

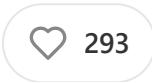
BREAKING: McSweeney's think tank paid PR firm to investigate journalists

Labour Together put private investigators onto journalists writing about its funding. Starmer's right-hand man knew.



PETER GEOGHEGAN

FEB 05, 2026



Under pressure: Morgan McSweeney

By Khadija Sharife and Peter Geoghegan

Labour Together paid a controversial PR firm at least £30,000 to investigate journalists

that were digging into how its undeclared funding bankrolled Keir Starmer's successful Labour leadership campaign, Democracy for Sale can reveal.

The influential Starmerite think tank, once run by Morgan McSweeney and then by Josh Simons, now a minister in Starmer's government, hired APCO Worldwide to investigate journalists from *the Sunday Times*, *the Guardian* and other outlets and to identify their sources, documents we have seen show.

ACPO was hired in 2023, when Simons ran Labour Together. Sources close to Morgan McSweeney, who joined Starmer's team in 2020, said that he did not make the decision to hire APCO but did not dispute that he was aware of it.

A political think tank hiring a PR firm to investigate journalists is highly unusual, and the revelations have sparked furious response from a senior figure in Labour Together's formation.

Former Labour MP Jon Cruddas, who helped found the organisation in 2015, said our findings were "shocking" and "extraordinary".

"I have heard of black briefings, but never heard of anything like this," he told us. "This is dark shit."

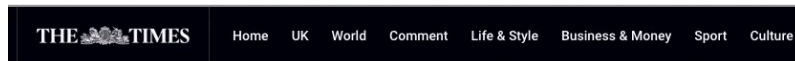
The news that Labour Together put private investigators onto journalists will raise fresh questions about the conduct of senior figures around Starmer as the prime minister fights for his political survival.

Starmer today declared 'full confidence' in McSweeney, who pushed for Peter Mandelson's appointment as US ambassador despite his known friendship with the convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

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November 2023. Panic at Labour Together. [The Sunday Times](#) had just published an explosive investigation into the organisation, revealing in detail how McSweeney had failed to declare £730,000 in donations to his think tank between 2017 and 2020. The money paid for polling and campaigning powered Starmer's rise to the Labour leadership.

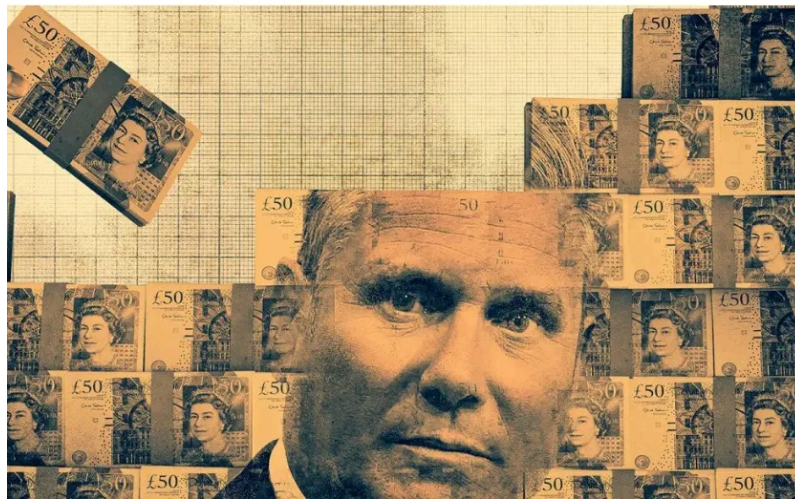
The story, bylined by Gabriel Pogrund and Harry Yorke, was filled with serious accusations. At its core, is that McSweeney had intentionally kept Labour Together's donors secret so the think tank would look like a humble, grassroots initiative when in fact it was a well-funded vehicle to take over the party.



INVESTIGATION

The secretive guru who plotted Keir Starmer's path to power with undeclared cash

Morgan McSweeney, 46, spent much of Jeremy Corbyn's reign researching how moderates might regain control of Labour and turn it into a party of government — but failed to declare donations that paid for it



Sunday Times, 12 November 2023

With a general election now pending, questions about Labour Together's money - and its genesis - could seriously derail an operation that had become a pivotal part of Starmer's Labour.

So Labour Together turned to APCO Worldwide, a controversial PR firm whose work includes crisis comms. The think tank would pay at least £30,000 to identify the source of stories about its funding.

The work was led by Tom Harper, a former *Times* journalist who is now APCO's head of European media relations. APCO, which has previously worked for big tobacco companies, has recently [faced protests](#) in the UK over its work for Israeli defence firm Elbit Systems.

Internal reports prepared by APCO's London office for Labour Together, and seen by Democracy for Sale, name Pogrund, Yorke, *The Guardian's* Henry Dyer, *Declassified's* John McAvoy and journalists from other outlets as "significant persons of interest" and discuss potential "leverage" over other reporters.

APCO's briefings suggest - without providing any evidence - that one possible source of the *Sunday Times* story about Labour Together's funding was a Russian or Chinese hack of the Electoral Commission. It is understood that the contents of some of the documents were shared with other journalists on Fleet Street, seemingly in an attempt to discredit the initial story.

A briefing document entitled "Grimsby Town" and marked "memo for Labour Together - December 2023" states "it is important to identify the source of the information" behind the revelations about Labour Together's funding.

"After a review of publicly available information, there appears to be two potential sources for the information about Labour Together's funding that appeared in *The Times* article: A leak from someone within the Electoral Commission or Labour Together to the author; or Illegally-gathered information collected from the 2023 hack of the Electoral Commission that has been passed on to the author," the memo says.

Two weeks later, on December 29, APCO provided another report for Labour Together. Headed 'strictly private and confidential', the two-dozen page long briefing is titled "executive summary: investigation into Shadow World Investigations", a

London-based investigative outlet run by South African investigative journalists Paul Holden and Andrew Feinstein.

The memo seems designed to discredit Holden, who collaborated on *the Sunday Times* story about Labour Together's finances and later brought out a well-received book, titled *The Fraud*, about Labour Together and McSweeney's role in Starmer's rise to power.

"Holden's activities blur the lines between journalism, activism, and political campaigning, particularly in relation to the UK's Labour Party," the briefing states. It adds that Holden's organisation had received funding from George Soros' Open Society Foundations, which "complicates the conflict of interest and represents a significant leverage point."

The memo also plays up his co-founder Feinstein's support for Jeremy Corbyn and his appearances on Russia Today. The South African went on to stand as an independent against Starmer in the 2024 general election, winning 7,312 votes in the prime minister's Holborn and St Pancras constituency.

Westminster insiders expressed shock that Labour Together had hired a PR firm to investigate journalists and their sources. A public affairs veteran told us they "haven't seen or been involved in anything like this in [their] career".

Holden, one of the journalists targeted, said that the revelations "really show how afraid Labour Together were of proper scrutiny and transparency, and where my investigation was going: the undeclared money that goes to the heart of this current government and implicates not just McSweeney, but sitting Cabinet Ministers and Starmer himself."

Labour Together has also been one of the most influential funders of Starmer's Labour, donating more than £2 million to the Labour Party, Electoral Commission records show, and directly financed the election campaigns of more than a dozen current government ministers.

The think tank spent over £445,000 backing Rachel Reeves, David Lammy, Shabana Mahmood, Yvette Cooper, John Healey and Darren Jones ahead of the 2024 general election – now six of Starmer’s most senior cabinet members – according to the MPs register of interests.

Jon Cruddas, who stepped down as a director of Labour Together in January 2023, says the organisation has strayed far from its original mission to unite the party.

“The organisation was set up to nurture pluralism across the party, to be open. It’s been bent into something very different.”

Simons, McSweeney, Labour Together, the Labour Party and APCO all declined to comment on the record about this story.

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Rosalind Stewart 5 Feb



Thank you again for your brave work, Peter. When are you going to release the names of the journalists who were 'investigated'? And why was McSweeney doing this?

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Jacky Smith  Jacky Smith 5 Feb 

"Blue Labour" really are everything I've always hated about the party.

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