

British politics | Essay

## Knight moves

The challenges facing Keir Starmer as Labour leader

By [James O'Brien](#)



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Kim Leadbeater and Keir Starmer after the Batley and Spen by-election, Cleckheaton, July 2, 2021 | © OLI SCARFF/AFP via Getty Images

**I**t is always tempting to overanalyse by-election results, especially for those of us paid to fill pages and programmes with pontifications. When those results are particularly unexpected and unpredicted, the temptation is close to irresistible. But resist we must.

Last month's Liberal Democrat victory in Chesham and Amersham, followed by Labour's in Batley and Spen, have undoubtedly conspired to create the first sense of ballot box vulnerability for Boris Johnson. Given just how many Conservative MPs have sacrificed their respect for trifles like the rule of law and objective truth at the altar of his "winnability", this might once have discomfited swathes of the

Parliamentary party. But there has been scant complaint beyond some mild grumblings about planning laws and covetous glances from South East MPs at the lip service being paid to northern constituencies.

High on bogus “culture wars” and insulated by a still whopping majority with little prospect of imminent electoral tests, they drape their offices in flags, line up behind the home secretary Priti Patel’s performative and callous refugee “policies”, and bank on the malevolent genies of populism and personality politics released by the Brexit referendum remaining unbottled. Knives are most definitely not being sharpened. Yet.

They were, however, for Keir Starmer, and soon they will be again. For now, the result of the Batley and Spen by-election on July 1 has silenced talk of leadership challenges, notably from “allies” of his deputy Angela Rayner. The Labour leader had the look of a drowning man that day, with the courageous winning candidate Kim Leadbeater his unlikely lifeboat, keeping him afloat by just 323 votes. Yet the dissatisfaction and disappointment in Starmer’s party are going nowhere.

It is, in many ways, remarkable that the leader of the opposition should be watching his back so much more closely than the prime minister. Having presided over a pandemic response which, by most international comparators, ranks as one of the worst in the world, Johnson is now reduced to responding to every criticism by citing the success of the NHS’s vaccine rollout. That success has been considerable, although the gap between the UK and many other European countries is now shrinking daily. It is also irrelevant to the tens of thousands of avoidable deaths, or Johnson’s failure to fire the health secretary Matt Hancock, or the eye-popping details of catastrophic leadership that his former adviser Dominic Cummings continues to lob vengefully into view. (The stakes remain far too high, meanwhile, to enjoy Cummings’s frustration at finding himself a victim of precisely the anti-factual mood in contemporary political life, that he has done more than anyone else in the UK to bring about.)

And a fish rots from the head down. *Private Eye* recently pointed out that there are six qualified lawyers in the current cabinet, while the number of members found by courts to have acted unlawfully stands, at the time of writing, at seven. The Ministerial Code seems not even a mild impediment to conduct that would once have ended careers, the Northern Ireland Secretary speaks blithely in the House of a willingness to “break international law in a very limited and specific way”, and Jacob Rees-Mogg, as Lord President of the Council and leader of the House of Commons, flew to Balmoral to mislead the Queen about the unlawful proroguing of Parliament in 2019. Then there is the grossly lavish refurbishment of the prime minister’s private flat, the PPE contracts awarded to chums and party donors, the failure to close borders to slow the Delta variant of the coronavirus in the hope of letting Johnson unveil another Potemkin village trade deal with India, the test and trace debacle, the mess of school openings and examinations.

This woeful litany of wrongdoing and attendant impunity provide crucial context for the question of why Sir Keir Starmer continues to fare so badly at the polls and what, if anything, he can do about it. In last year’s splendid critique of left-wing populism and Labour’s electoral woes, *The Dark Knight and the Puppet Master: Left populism and its defining myths* (Penguin; £9.99), Chris Clarke argues that there are three myths that Labour leaders must dismantle before they can emulate the electoral successes of Clement Attlee, Harold Wilson or Tony Blair. Loosely linked by the necessity of appealing to people who would otherwise be quite comfortable voting Conservative, the three myths make for a thesis that convincingly

accounts for the defeats of leaders as outwardly disparate as Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock and Ed Miliband, not to mention Jeremy Corbyn and, perhaps ultimately, his successor.

The “Dark Knight” element in Clarke’s argument is the notion that Labour is so obviously and intrinsically “good” that anyone not fully aboard must be, by definition, “bad”. The ramifications of such an approach at the ballot box might be obvious from the outside but until it is more deeply acknowledged inside the party, it will not be remedied. The dopamine hits delivered by feelings of moral superiority may be addictive and intoxicating, but they are clearly not contagious; generally speaking, people don’t like being told that they are evil. While Corbyn was a veritable Pied Piper for such pieties, Starmer seems instinctively to understand their dangers.

The “Puppet Master” element, the least persuasive part of the triumvirate, is the argument that voters who cannot see that the Labour Party is the best defender of all but the wealthiest voters’ interests must have been bamboozled into political blindness by dark forces such as media owners. Clarke is right to stress the absurdity of believing this to be the only factor in the posited process, but doesn’t satisfactorily explain why anyone would want to own, say, a newspaper if not to influence the thinking of its readers, not least when these days they often lose money. Neither does it explain the people, well represented on my radio phone-ins, who claim to know that they are being misled but enjoy it because, as one memorably put it, “it upsets people like you and Sadiq Khan”.

Finally, Clarke rightly bemoans the fetishization of the “Golden Age” of postwar settlement, where the creation of the NHS and the welfare state created a country to which we all yearn to return. The belief that Margaret Thatcher wrecked everything good about our once great nation and that the miners’ strike somehow sowed the seeds of most modern-day problems is almost Trumpian in its seductive simplicity, and Clarke convincingly claims that it still enthral populists on the left. Starmer, like all of his losing forebears, needs antidotes to these populist poisons.

Some problems, though, are peculiar to him. One of the biggest of them lies at the heart of the exhaustive *Keir Starmer: The unauthorised biography* by Nigel Cawthorne (Gibson Square; £20). As a gossip columnist, I was always grateful for pre-release copies of biographies from which I could glean a juicy snippet about the subject for the next day’s paper. It seems significant that the choicest morsels diarists could find in this superbly written book involve a youthful Starmer playing the flute and wearing suits at the weekend. It is not Cawthorne’s fault. His last effort, *Prince Andrew: Epstein, Maxwell and the palace* (2020), was as forensic in detail as it was salacious in delivery. But in the way that Johnson has become shocking without being surprising, so the Starmer realized here is fascinating without being interesting. He emerges as the worthy recipient of untold awards for human rights advocacy and legal perspicacity but not as an obvious recipient of the votes of the politically unconverted and undecided.

And here, perhaps, lies Starmer’s greatest challenge: he is caught between two cults, a political Scylla and Charybdis. On one side, Johnson, the embodiment of a rapidly unravelling Brexit that his core support will never admit bears no resemblance to what they voted for. On the other, Corbyn, whose core support will be forever snarling furiously at anyone who dares to question his messianic status. They hate the comparison but are almost identical in stubbornness and determined delusion. I regularly speak to both camps on the radio, and see still more of them on Twitter; and I don’t think Starmer will ever recruit any of them.

Moreover, it would be a waste of his time and energy even to try. His success, indeed his survival, depend on reaching people in neither personality cult. There must, after all, be millions of them. Nothing about recent by-election results, whether in Hartlepool, Batley and Spen or Chesham and Amersham, suggests that he currently knows how to do it. He remains decent, bright and honest at a time when the political fashion values none of the above. But the world is always turning and it is not too late. Yet.

*James O'Brien* hosts a radio programme on LBC. His book *How Not To Be Wrong: The art of changing your mind* was published in paperback earlier this year

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