



KEIR STARMER

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CAWTHORNE

THE RELUCTANT POLITICIAN

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Vanity Projects

I should start by admitting that this book, the first biography of Keir Starmer, is somewhat driven by a personal interest in the man. Starmer is the MP of Holborn and St Pancras in which Bloomsbury, where I live, is located. I do most of my work in the British Library on Euston Road, also in his constituency. In truth, I feel a bit of connection. As children we also went to the same school, Reigate Grammar School, though not at the same time. I did not know him back then, any more than I knew David Williams, another former pupil—they both arrived years after I had left.

Back when I attended Reigate the school was state funded. I went on to study physics at University College, London. Starmer went on to do law at Leeds and an advanced degree at Oxford.

However, as ‘Guido Fawkes’ gleefully pointed out on order-order.com, RGS became a fee-paying school around the time Starmer was there.

In 2021, it charged upwards of £19,740 per year. With 1057 pupils, the school was doing very well with average grades of 3 As, and, of the 5000 secondary or so schools in Britain, it is ranked in the top 50 of Britain’s 400 plus independent schools.

In addition, the school could also count on the Leader of the Opposition’s warm support as Ambassador for the RGS Foundation in 2016, even though the Labour 2021 Manifesto calls this type of school ‘the Conservatives’ grammar schools vanity project’.

These fees are curious to consider. Today, a millennial with Starmer’s Surrey background no longer has the automatic educational access that propelled the Leader of the Labour Party himself through his career and dropped him in Parliament running for Prime Minister. They form a considerable threshold, notwithstanding Reigate’s head

master being the son of a seventies glam rock-star. Over their GCSEs and Sixth Form a millennial going to RGS will need at least £138,180. Yet funds for bursaries 'are limited', RGS tells the parents of prospective pupils.

For our parents—my mother was recently widowed and the Starmers had their own worries—there were no additional financial concerns after the eleven plus. Though not a cinch, free access was still taken for granted. But a millennial in need of financial support will have to compete every year for a limited number of bursaries that may or may not cover the whole of the outlay in a school where they are the odd one out in many ways. Furthermore, those considered in need of financial assistance in 2021 are families with up to 'a total gross annual income of £85,000'. That is almost twice Britain's median income in 2020.

I very much doubt that either of our parents could have afforded to send us to RGS these days. If that millennial, possessed with the same eleven plus results as Starmer, didn't get a bursary and was from a household with Britain's median disposable income in 2020 of £29,000, their family would be left with £10,000.

Here the RGS Foundation stepped in and administered 'Changing Lives' scholarships through its 1675 Bursary Fund and one of its other initiatives was the Henry Smith Club dinner. In 2020, the donation of £1675 a year for seven years by ten club members would support a child through school with the school chipping in the balance of £2990 going forward (in the programme's first year, 2013, the formula was seven members' annual donation for one school year of one child).

In January 2017, Starmer himself was one member who fondly spoke of his memories to the Smith Club's 60 members in the East India Room at the 'splendid' East India Club. The club's president was Sir Peter Gershon, chairman of both Tate & Lyle and National Grid, who was a pupil at the school from 1958 to 1965. At that time, his

parents did not have to pay any fees either and Reigate fell well within the ideal of founder Henry Smith to create a 'free school for the poor children of the Reigate area'. Things have changed somewhat since then.

Starmer is not responsible for the fact that state funding for secondary schooling like ours was cut in the past. But it looks as if his time—and mine—was the last gasp of effortless social mobility.

Many Americans believe in their youth that they can become President of the United States if they apply themselves. In the UK, through Heath, Wilson, Callaghan, Thatcher, Major ran a similar vector in the twentieth century.

When I was in school, you didn't have to tell us that we were getting a very good education. In turn, we studied for it, with Starmer maybe bunking off a bit less than I did. At our school, only dances and trips needed to be paid for. And, certainly, those pupils whose parents could afford them felt exclusive.

Today, RGS's entire existence and not merely its range of extra-curricular activities is predicated on pupils who can afford her fees. No doubt that comes with its own feeling. The school is now a passport to 'world-class universities, medical school, top-10 ranked universities, Oxbridge, and elite Russell Group courses' where the eleven plus was previously good enough.

Starmer undoubtedly profited from Reigate and it set him confidently on course for his career successes. Yet—while he was lucky to be on the right side when the axe felled schools like ours—what do things look like for the Starmers of today, female and male, who also would like to become a political leader?

I write this biography in a world where the UK has suffered the highest impact on its population from Corona in Europe if not the world. Despite the first Corona lockdown, however, RGS's 2020 class headed off 'to life-

changing opportunities with some of the very best results in the country, yet again!', the school's website congratulated them.

One wishes today's Reigate's pupils the best of luck as much as one can't begrudge Starmer his early stroke of luck. But what of the other pupils with aptitude in the over 4000 or so state schools in Britain not so fortunate to be well buffeted from the circumstances into which they are born? I am not sure how his and my millennial self are doing.

While baby-boomers by and large couldn't stand Starmer's predecessor Jeremy Corbyn as a 1970s throwback, the sixty seven year old was considered cool enough by Glastonbury revellers for a jubilant billing at its world-famous Pyramid Stage. He pulled in hundreds of thousands hanging on to his words and wearing the T-shirt as a Glastonbury thumbs-up. It was a political first that even Corbyn's close Parliamentary collaborator Tony Benn had never pulled off with his yearly stage homilies at the festival's Left Field since 2002.

It is unlikely that Keir Starmer will ever follow in either men's unelectable wellies if only because he himself has said, 'The idea that all politicians must now be entertainers I think is interesting, but not right'. Although Starmer once more nimbly defended Glastonbury's Chief Druid, he seemed to be quashing that hope for the Festival's bookers.

Yet Tony Blair swept into office having rolled an air of competence, guitar-playing and Cool Britannia into one nationwide personal brand. Starmer will also have to give the next generation at least some hope of progress that is more than a power point presentation of 'read-outs' if he wants to lead Labour to power.

If one looks at the 24 prime ministers since 1900, 13 were privately educated (7 of them at Eton) and 9 at selective-entrance state schools (8 of them grammar schools), which tells a story. Of the 12 prime ministers

since Starmer's birth in 1962, 7 prime ministers attended state schools with selective-entrance and 5 independent schools (4 were at Eton). Comprehensive schools have yet to make an entry despite the first one being founded in 1946.

Labour leaders seem at risk of a 'learn Tory lead Labour' problem when it comes to education. Tony Blair was privately educated, (Fettes—2021, upwards from £121,770). While Jeremy Corbyn attended a 'vanity' grammar school similar to Reigate, director of strategy Seumas Milne went to one of the 'great nine' public schools (Winchester) as in fact did Starmer's left-wing guru Tony Benn (Westminster).

The fact that even Corbyn's 2019 Labour election manifesto finally dropped the party's opposition to selective tests after half a century—he voted against in the past—is still not the same as a fair secondary education for younger generations.

In 2019, Starmer himself said, 'In most walks of life, people are judged by who they are. Politics is different... people do, understandably, want to know who you are and what you come from, but it does feel odd.' Disarmingly off-guard, he didn't sugar-coat it when he admitted, 'I don't like it.' While one sympathises with Starmer's irritation, being a politician is hardly just another job—his parents would agree. They told him to study law.

Starmer's ambivalent response to politics brings to mind the self-deprecating words of a US senator after being voted out of office, 'I was the best candidate, but they disagreed—the bastards.'

Henry Smith, born like Starmer in Wandsworth and ostensibly a self-made professional, had the vision thing in 1675, but in 2021 there seems to be some doubt whether Starmer QC does, too. One of the things this biography aims to do is uncover brand Starmer.

It may be unfair that a conservative Etonian politician—whose secondary education weighs in at a value of over £900,000 for him and two brothers, plus a relatively modest £60,000 for his sister—merely has a political case to answer about education and not a personal one. Yet if Johnson were to abolish independent schools tomorrow, few could or would accuse him of unfairly depriving the young who are currently growing up in similar circumstances to his.

For a politician whose platform is ‘change lives for the better’ but whose own advancement—like Corbyn’s—was the result of equitable state support, it looks and feels different. Is it merely a case of optics that the country’s top jobs, including that of Leader of the Opposition, are held by a selectively educated few?

One doesn’t begrudge the good fortune whereby anyone young with aptitude, whatever their background, receives an appropriate education, whether private or public. Starmer’s parents chose a grammar school education for him with the eleven plus, exams for which he worked very hard. Though Labour through and through, they had every opportunity to put their son in a school advocated by their party as better, which they firmly declined to do as will become clear below.

As to what is a good education, the Labour Manifesto 2021 says, ‘The world’s most successful education systems use more continuous assessment, which avoids ‘<D>teaching for the test’<D>.’ Possibly. But, actually, how would Starmer know? His parents opting for such a method set their bright working-class son on a path of success, as it did with 8 other prime ministers. After a further quarter of a century of Labour leaders since Tony Blair, a case is starting to present itself of good education unequally provided rather than half a century of Labour losing a class-struggle to a 1970s Pink Floyd-style tune.

In the twenty-first century, the vector has changed. Three prime ministers were privately educated and only two went through state schools, and that balance will—depending on the Puritanical grade of the scalpel—at best add O-levels to the grammar-school tally at the next General Election.

Is there a new caste of mandarins that leads the country as it did in the nineteenth century when the government of Great Britain was the domain of the ‘great nine’ and of its nineteen prime ministers nine were Etonians?

1. The Starmers

There was a certain hope pinned to Keir Starmer, who rose from rookie MP to leader of the Labour Party to potential Prime Minister in just five-years. Not a professional politician though, he was unlike the modern variety who moved directly from university to Westminster, such as David Cameron and Nick Clegg. He had a distinguished career in the law along the way. As a young barrister he took on human rights cases, fighting against the state and big corporations, and only went into politics to fight cuts to the NHS and social care system inflicted by austerity. But he had also been Director of Public Prosecutions, which earned him a knighthood as he cornered the Tory stomping ground of Law and Order.

As someone who was not very well known, apart from being the only Labour politician journalists liked to refer to with the honorific Sir, he almost seemed too good to be true. He was a left-wing Tony Blair with right-wing credentials. Certainly, after five long years of Jeremy Corbyn leading the Labour Party from an obscure rear committee room stocked with grand ideas, one of Starmer's main attributes was that he was not another Corbyn full of untested hot-house ideas. In that sense, his election shared a lot with that of Joe Biden in the USA, whose key qualification was that he was not Donald Trump. Like Biden, Starmer just about managed to rope in more than fifty per cent.

Enough to win the Labour leadership election, it did raise the question who is Keir Starmer and what kind of leader—if not Prime Minister—can we expect?

Despite his elite schooling, Starmer is the first leader of the Labour Party with a genuinely working-class background since Neil Kinnock. While Starmer's predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, was seen as a dangerous Marxist among the likes of Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Che Guevara and even Karl Marx himself, he was also irredeemably middle class. But

Starmer, though dismissed as a Blairite centrist by members of Momentum—the militant rump of Labour’s Corbynistas—is indeed from the left of the party. A Conservative cabinet minister described Starmer as ‘a Trot, yes, but a professional.’

Born on 2 September 1962 in the inner London borough of Southwark, Keir was brought up in the countryside near Oxted, in the depths of blue Surrey. He was the second born after his sister Anna. It’s a commuter town with mock-Tudor houses and stucco fronts. In 2011, the [toxisisitalic]Daily Telegraph[/toxisisitalic] listed Oxted as the twentieth richest town in Britain. Compared with Southwark, one of London’s most deprived areas in the sixties, whose local socialists and communists were once a target for Oswald Mosley’s blackshirts, respectability rather than poverty marked out the area.

However, his parents did not take the 7.15 to London Victoria every morning. His father, Rod, was a toolmaker who worked in the light industry sprinkled around East Surrey’s stock broker belt and serving Gatwick Airport which opened in 1958. He worked in a factory every day from 8am to 5pm before coming home for his tea and going out to work again for a thirteen-hour work week. Starmer’s own hours as a barrister were not too different.

Starmer’s mother, Jo, short for Josephine Anne, was a nurse until she became too ill to work. They got married in Surrey in 1960 and were often hard-up.

Keir’s childhood was spent in a ramshackle, pebble-dashed semi-detached with his two sisters and brother Nick. It was located in Broadham Green, on 23 Tanhouse Road, in the middle of a strip of some twenty Edwardian style houses on a country lane wedged in by fields just outside Oxted. It was a ‘bit like a building site, never quite finished,’ he said. According to a schoolfriend, it was a ‘very joyful and very intense house’. There was no lock on ideas and you had to say what was on your mind, ‘everyone had to make their

points of view known'. His parents would continue to live at the family home until they died three years apart.

There was a clear absurdity and joy to the lives of the Starmers, who, unusually, kept donkeys in their garden. The Starmers were animal lovers and ran a sanctuary for donkeys who were otherwise on their way to the abattoir or some grisly fate in Spain. As each of the children left home, Starmer joked, a new donkey moved in to replace them. They also looked after rescue great Danes.

As the second of four children, there was a certain pressure on Keir to grow-up quick, a pressure exacerbated by his mother's illness. His mother struggled with Still's, a rare and incurable condition which caused painful swelling of joints and organs that would have prevented Jo from having children if medication to suppress its chronic symptoms had not been discovered in the 1960s.

As a child, Keir spent long devastating nights in the hospital by her side. 'She is very ill and has been very ill for over fifty years,' he said when first standing for election in 2015. 'She's been on steroids for fifty years to deal with the disease. There have been huge and very damaging side-effects. She's been in and out of high-dependency units for as long as I can remember. It was something we grew up with. I certainly have seen the NHS from the inside for decades. By the time Keir would become an MP, she had been unable to speak for five years and died two weeks before his election.

His father, though a 'complicated man', was deeply committed to his mother and spent long nights away from the house in the hospital. 'He was a difficult man... he kept himself to himself, he didn't particularly like to socialise,' says Starmer, 'but he had this utter devotion and commitment to my mum... on the many occasions she was in the hospital he would stay with her the whole time, he wouldn't leave the hospital, he would sleep on any chair or whatever was available.'

Channelling his anxieties into something practical, his 'dad knew exactly the symptoms of everything that might possibly go wrong with my mum. He knew exactly what drugs or combination of drugs or injection would be needed. He stopped drinking completely just in case he ever needed to get to the hospital with her.' Applying his toolmaking skills, he modified her wheelchair after she needed one later in life so that they could continue walks in the Lake District on their holidays.

In 1975-76, Jo had a serious relapse. 'I remember one occasion when I was about thirteen or fourteen, my dad phoning me from the hospital and saying, 'I don't think your mum's going to make it. Will you tell the others?' That was tough.' Even as a young-teenager, Starmer was seeing expectations for leadership thrust upon him.

Nonetheless, Rod himself remained somewhat of a closed book to his son: 'I don't often talk about my dad', Starmer told the BBC's Desert Island Disks listeners. He was 'a dad who was obviously sort of somewhat cut off from his children', said Helena Kennedy QC who supervised Starmer's pupillage as barrister.

Starmer himself said, 'we didn't have discussions around the kitchen table. We didn't have guests very often to the house. And just because my dad was working most of the time, he didn't particularly want to socialise. And he wasn't a man for debating. His view was the view. And that was it. Again that made life difficult. Made me much more prepared, I suppose, as I grew up to countenance other views. But most of what particularly my dad thought was not up for discussion.'

During Starmer's 2020 leadership campaign there was a furious wide-ranging debate by opponents whether Jo and Rod were sufficiently working class for their son to measure up in a Labour leadership fracas on the subject of parents. Contended Angela Rayner had told a local paper her mother 'can't read nor write, and my father hardly ever worked due

to health issues, so there was precious little money and certainly no reading material in our house when I was growing up', and she had as a 16-year-old single mum been given a Manchester council flat with son Ryan, as school for her had meant larking about with friends rather than learning. In contrast, Starmer's family hailed from the rural working class which was always more genteel in appearance as they laboured in closer proximity to and supervision under the rich, as well as having, in England, nature as an ally when things got tough.

Born in 1934, Rod himself hailed from modest country-hunting stock and both his father Herbert—Rod was his youngest son—and grandfather Gus lived in nearby Godstone, a twenty minute bicycle ride from their (great-)grand son Keir's home in Tanhouse Road. Broadham Green was a good place to return to for him from Wandsworth, London, when Jo and he had Anna, their first child, followed by Keir, named after Labour's first leader Keir Hardie.

Gus, Keir's great-grandfather, was still alive when Keir first went to school. Borne in 1882 in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, Gus was the oldest of eight sons to George, a Lincolnshire game keeper from a family of game keepers and beaters on large estates. George moved to Gateforth, Yorkshire, and Gus was briefly a game watcher under his father before moving to Liverpool, where he married his wife Katherine. Their son Herbert was born in 1905 in Liverpool, whereupon a year later the family moved again further south where the jobs were and Gus became game keeper at Marden Park, Caterham. The estate had just been purchased by stockbroker Walpole Greenwell, created baronet of the place shortly thereafter, and the estate, too, was but a twenty minute cycle ride from Tanhouse Road until junctions 5 and 6 of the M25 were built in 1979 when Keir was seventeen.

Gus was well-respected by the Greenwells and seemed to have been good at his job. His father George seemed to have moved in with him, as he died in Surrey, and Gus's third son Reggie, Starmer's uncle, would work for the family, too, and was employed as their land agent from 1937 to 1979.

Both Gus and Katherine, Keir's great-grandfather and great-grandmother, lived in Godstone when they both died in 1974. Keir was twelve. Used to living off the forest, what would they have thought of their great-grandson Keir becoming, of all things, a vegetarian? 'I gave up as a matter of principle years ago on the basis that eating meat wasn't the right thing for the body and the planet', said Starmer. This choice may seem unremarkable, but within the traditional rural, working-class Starmer family it was a notion as if from a different planet. His extended family's livelihoods revolved around maintaining life stock, which in turn fed the family. It was inconceivable that they could turn their backs on this ecosystem by choice.

In an outside shed, Starmer's great-grandfather's orchard 'larder' previously contained the bucket that served as the family's toilet. But later he kept his saw horse and hung freshly killed game for the pot. There, in the 1950s, he also kept his hunting retrievers named after minerals, 'Rock, Stone, Grit etc.', and would shoot them when they were too old to hunt. Apart from retrievers for the Greenwells' hunt, Gus also bred pheasants for their friends and family shoots on the estate behind Marden's football pitch. His day job consisted of killing magpies, jays, owls, hawks, falcons, badgers, moles, rabbits and 'practically everything that walked, ran or flew' to protect their eggs from predators, except foxes, as that would have been grounds for dismissal by the family.

Gus's long life occasionally bumped against the fixed lanes of the rural lower classes. After being invalided during the First World War, he was for a while the estate carter, fetching coal for 'the big house', fencing, as well as hurdles,

before being employed again as game keeper. Later during the Second World War, as a sixty-year-old, he was in the Surrey Home Guard and passed his countryside knowledge on to one of his grandsons, Keir's uncle, on how to hand-kill rabbits after making rabbit squeals with your mouth, dispatch downed pheasants, shoot pigeons, as well as beating for a shoot or hunt in the park grounds.

Keir's grandfather, Gus's oldest son—also a bicycle ride away during Keir's youth and adolescence—seemed slightly less class-bound, though he never moved far away from Oxted, and was bookish. Surrounded by pets, he and his four siblings grew up in the four-room cottage whose plumbing, apart from the outside bucket loo, consisted of a 20-gallon rainwater barrel for drinking and cleaning. Even though the title was not in the peerage, the estate of the freshly minted baronet was still run along feudal lines—though Lady Greenwell demanded in vain that the porter's wife curtsy for her. During shooting days, the family of six were expected to give their cottage and table over to lunch to the guests of the Greenwells. Sir Walpole, the first baronet, had a reputation as a 'pig', but his son Sir Bernard was well-liked when he inherited the title. He tipped generously for personal services rendered, and the parents of a new-born could expect £2 and the second Lady Greenwell made a coat for the baby.

Even though Herbert went to a rural primary school, Woldingham School, in the 1910-20s, everything was as it ever was before the Second World War. When Keir's father Rod was born on Christmas morning, 1934, Sir Bernard gave Herbert 50 shillings (£2.50) to his delight.

It is not difficult to understand what it meant when Starmer was knighted by Prince Charles in 2014 and Rod wrote with hyperbole, 'at the Investiture at Buckingham Palace we were the proudest parents there; Keir was treated like a Lord and we were looked after like a Lords Mum and Dad'. Rod wrote these words in the newsletter of

the Barn Theatre, Oxted, of which Ronnie Corbett was a patron in 2000, and they were in 2005 when the Duke of Kent visited. Neither of their families and ancestors had witnessed anything like what they were experiencing.

Keir's grandfather Herbert Starmer nonetheless reflected Britain's gently broadening franchise of education to the countryside when he was a boy. Apart from learning how to read and write, there was recitation, composition, geography, history, and singing, and Herbert was school friends with Doris Parsons, who became his wife. Her aunt was one of the two teachers in their school and they looked after some 25-30 children each. Though the Herbert and Doris missed Surrey's free school meals from 1914, there was medical care, too. From 1907, eleven years before the Spanish 'flu, preventative public-health inspections were instituted for weight, height, cleanliness, nits, lice and signs of infectious diseases such as whooping cough, scarlet fever, measles and diphtheria.

Like Keir's mother's family, the Bakers, the Parsons were locals. In his retirement, Herbert was a member of the Bourne Society, a vibrant local history association of Godstone and Caterham founded in the 1950s around the time when rationing ended. Herbert himself contributed the recollections of his youth to its magazine, but without any negative judgement or condemnation of others regarding his own station in life or that of his parents beyond nostalgia. In 1991, when Keir was in his first year at Leeds university, Herbert died, followed ten years later, a year before Starmer took silk, by his grandmother Doris.

If Jessica Mitford is to be believed, it was not uncommon for a game keeper's son like Rod to become a socialist. Like his father and grandfather, however, Rod had no further aspirations apart from having strong Labour views and the freedom to express them.

In 1997, Rod was briefly one of the directors of the non-profit Donkey Breed Society, devoted to driving, showing,

championship shows, ploughing, religious activities, donkey awards and trekking. It didn't last long and he resigned 3 years later when he was 66. His utter passion in retirement, apart from looking after Jo, was the Southern Counties Cycling Union (1898) and the one-man Surrey Ravens Cycling Club. He didn't participate in the races, but organised, marshalled, and promoted time relays until his death in December 2018, aged 83. Ten years earlier his devotion was recognised when he was cited as one of the 'old-boys' dotted around Britain whose tireless work kept the sport alive.

Starmer's earliest memory was not of his mother but of his father helping clean their first car, a Ford Cortina—a model first launched in Britain in the month of Keir's birth a few years earlier. Jo was to receive her first cortisone shots around this time that would keep her mobile and would allow the family to expand to four children. 'It was just incredible to have a car and I was very excited about having a car and I just remember doing that with my dad', Starmer recalled.

Despite their complicated relationship, Keir was another one of Rod's passions. Helena Kennedy QC recalled meeting Rod, then 68, at the party thrown to celebrate Starmer's appointment as QC in April 2002. 'I spoke at the event about Keir's commitment to the most disadvantaged who came before the courts. His work on death penalty cases and asylum for refugees, on gay rights and anti-racism. His work with me on battered women. His mum was there in a wheelchair and she was beaming, and his father had his arm round her and they said how proud they felt. But then Keir's dad sobbed and sobbed. Life had not always been easy, but here was their son trying to get justice for people.'

Gus, Katherine, Herbert and Doris all bobbed up and down with Britain in general and Surrey in particular. But, though Rod was clearly not adverse to change with an

independent streak, it was Jo who was cut from a different cloth.

2. Collapse

Young Keir's primary school was the now defunct Merle Common First School situated a forty minute walk south from their home in Merle Common, a hamlet like Broadham Green on a country road outside of Oxted. Di Cooper, senior nurse at Musgrove Park Hospital, was in the same class and remembered him well as 'quite a serious child'. Her family kept donkeys, too, and got one from the Starmers to look after. She remembered visiting the house at Tanhouse Road, Broadham Green, just outside of Oxted, where the 'family lived very modestly'. The progress of Still's disease had by that time already deformed Jo's hands, Di recalled.

A force of nature, Jo hardly let her illness get in the way. Some twenty five years later, she still dominated her illness when one of Starmer's colleagues visited her. 'She was ruddy-cheeked and packed with energy', he said. It was only when she handed him a cup of tea that it became clear how disease had ravaged her body.

As in many rural families, Jo had a strong connection to the church and its local networks and received help from friends once it became necessary. Apart from Still's, one of her four children had a disability.

With a church friend from the left, while Keir still lived at home, she was also studying at Open University. Jo was slightly younger than Rod and theirs was one of the first generations in Britain to benefit from universal free secondary education from the age of eleven to at least fifteen.

Jo and Rod's free education was first introduced through the 1944 Education Act—judged by some 'one of the finest pieces of twentieth century legislation'—by Winston Churchill's education minister Rab Butler (Marlborough, an independent school founded in 1843 to educate the sons of Anglican clergy). The act provided for an aptitude test at the age of eleven to direct pupils with an aptitude for

studying at university, such as teenage Jo, to a secondary education at Britain's grammar schools. The act also raised the compulsory school-leaving age to fifteen. These were seismic changes. Reigate Grammar School, for example, cost £4 per trimester in 1943, the year before the Act was passed. It was the kind of outlay that few beyond the middle class could afford—a boarding school was in a stratospheric, unimaginable category of its own. The Act wiped away all these fees.

Yet Jo and Rod, born in 1934 and 1939 respectively, were unlucky. Jo in particular, as she wanted to go to university which required grammar school before the Open University was founded. Within a short period of time, the Act became a victim of its own success as there were not enough grammar-school places to keep up with the increased number of pupils who sat for the eleven plus. Thus, the exam became the means to severely limit the number of pupils who got through rather than a general aptitude test broadening the number of young people receiving a grammar school education.

With war-rationing ending as late as 1954 in Britain, Clement Attlee's Labour government did not allocate sufficient funds to build enough grammar schools to keep up with the pace of demand for places generated by the 1944 Act. Nor did the Conservatives over thirteen years of government after him. Left to their own devices, grammar schools returned to pre-1944 attitudes as the increasingly difficult eleven-plus self-selected towards the middle classes and this proved to be the beginning of the carping at the schools. Their free access and claim on state funds was no longer easily parried as a reward for bright children hailing from all backgrounds in lieu of unity in the face of all the hardships endured during the war.

In 1951, a year after Jo's eleven plus, a further restriction on the booming number of pupils was introduced just before Winston Churchill returned to

power. The newly styled O-levels acted as a fifteen plus entry exam in all but name to two further years of A-levels. As the age of compulsory education was only raised to sixteen in 1973 by Margaret Thatcher as education secretary, this second 'funnel' with a certificate, the GCE, never became as controversial as the eleven plus.

Both gifted and a hard-worker to the bone, Keir, however, rose to meet the expectations of his parents and passed the eleven-plus exam in 1974. He finally took the prize enshrined in the 1944 Act that had escaped Jo and Rod in 1945 and 1950 respectively.

Talking about his parents, Starmer said that they were at pains to treat the achievements of all four children equally so as not to accord their oldest son a special position in relation to his siblings. In 2020, one of them worked in the construction industry after studying mechanical engineering at Redhill Technical College and another was a social-care worker after working for a time in the NHS like Jo herself.

But his progress as the first one to sit the exam successfully and claim its opportunities was important to them. There was always Jo and Rod's—as it turned out—prophetic reminder that good fortune could not be taken for granted. Starmer would say in 2014, for example, that one of his two sisters was on a zero-hours contract.

As Jo took life with both hands, there was a certain pressure on their children not to squander their privilege: 'My parents didn't have the opportunities they would have liked, but they didn't complain about that because they thought they were part of a society where the next generation would have those opportunities', said Starmer.

About his mother Starmer spoke at times with uncharacteristic intimacy and unguarded warmth. He once recalled how around the age of seven he watched how the disease suddenly overwhelmed her and she collapsed at the

Merle Common First School along the gutter on the other side of the road.

On BBC Desert Island Discs, he emphatically acknowledged that his commitment and work-ethic were inspired by his mother's own persistent fight against her disease. 'She's been a massive fighter all her life,' he said. 'She managed to walk and work for many years.' Eventually, though, she had to have her leg amputated and his father had to give up work to become her full-time carer.' Though ultimately confined to a wheelchair and unable to eat or, eventually, speak and sleep properly, she remained stoical.

'She wouldn't have moaned. If you'd asked her how she was, she'd say '<D>fine, how are you?'<D>', he said. Even so, the circumstances affected everyone. 'When you're in a family with someone who has got something really seriously wrong with them, a serious illness, you don't feel you can complain. You don't emote. You don't have tantrums. You have to make life better for other people so you learn to close off your own needs and emotions', observed Kennedy QC, Starmer's pupil master. The Starmer siblings knew what a world of difference their behaviour and contribution made to their parents who were battling it out with the disease.

And just as Starmer's parents shaped his dedication to success so too did they shape his politics. Talking of them, Starmer recalled: 'We didn't have much money, and they were [toxisitalic]Guardian[/toxisitalic]-reading, Labour-leaning parents. That inevitably created an atmosphere where my thinking developed.'

With the intense atmosphere at home and at work, as well as four young children, Rod's favourite piece of music was Beethoven's pastoral sixth symphony rather than the pulsating [toxisitalic]sturm-und-drang[/toxisitalic] of Beethoven's ninth and last symphony. In an invitingly Freudian synthesis of his youth, Starmer himself would

pick the ninth's 'Ode to Joy' movement for its 'incredible noise' as a favourite piece of a music at a 2019 Desert Island Disc fundraiser in his constituency.

On BBC Desert Island Discs, Starmer also chose Jo's favourite piece of music: Jim Reeves's song 'Welcome to My World', a hit in 1963. It was released in the UK just before the time when he knew she started the steroids that allowed her to stay mobile and have children in defiance of the disease. The only US country singer to become popular in the UK at the time, Reeves's ballads resisted even the onslaught of the Beatles and were British chart successes for decades after his death in a plane crash in 1964.

Starmer remembered listening to the song together while his mother made jam sandwiches after school. As a child they attended church services together, which for his mother was an important social event. He joked that the Pineapple—a 'very dog-friendly' pub serving Thai and gluten-free food off the Kentish Town Road in his constituency—was his equivalent. Many of Starmer's other BBC Desert Island Discs choices were songs reminiscent from the time when US music offered rays of optimism and he was at his Merle Common primary school:

'The Israelites' (1969), Desmond Dekker's reggae song; and 'Bridge over Troubled Water' (1970), Simon and Garfunkel's folk rock.

3. The Right School for Keir

[toxisitalic]Schools Week[/toxisitalic] interviewed Keir Starmer in March 2020 ahead of the Labour Leadership election and asked him whether he would redistribute private schools' endowments and properties across the state sector, as adopted at the 2019 Labour conference, or, at least, take away their charitable status. Side-stepping an unambiguous answer, Starmer did unambiguously say 'I received a brilliant state education'. But as we follow Keir in his school education in this and the following chapters, we will see that this was at the very least a misrepresentation of the actual schooling he received. Given his acid criticism of Boris Johnson's integrity, it is not easy to square his answer to [toxisitalic]Schools Week[/toxisitalic] with the truth.

In 1973, the year Keir successfully passed his eleven plus exam, politics in Britain were hardly placid. Britain joined the common market and Reigate Grammar School was still publicly-funded by Surrey Council, but Britain's economy was teetering. On 1 January 1974, pummelled by the oil crisis, Ted Heath introduced restrictions that severely limited commercial use of Britain's coal-powered electricity to 3 days following miner's strikes over demands of a pay rise of 35 per cent as against a government-recommended 27.5 per cent, the then going rate of inflation. The month before, Heath had closed pubs and shut down TV broadcasts after 10:30pm in an attempt to flatten the country's electricity curve in the evening and prevent the country running out of fuel.

Reigate Grammar School was the education Keir's Labour-supporting parents most desired for him. They worked hard and so, they assumed, would their children. While there was broad criticism in the 1960s how grammar schools should improve, many children passed the eleven plus. In 1970, the exam still directed close to 800,000 pupils

addressing the many 'isms' easily caught in the attention of the media.

However, while Starmer's commitment to the traditions of his family may resonate with older voters, younger voters were certainly frustrated by what they saw as an attack on progressive Labour politics. In contrast, to Jeremy Corbyn Starmer had not been as successful in appealing to young people. Corbyn's team shrewdly utilised social media to appeal to those under 25. Colourful videos and infographics easily shareable online helped to create a larger audience. The protest-culture of Corbynism had a neat appeal to young Marxists reading the [toxisitalic]Communist Manifesto [/toxisitalic]in their Introduction to Politics classes for the first time.

The new generation which lived their political lives on Twitter and Instagram wanted full access to politicians at all times in the name of 'authenticity.' The desire for insider understanding of representatives did not fit with Starmer's protection of his private life. Although Starmer allowed for his family traditions to be slowly brought into the spotlight he still refused to name his children in the media, keeping them out of press releases and pictures.

As well, quite significantly, Starmer seemed to misstep on the issues close to the hearts of young people. Not insignificantly Starmer's dismissal of Long-Bailey came on the back of quite dismissive comments regarding the Black Lives Matter protests. The Labour leader called the movement a 'moment' to the chagrin of many, especially young people, and made what were deemed dismissive comments regarding the defunding of the police. 'Nobody should be saying anything about defunding the police. I was director of public prosecutions for five years. My support for the police is very, very strong, and evidenced in the joint actions I've done with the police,' Starmer told BBC Breakfast.

Whilst the Labour Party's response to the Black Lives Matter protests was generally perceived better by Black