announced to

little fanfare. Nobody really noticed, but by the narrowest of margins McSweeney's moderates won.

There would be no time to dwell on that result and what it meant. In 2017 came an unexpected general election. Theresa May, the Conservative prime minister, called it early, hoping to annihilate Corbyn. In the week before polling day the cover of Labour's house journal, the *New Statesman*, showed Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and Diane Abbott cowering beneath an asteroid. Having run on a manifesto of big-statism that harked back to the 1970s, soon they and their Project would be ground into dust. Or so Westminster thought. May ran an abysmal campaign and Corbyn gained seats, denying the Tories a majority on his own terms. Soon he might be prime minister on his own terms. Those who had spent two years opposing him seemed to have little option but to agree to those terms. When Corbyn first addressed his parliamentary party in the hot, heady hours after polling day, his destroyers were made supplicants. Chuka Umunna, who had spent the preceding weeks planning his leadership campaign, told reporters: 'Government is the watchword – unity is the aim!'

McSweeney wanted neither – not under Corbyn. Before the shock of the election result he had finally agreed to take the helm of Labour Together, whose MPs were determined to unite what would remain of a post-apocalyptic party after Corbyn's inevitable annihilation behind a candidate who might return it to some version of normality, and turn once more to the voters it had lost. Their motives were constructive. Now, in a changed world, McSweeney would devote himself to destruction. As he left the Local Government Association his colleagues inquired as to his plans.

'I've got a job at Labour Together,' he said.

'What are they?' asked a friend.

'We're going to renew the Labour Party.'

'But it's already renewed,' said another, revealing the Corbynite sympathies that few could resist in the wake of Jeremy's great vindication.

McSweeney was baffled. However impressive the Corbyn surge, Labour had lost again. It had won millions of votes from the middle classes but, almost unnoticed, had lost pockets of support in the old industrial towns that backed Brexit to the Conservatives. It was a portent of what was to come in 2019. The Voter, the angry man McSweeney

had met on the Becontree estate in Barking, was closing his door to Corbyn's Labour. His answer now was not to wait, nor let Jeremy fail on his own terms. It was to use any means necessary to delegitimise and destroy him. And so the Irishman turned to deception.

The ruthlessness with which he set about hoodwinking the Labour Party shocked even his closest colleagues. As one MP on the Labour Together board said: 'I remember thinking that he needed to speak a bit more loudly. I couldn't hear him. I asked him to repeat himself a few times. He looks very nice, very agreeable, very softly spoken. Probably hard as nails underneath.'

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On Tuesday 20 June, as Corbyn packed his bags to address hundreds of thousands of adoring fans at Glastonbury later that week, McSweeney assembled the board of Labour Together in Steve Reed's parliamentary office. Before him sat Jon Cruddas, Lisa Nandy, and Sir Trevor Chinn, who paid his wages. McSweeney told them hard truths. While Corbyn had not won the election, he had won control over his own fate and would only leave office on his own terms. The next general election was his to lose. That was an outcome none of them could control. They could, however, control the aftermath – and help to ensure he lost badly.

Reed, at his old assistant's instruction, had printed copies of a strategy paper for those assembled. Authored by McSweeney, it was to be the order of service at Corbynism's long funeral. The mission: 'Move the Labour Party from the hard left when JC steps down as leader and to reconnect the Labour Party with the country, build a sustainable winning electoral coalition, based on a vision that is radical and relevant and protects the labour interest.' The imperative: don't get caught.

McSweeney described his first strategic objective as evading 'the threat of attacks of disloyalty by supporters of the leader'. The Corbynites – be they 'from online organisations, from the media or from official party bodies' – could not be allowed to learn that Labour Together existed to eradicate them. Progress, the Blairite think tank controlled by Peter Mandelson, was cited as a cautionary tale. To the left it was 'the enemy within'. Petulant and pugnacious, its leaders had argued themselves into bankruptcy and irrelevance. Labour Together

could not afford to become ‘a new internal enemy’ for ‘JC supporters’. MPs, wrote McSweeney, were similarly dangerous. Those invited into their confidence ‘may publicly attack the leader or privately brief that we are their leadership campaign or the leadership campaign of a potential rival’.

The risks were considerable – and potentially fatal. The solution was subterfuge.

Anything that might provoke hostility or even cursory interest from the Corbynites would have to be disguised. Labour Together would be elaborately costumed to appear at one with the party’s new order. It would brand itself like Greenpeace and campaign as if it were any one of the countless leftish pressure groups doing earnest work on the fringes of the Labour Party. They would say so explicitly to Corbyn’s face. Through subterfuge they would ‘build an official relationship with at least one trade union’. When Corbyn fought elections, they would support him and they would build official relationships with ‘bona fide JC supporters’. If Blairite backbenchers tried to take control, Labour Together would ‘robustly defend ourselves from MPs co-opting us’. As he stood before a cartoonish slideshow, McSweeney called his strategy Operation Red Shield. Emphasising the point, he presented the room with an image of Roman legionnaires forming a phalanx. Labour Together’s soldiers would need to hide beneath their red shields too.

Once the Corbynites had been lulled into disinterest and ignorance, McSweeney would pursue his second strategic goal: ‘Win the battle of ideas.’ As he had learned in Barking, Labour was ‘increasingly disconnected from its traditional electoral base’. The Voter knew that Corbyn did not share their values, or even understand them. That word again: *values*. ‘The key to reconnecting,’ the paper declared, ‘is to develop a political vision that is relevant to voters’ concerns in a rapidly changing world and reflect their values.’

The self-confident language belied the difficulties they faced. The election had now confirmed Corbynism’s hold on the party. Whatever policies they presented would have to be seen as harmonious with it: ‘the New Testament to Corbyn’s Old Testament’. And they would be forced to address and convince the activists who worshipped at his altar. ‘Labour Party members credit our relative success in the general election to the manifesto and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn,’ he

said. ‘Since our immediate audience is party members, whose support we need to gain traction, we need to present our work as building on what they already consider to have been successful.’ But *how*?

Corbyn’s supporters lived online. The fallen rulers of the Labour Party had failed utterly to understand ‘how digital media has transformed the rules of political debate’. The members had little time for the mainstream media. Instead they read ‘insurgent propaganda sites’, most notably the *Canary*, a blog that supported Corbyn in the manner of a football fanzine. Its editor, Kerry-Anne Mendoza, was an Occupy protester who lived far away from Westminster, in the Welsh Valleys. She had started with nothing – neither the resources nor the brand prestige of the legacy newspaper – but in railing against austerity and revelling in condemnation of the Conservatives – a slur it applied as readily to Labour MPs as to the Tory government – she had gamed the algorithms of social media and now commanded 8.5 million hits a month. That, McSweeney told his co-conspirators, was nearly twice the audience of the *New Statesman*.

Other populist blogs fluent in the confrontational language of the digital left included the *Skwawkbox*, *Evolve Politics*, *Another Angry Voice*. This was the newsstand of the Labour Party in 2017. ‘These alt-left sites have grown dramatically,’ McSweeney warned, ‘and pump out stories that often go unchallenged by the mainstream and are therefore accepted uncritically by their committed readers.’ Without breaking this unlikely cartel of media influencers, there was no way any attempt to wrest the Labour Party from the left’s control would succeed. Labour Together, which barely existed beyond the room in which its leadership spoke, would have to build ‘a rival infrastructure to communicate our politics’. Like *Endeavour*, the leftist literary magazine secretly funded by the CIA to undermine the British intelligentsia’s support for the Soviets, McSweeney would cultivate ‘seemingly independent voices to generate and share content to build up a political narrative and challenge fake news and political extremism’. The *Guardian* might help. Ditto LabourList, the blog devoted to the minutiae of party business, Hope Not Hate, the anti-fascist campaign group he had worked alongside in Dagenham, and Reg Race, a former MP who had turned his back on his old comrades like Tony Benn and ran a Facebook page called Saving Labour.

All that was missing was a leader. ‘Ultimately,’ McSweeney concluded, ‘we will need a candidate to win a future leadership election on the political platform we are developing. There is no need to identify a candidate at this stage, but we will proceed on the assumption that our organisation must be able to generate a successful leadership campaign operation when required.’ Lisa Nandy, sitting expectantly across from McSweeney, believed it would be her. Whoever it was would need to win a membership with little desire to renounce its faith in St Jeremy. And to secure that new leader’s hold on the party, ‘We need to make sure the party’s organisation is not used by the hard left to conduct political purges against our supporters.’

There was every chance Labour Together was doomed to fail. McSweeney’s final slide listed the threats it faced: its true identity being uncovered by the *Canary*, denunciations by a trade union, a hijacking by a self-serving MP. Graver than all of them was the unthinkable: ‘A Labour government.’ However unlikely they believed it to be, Corbyn’s victory would be their permanent defeat. Still McSweeney was undeterred. In the style of Dominic Cummings, the eccentric, single-minded strategist who had delivered Brexit and broken the Tory establishment, he concluded with a quote from Sun Tzu. ‘To not prepare is the greatest of crimes; to be prepared beforehand for any contingency is the greatest of virtues.’ So began the great deception that would destroy a movement.

The Candidate

McSweeney worked on Black Prince Road, a long street in Lambeth with a longer history. It took its name from Edward of Woodstock, the Plantagenet heir to the English throne whose palace had once stood nearby. The Black Prince was the great knight of his age. He psychologically crushed his enemies with the *chevauchée*: small units of mounted soldiers who stampeded and pillaged their way through villages whose rulers and riches never recovered. With Trevor Chinn's money he hired space in China Works, a fashionable hot-desking space in an old ceramics factory. Room 216, the sparsely furnished headquarters of his conspiracy, was undecorated save for the skull and cross-bones of a pirate's Jolly Roger, pinned clumsily to the white walls a little while later. McSweeney was intoxicated by the arguments of *Be More Pirate: Or How to Take On the World and Win*, a book that presented the lawless behaviour of Captain Kidd and Blackbeard as rulebreaking for the greater good. Alone with his laptop, he had a view across the Thames to the citadel he one day hoped to retake.

For anyone to learn of Labour Together's true intentions would be fatal. Few beyond the staffers it employed, Hannah O'Rourke and Will Prescott, were welcomed into Room 216. Only one outsider was allowed to sit beside McSweeney: Imran Ahmed, the eldest of seven children from a poor Pakistani family in Manchester, who looked and sounded like the investment banker he had once been. McSweeney was shy and shifty, disorganised and dishevelled: old colleagues recalled him as the man who would arrive late for meetings, jeans caked in mud. Yet the two men were of one mind. As an adviser to Hilary Benn, the shadow foreign secretary, Ahmed had helped draft Benn's Commons speech in which he defied Corbyn to demand airstrikes on Syria. Like McSweeney, he believed the pages of the *Canary* and the Facebook

groups of the left were incubators of extremism where prejudice and misinformation metastasised into conspiracy theory. Ahmed, traumatised by the assassination in June 2016 of the Labour MP Jo Cox, an old friend, had come to China Works to set up the Center for Countering Digital Hate. He appointed McSweeney his co-director.

They studied their subject closely. McSweeney and Ahmed joined Facebook groups full of thousands of Corbyn fans, including the leader's own staff. The pair found their members were consumed with rage. They hated the media. They hated Labour MPs. They hated the Rothschilds. They hated Israel. One of the most voluble posters, Ian Love, an organiser for the Corbynite campaign group Momentum, declared that Tony Blair was 'Jewish to the core'. Here, in full view of the leadership of the Labour Party, the left spoke the conspiratorial, hateful language of the far right. This was the army McSweeney would have to overcome.

McSweeney commissioned YouGov to poll members of the two biggest groups: We Support Jeremy Corbyn, and Labour Party Supporter. It revealed more about their minds than any Labour MP knew. Corbynism's most devout, fanatical adherents believed the left's political project was sustained by champagne socialists in north London. Nearly half were working class. 33 per cent were older than sixty, 65 per cent over forty. 56 per cent said they were dissatisfied with their standard of living – twice as many as Britain at large. Half said they found it hard to sleep at night. A quarter agreed that 'sometimes I let people walk all over me'. They were paranoid and pessimistic, with nearly half agreeing that the world was controlled by a secretive elite. Nearly two thirds said the media could not be trusted to report the truth. Political violence did not shock them. When asked for their view on George Osborne's vow to chop up Theresa May and store her remains in his freezer, 55 per cent described it as light-hearted banter. Their views were markedly more extreme than those of the population at large – and of the paid-up party members who had twice voted for Corbyn alongside them.

McSweeney ensured the most disturbing examples found their way to the *Sunday Times*. It reported his findings on its front page on 1 April 2018, underneath a screaming headline: 'Exposed: Jeremy Corbyn's hate factory'. Members of the groups were quoted praising Hitler, advocating for the murder of the prime minister, and dismissing the Holocaust as a 'big lie'. Activist Ian Love defended his comments to

reporters: 'The Rothschilds control all the money in the world.' The BBC emblazoned the news across its website.

It could have been a crisis for Corbyn but instead it hardened the left's resolve. The Labour Party's spokespeople called the story a smear. Its members reappropriated the headline as a badge of honour. They ridiculed the media under the hashtag #armyofhate. The experiment had failed, succeeding only in persuading the Corbyn supporters who did not share the extremism of those quoted that there really was a conspiracy arrayed against their leader. Labour Together needed to persuade these people, not demonise them. Every member who felt unjustly accused of racism was a member more likely to reject overtures from outside Corbyn's circle of trust.

McSweeney concluded that that was exactly what they had done. The YouGov polling paid for by Chinn and Taylor had confirmed his long-held thesis that the Labour membership was not overrun by Trotskyites and racists. If the research had proved anything, it was that they were in the minority – albeit a noisy and influential one. But to challenge them – as he had done via the *Sunday Times* – was to reinforce their conspiratorial world view. It was to prove the *Canary* right. Anyone who wished to break the hard left would first have to jam its feedback loop.

Perhaps the answer was to shout louder. In the 1980s, dismayed by the monopoly power of populist tabloids like the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror*, left-wing activists briefly printed their own red-top: the *News on Sunday*. It failed, just as McSweeney's attempt to disrupt a new ecosystem of digital media would too. *Tribune*, the venerable old weekly once edited by Nye Bevan and Michael Foot, had collapsed into insolvency. McSweeney tried to buy it. The hard left did instead. A bid for LabourList, the party's parish noticeboard, went nowhere fast. So did Changing Politics, a podcast hosted by the comedian Gráinne Maguire and journalist Marie Le Conte. Nobody listened, and for many months nobody was paid. Maguire later recalled that every episode was scripted by McSweeney. After six episodes, McSweeney's brief foray into audio production was over. If he was to clip the *Canary*'s wings and concrete over its 'cesspit of antisemitism', he concluded that his only option was to kill it entirely.

He foresaw no end of opportunity in its death. Without its online *Pravda*, the hard left would lose in an instant its ability to manipulate the narrative to which its angry audience was so receptive, and which