**Keir Starmer’s chance to sparkle: Labour leader finally puts his working class credentials to work for him**

**Alex Prior and Clara Eroukhmanoff (10/10/23)**

[The Conversation](https://theconversation.com/keir-starmers-chance-to-sparkle-labour-leader-finally-puts-his-working-class-credentials-to-work-for-him-215320)

Starmer’s challenge in his speech to the Labour party conference was to present himself as a prime minister in waiting. To achieve this, he had to embody both authority and authenticity, credibility as a leader but also sympathy with the experiences of ordinary Britons.

He also had to present his own origins, as well as a direction of travel. He effectively needed to turn his story into strategy. As [one journalist](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/authenticity-is-great-but-so-is-strategy-a6669596.html) wrote about Jeremy Corbyn: “Authenticity is great, but so is strategy.”

Stories provide insight into leadership and substantiate claims of authenticity, a quality that [“has become a key battleground in contemporary politics”](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/newe.12259?saml_referrer). Donald Trump was [portrayed as the “authenticity candidate”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2015/12/11/who-is-the-authenticity-candidate-of-2016-yup-its-donald-trump/) ahead of the 2016, for example.

With more attention than ever on his speech, this was an unparalleled chance to deploy a resource hitherto ignored by Starmer and weaponised by his opponents: his [personal life](https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/the-respect-agenda/). A [leader’s life story](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1742715005049348?casa_token=asoLnWdDEuUAAAAA:gEfuUTnr5dRlVJwLDt8_cTKsRwUGnmyJTBtCAmzS19xRFJLLb4m1Hdrp-GMWvp9rKlLfomuKMEc&journalCode=leaa) is an important tool for influencing potential followers.

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As Robert Shrimsley, chief political commentator at the Financial Times, [has argued:](https://www.ft.com/content/819182e1-59ea-4ffd-951e-ea99cc1a9e3d) “If the Labour leader’s character is to be the central issue at the next election, Starmer must settle that question to his advantage before the Conservatives answer it for him.”

Starmer made some progress on this matter, incorporating references to his own life. He spoke of holidays to the Lake District with his wife, and of going there every year with his parents. He referenced his childhood in Surrey when discussing the green belt, and snobbery towards his father’s vocational skills on the topic of working-class university aspirations.

## ‘I grew up working class’

The Conservatives have capitalised on Starmer’s knighthood and turned what should be credentials into a weakness. They repeat the word “Sir” over and over when referring to Starmer in order to imply that he is upper class rather than working class – his actual background.

Starmer addressed this head-on – finally – at the conference. Alongside references to his sister, who is a careworker, he stated clearly that he “grew up working class” and had been fighting all his life: “I’ve felt the anxiety of a cost of living crisis before. And until your family can see the way out, I will fight for you.”



Starmer referenced his wife several times during the speech. Alamy

The Tory line of attack is partially explained by the fact that Starmer embodies many virtues that Tories traditionally lay claim to. A knighthood reflects public service and dedication. In some cases, including Starmer’s, it shows someone has worked their way up from humble beginnings.

Crucially, Starmer was knighted for “services to law and criminal justice” – territory that Conservatives would traditionally claim as their own. This explains attempts to turn Starmer’s achievements against him.

His tactic of emphasising the need for Labour to be a “party of service” and of painting the Conservatives as unable to understand the lives and challenges of the working people is his response. “Why Labour?” he asked the conference. “Because we serve your interests.”

## A chance to seize the narrative

As Labour leader, Starmer has been private and distant. His deputy, [Angela Rayner](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/angela-rayner-i-overshare-keir-starmer-undershares-nwvxx97xh), has remarked that his greatest weakness is that he “undershares”. This is a problem for a political leader in an age of personalised politics, as is reflected in numerous criticisms levelled at Starmer, such as that he lacks [personal charisma](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/06/keir-starmer-tony-blair-reform-new-labour-90s).

Starmer has a great deal of authenticity to draw upon. As the son of an NHS nurse with Still’s disease, he spent much of his childhood experiencing the NHS as the relative of a worker and a patient.

So it is surely not a coincidence that he announced that money saved from clamping down on non-domiciled tax status would pay for the regeneration of the NHS. That, after all, was the tax arrangement [enjoyed by Sunak’s wife for so long](https://theconversation.com/what-is-a-non-dom-an-expert-answers-our-questions-about-the-tax-status-claimed-by-rishi-sunaks-wife-and-other-wealthy-people-180928). This was Starmer turning the personal-narrative-as-strategy back on his opponent.

Today was Starmer’s big chance to reinforce his working-class credentials, and more broadly his claims of authenticity. This was perhaps the last big chance before an election next year.

It was also chance to capture attention and discussion on his own terms (even if a [glitter-wielding protester](https://www.itv.com/news/2023-10-10/we-are-the-healers-keir-starmer-to-promise-decade-of-national-renewal) had other plans). In the end, we saw Starmer realise the value of turning a personal story into strategy. He strengthened his vision of the future by looking inwards at his personal life, and backwards at his origins.