



# THE LABOUR LABYRINTH

A guide to who's who in the  
Leader's office and why it matters

In a world where politics is dominated by larger-than-life personalities, those who are really pulling the strings are often the quietest, and who rarely even have a mention of their name in the news.

The sway of the Leader's Office in the Labour Party has fluctuated, but in the Starmer Era, the leader's office tells us much about the Labour Party's priorities and its plans for government. Alongside the shadow cabinet, major decisions are made in the Leader's office and it's important to understand how it operates in order to align your organisation's aims with the strategic priorities of the next Labour government.

**Whitehouse Communications** has decades of experience influencing government policy and navigating complex party-political structures for the benefits of our clients.

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# HOW THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION'S OFFICE (LOTO) FUNCTIONS

Different Labour leaders have utilised LOTO in different ways in the past and is the main engine room driving policy and political relations while in opposition. It has a similar function to Number 10 at the nexus of the Labour machine but without the full force of Downing St and Whitehall. LOTO's function has changed in the last few years after the tumultuous Corbyn years and wild swings in leadership personalities has caused it to do so. Understanding the hardwiring and relationships behind the policy making is therefore vital.

It's also important to recognise that, whilst much is made of Labour's democratic policy making processes, the final say as to what commitments make it to the manifesto sits firmly with LOTO.

For the purposes of this short guide, we will set out its current purpose and key drivers.

Firstly, LOTO is literally an area of the Westminster estate in Norman Shaw South consisting of half a dozen offices, corridors and meeting rooms. But as we get closer to the election, the geography of LOTO is much less important than the personnel.

Within LOTO are the Labour Party's senior campaign, political and communications team, hand-picked by Starmer. Labour HQ, now at Rushworth Street, is the party's civil service, full of people who have seen generations of Labour leaders and are experienced of ground operations, as well as policy and press. Each Shadow Cabinet member has at least one advisor to take forward their policy agendas. But LOTO is Starmer's inner circle: his trusted advisors who drive forward the Labour priorities and strategy.

As Labour has gotten more professional, so too has LOTO. In its current form, senior LOTO staffers meets with Starmer daily: advising him on decisions and keeping a watchful eye over any emerging concerns. It is a tightly controlled, well organised machine – his team are mostly “veterans” from the Blair and Brown glory days.

To offer context on the driving forces behind Starmer's Labour party, we've highlighted some of its key players to give a flavour of their backgrounds and drivers. Understanding their motivations will help to ensure your organisation is well poised to influence some of the major players in a future Starmer government.

# THE LABOUR LINEUP

## Morgan McSweeney

### Labour Campaign Director

McSweeney is a highly influential member of Starmer's team. He has been working his way up the Labour Party ranks since working for Tony Blair in 2001, and really established himself as Starmer's right hand man when he led Starmer's leadership campaign.

As Campaigns Director, McSweeney is in charge of the party's general election campaign and political strategy. But more than that, he is credited with Labour's messaging discipline and strategic direction that has led to the party's substantial poll lead. He will become a key figure during Labour's first 100 days in power where he will ensure that the Labour government is set up to achieve. But as a campaigner at heart, it may be that he moves on from Downing Street whilst continuing as a key Starmer adviser.



[commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sue_Gray.jpg)

## Sue Gray

### Chief of Staff

Perhaps the only member of this list who has not been a die-hard campaigner for Starmer, Gray's appointment has been crucial for professionalising the Labour Party's operation and getting them ready for government.

Ablly assisted by her deputy, Helene Reardon-Bond, she is responsible for managing and streamlining the structures within the Party, and ensuring that the opposition is ready for government. She also heads up the running of LOTO itself although much of the day-to-day work is done by Jill Cuthbertson who has performed similar roles for both Brown and Miliband.

## Matthew Doyle

### Communications Director

Doyle has been a familiar face in the Labour party for years. He was a taskforce leader for Labour's 2005 general election campaign and supported Gordon Brown to prepare for TV debates. He was a confidant of Blair's, working as a special adviser to him when he was Prime Minister and was his political director once he left Downing Street until 2012. He's been in his current post since 2021 and is responsible for crafting the Party's overall messaging, directing the grid of stories and ensuring that all stories are communicated to represent Labour as the government in waiting.



members.parliament.uk

## Pat McFadden

### Shadow Cabinet Office Minister & Labour's National Campaign Coordinator

In his role as campaign coordinator, McFadden will have worked with McSweeney to craft Labour's general election campaign. A respected MP and shadow cabinet member, he was also a huge player in Blair's team as his political secretary. After the general election, McFadden's role will evolve into a highly influential policy and political driver in the cabinet office, tasked with putting Labour's plans into place.

## **Ravinder Athwal**

### **Director of Policy**

Ex-civil service, Athwal was brought in to write Labour's manifesto for the general election. He was previously Head of Growth Strategy at the Treasury, so it's easy to see why Starmer wanted all policy commitments to go through him first. Peter Hyman will also be a key figure.

## **Deborah Mattinson**

### **Director of Strategy**

Mattinson has played a key role in Labour for years, having advised several previous Labour leaders. She's seen as a veteran of when Labour was election-winning, and quite literally wrote the book on why Labour lost key voters in 2019. As one of the UK's most experienced pollsters, she will be running highly focused internal polls and focus groups to sharpen Labour's election campaign messaging and approach.



## **Rachel Reeves**

### **Shadow Chancellor**

As a former bank of England economist who had speedily risen through the shadow cabinet ranks, Reeves is well-placed to lead on the Party's domestic policy. Having held her current position since 2021 she can be credited as playing a huge role in positioning Labour as a "serious" party in the eyes of business. As the final decider of Labour's funding commitments, her influence cannot be understated. With an office already next door to Starmer's in LOTO, they aren't waiting until Downing Street to be close neighbours.



## **Luke Sullivan**

### **Director of Politics**

Sullivan has acted as liaison between the leader's office and the whip's office, having worked for successive Labour chief whips since Gordon Brown's premiership. A Bristol City fan and keen cyclist outside of Parliament, in his role as Director of Politics he plays a major part in communicating decisions to MPs, setting Labour's agenda, party management and solving political problems.

## **Vidhya Alakeson OBE**

### **Director of External Relations**

The Labour Party has successfully positioned itself as a serious political force in the eyes of business, and Alakeson is recognised as having played a key role in making that happen. She has led on identifying what businesses the party should align itself with and building better relationships with key business leaders.

## **Steph Driver**

### **Communications Director (for Keir Starmer)**

Driver was also part of the 2021 entry. As Starmer's personal communications chief, she travels with him and oversees his personal media operation. She has worked for the Labour Party for over a decade in several different roles including the press office, regional communications and visits for the Shadow Chancellor.

# NOW WHAT?

With this context, you and your organisation can now consider what steps you should take to influence the senior figures in the next government.

LOTO and the wider Labour Party are already in campaign mode and focused on narrowing their electoral offer to their key issues. Although the Party is simplifying its messaging now, it will need the ideas, experience and expertise of external organizations once in government. Therefore, it is worth engaging with key Labour figures now and establishing those relationships so that you have a better chance of working with the next Labour government to make the change that needs to happen.

With all this in mind, you have everything you need to hit the ground running if Labour win. Ahead of election day, consider doing the following:

1. Now is a great time to do a strategic review of your organisation's policy objectives – how can you align what your organisation wants with what the Labour Party want to achieve?
2. Do you have the evidence you need to make your case? Given the Party's sensitivity to being seen as "serious", evidence-driven solutions will be more important than ever. Now may be a good time to commission research to prove your case – and do make sure that any policy suggestions are costed.

3. Investing resource into building your network of Labour contacts is highly advised. If Labour wins a landslide, the attention of new Labour MPs will be highly coveted as businesses seek to engage with them. If you can start building a relationship with prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) now, you will be well ahead by the time they are in office.
4. Labour has already begun building relationships with civil servants in anticipation of winning the next election. It is also crucial for you to build relationships with relevant civil servants to make it more likely they are briefing new Ministers with your solutions, using your evidence.

The Labour Party has a formidable lead in the polls and is likely to win a majority in the next election after 14 years in opposition. The party is actively listening and engaging with thousands of organisations across the UK, but with so many vying for their attention, your organisation will need to stand out.

At Whitehouse Communications, we have decades of expertise in helping clients to shape their political strategy to achieve major policy wins. Get in touch today if you're interested in taking your organisation's political strategy and engagement to the next level.

**Max Wilson**

Director of Public Affairs

[max.wilson@whitehousecomms.com](mailto:max.wilson@whitehousecomms.com)