



# STARMER'S GREEN ARMY

Labour strategists with strong Irish links are aiming to put Keir Starmer into Downing Street

By Mark Paul

**J**ust after St Patrick's Day there was a lively fundraiser at the London Irish Centre in Camden, north London, to support Liam Conlon and Danny Beales, Labour candidates in the British general election on July 4th. Conlon is also chair of the Labour Irish Society.

The diaspora answered the call in eclectic style, dining on Indian food to a soundtrack of Irish tunes spanning the Pogues to B\*witched. Labour big hitters moved among the crowd, including Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, and frontbenchers Louise Haigh, the shadow transport secretary, and shadow attorney general Emily Thornberry.

Yet the most influential party figure by far at the event was never elected to public office. Helping out with the raffle was Morgan McSweeney, an accountant's son from Cork. A backroom operator with guru status, he has helped to transform the party from the wreckage left behind after the Jeremy Corbyn era to put Labour back on the doorstep of power.

Along with Sue Gray, who is Conlon's mother, and Glasgow-born MP Pat McFadden, McSweeney is part of an all-powerful triumvirate of strategists with strong Irish links who aim to deliver the keys to Downing Street to party leader Keir Starmer in six weeks' time.

If Labour wins the election as expected, Britain's next government could end up as its most green-tinged in living memory with conspicuous Irish links at almost every political level.

McSweeney, described by insiders as "hyper political", is at the tip of the spear and widely viewed as Starmer's current top adviser. Aged 47, he hails from the townland of Codrum, just outside Macroom in Cork, and is the son of Carmel and Timmy McSweeney, who for years has been prominent in Macroom GAA club.

Curiously for a man now drenched in the red of Labour, his family back home has strong Fine Gael connections. McSweeney's aunt, Evelyn McSweeney, was a long-time local Fine Gael councillor while his first cousin, Clare Mungovan, was one of former taoiseach Leo Varadkar's top advisers.

He left for London aged 17 to live with another aunt and worked for a time on building sites. He graduated from third level at the second attempt with a politics degree from Middlesex University. It was the late 1990s, early in Tony Blair's first term, and McSweeney joined the Labour Party as Britain turned away from the Tories and looked to the future with hope.

In 2001, he became a receptionist at party headquarters before landing a job inputting data into Peter Mandelson's Excalibur computer programme that helped the party shape its attack lines.

McSweeney's work ethic and organisational talents stood out and he rose quickly through the ranks. Over the following 15 years, he worked in a range of backroom roles, running local government campaigns, devising strategies to fight Westminster marginal seats and helping to fend off the

fringe right-wing British National Party in working-class London boroughs.

By 2017, he ended up running Labour Together, a party think-tank where he mined data and gained unrivalled insights into the thinking of the party's membership. McSweeney predicted the hard-left regime of Corbyn would lead Labour to annihilation. By 2019, he was an ally of Starmer, who was already preparing to succeed Corbyn even before Labour's electoral drubbing that December.

McSweeney masterminded Starmer's leadership win in 2020. A veteran party figure said it was the Corkman's idea for Starmer to campaign for the top job on a left-leaning platform that mollified Corbynites, only for the new leader to ditch it all and pivot to the right once he got the job.

"That was Morgan's big decision. The members at that time weren't yet ready to hear about reform. Politically it was the right thing to do," said the senior figure.

McSweeney, along with Starmer, devised a three-step strategy first to detoxify Labour and purge it of Corbynism. Second, it had to sharpen its focus to become once again a potent opposition force. Finally, McSweeney and Starmer plotted to return the party to power by wrenching Labour from identity politics and refocusing it on ordinary voters' core concerns: crime, defence and the economy.

McSweeney is said to be softly spoken, "unshowy" and occasionally even "cool" in his personal interactions. As he is Starmer's campaign director for the upcoming election, there are also





■ Clockwise from main: Sue Gray, former top civil servant and partygate investigator, now Keir Starmer's chief of staff; Cork-born Morgan McSweeney, campaign director for Starmer; Labour candidate Liam Conlon; Starmer (front centre) leading his shadow cabinet, including deputy leader Angela Rayner (left) and shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves (right); Matthew Doyle, Starmer's director of communications; Mayo woman Claire Tighe, an adviser to the Labour leader; and Labour's national campaign co-ordinator Pat McFadden, whose parents are from Donegal. Photographs: PA, Getty Images

rumours some MPs have grown resentful of his power and influence.

"He's not a warm guy, but it's not meant to be a love-in," said one close observer of the Westminster scene. "If he's not ruffling MPs' feathers, he's not doing his job properly."

**The second leg of Starmer's leadership stool** is Gray, who was the senior UK civil servant who investigated Boris Johnson following the Partygate scandal. She later infuriated the Tory government by accepting an offer to become Starmer's chief of staff, assuming the role last September after six months of gardening leave.

She is now in her mid-60s. Gray's parents left Ireland for Britain in one of the great migration waves of the 1950s. She was one of a typically large Catholic family of seven children born to a mother from Kilmeaden in Waterford and a father from Belcoo in Fermanagh. The family settled in Tottenham.

Gray joined the civil service before taking a short career break in the late 1980s to run the Cove Bar in rural Mayobridge, Co Down, with her Portlerry-born husband, country and western singer and carpenter Bill Conlon. Gray has since laughed off rumours she worked for British intelligence during this time. "I'm definitely not a spy," she said in author Tom Baldwin's recent biography of Starmer.

She returned to the civil service, later becoming one of the top officials in the cabinet office that controls the administration of UK government. Between 2018 and 2020, she ran North-

ern Ireland's finance department – she was blocked in her bid to be appointed as overall head of the North's civil service. She again returned to the cabinet office, before pitching up at Labour last year.

Gray has focused on preparing Labour for government, building links between Starmer's office and his shadow ministers, and mending relationships with devolved leaders, such as the big city mayors with whom Starmer previously had tetchy relations. "Sue Gray has really made a positive difference," said Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham. She is seen as calm but formidable.

Several sources speculated that Gray, and not McSweeney, may be the top adviser that Starmer chooses to take with him into Number 10, with the Corkman possibly remaining at Labour HQ to manage the party machinery. "But would he be happy with that?" mused one source.

**The third of Starmer's top advisers** is 59-year-old McFadden, born in Glasgow to Gaelgoir parents from the townland of Dunmore near Falcarragh in Co Donegal. Notably, he expressed condolences in the House of Commons in 2022 for the deadly filling station explosion that year in Creeslough, near his ancestral homeland. He is known to return to Falcarragh each year on holiday.

Like Gray, McFadden is one of seven children in an Irish-Catholic family that migrated to Britain during the 1950s. They moved from Ireland to Scotland after first considering New

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York. He is a Labour veteran and one-time Blairite who was the former prime minister's political director in Number 10, before he ran for election himself. McFadden is now MP for the working-class seat of Wolverhampton East in England's midlands. He is also Starmer's national campaign co-ordinator and, along with McSweeney, plots strategy for the upcoming election.

McFadden is said to be a committed centrist and moderate, a Europhile and an unflappable character – the latter appears to be a theme in Starmer's top team.

If Labour wins the election, McFadden is expected to take ministerial responsibility for the cabinet office. He would also be expected to be among the ministerial top team of four – along with Starmer, current shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves and Angela Rayner, who would be deputy prime minister – who would lead cabinet decision-making.

**Among the other Irish-linked top advisers** to Starmer are Matthew Doyle, Labour's director of communications who previously worked for Blair. Doyle's grandparents came from Sligo – his cousins still run a business in Sligo town centre – and he is a past head of the Labour Irish society. Labour's political director, Luke Sullivan, is also of Irish ancestry.

Mayo woman Claire Tighe has a key role in Starmer's office as his official liaison with the party's directly elected mayors, including Khan and Burnham. A Labour councillor in the west

London district of Ealing where she was born, Tighe grew up in Ballycastle, on Mayo's north coast above Ballina. She returned to London to work in politics after college.

A party veteran said Tighe would "make the perfect Labour MP" and she is tipped for a future run at a Westminster election. Meanwhile, McSweeney's wife, Imogen Walker, is also running this year for a Labour seat in Scotland, where they live with their child – he commutes from there to London.

Advisers aside, there are masses of Labour parliamentarians with strong Irish links. Kingswood MP Damien Egan was born in Cork while St Helen's MP, Conor McGinn, is from Armagh, although he is stepping down at the next election.

Siobhain McDonagh, the MP for Mitcham and Morden in south London, and Mike Kane, whose seat is in Manchester, both have Irish parents. So does shadow health minister Karin Smyth, whose family came from Cavan and Mayo. Shadow justice minister Kevin Brennan's father came from west Cork. Labour's chief whip in the House of Lords, Roy Kennedy, is the son of west of Ireland parents.

Meanwhile, Conlon, whose fundraising raffle was overseen by McSweeney, combines his role as head of Labour Irish with his campaign to become MP in Beckenham and Penge, a new seat in southeast London.

Part of the constituency was, under the old boundaries, a safe Tory seat for 80 years. The seat has become a top Labour target with the addition of wards with fewer conservative voters. Candidates such as Conlon will have to win this type of seat if Labour is to sweep to power. Irish voters in Crystal Palace could help him do it.

The Conservative Party would dearly love to deprive Conlon of the win because of his mother Gray's role as Starmer's chief of staff. He is reluctant to discuss her position in Labour, preferring instead to "focus on my own campaign". He must know, however, that the Tories have put a target on his back. The twinkle in his eye suggests he is up for the fight.

One of the best-connected activists in the party in London, Cambridge graduate Conlon has a story to sell to voters built around his experiences with the National Health Service: he spent four years as a teenager unable to walk after a fall that smashed his hip. "I don't need to read a briefing note to understand the power the NHS can have," he said.

As for Labour's burgeoning Irish links, Conlon believes they can only lead to improved relations between Dublin and London if his party wins the election – Starmer, too, used to work in Northern Ireland as a human rights adviser and, to this day, still wears a Donegal jersey when he plays five-a-side football.

"Look at the mess we've had in government in recent years [under the Tories]," he said. "Our closest neighbour [the Republic] should be our closest friend, but that's gone. Under Labour, I hope it comes back. It's time for a reset."