

London mayor elections

Labour moves against Ken Livingstone's candidacy

Keith Lee
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The Labour government hailed its plan for an elected mayor and a London Assembly as a "new and radical approach to governing London". Its White Paper states, "There needs to be a new style of politics, a style which is modern in its outlook, inclusive in its approach, relevant to Londoners and, above all, democratic and accountable. Our aim is to increase public confidence in the democratic process, engender enthusiasm and restore Londoners pride in their city."

All of which is disproved by the entirely undemocratic, dirty-tricks campaign the party leadership are waging to prevent Ken Livingstone from receiving the Labour nomination. Livingstone, Labour MP for Brent and a member of the party's National Executive Committee (NEC), is the current favourite to win the election, but the full force of the Labour bureaucracy has been mobilised to sabotage his campaign.

With the assistance of the right-wing press, Labour is using every means possible to stop Livingstone. The party's London management board decided by 24 votes to 4 that anyone seeking nomination as Labour's official candidate must first face a scrutiny committee appointed by the ruling NEC. MI5 are said to have given Blair a dossier, warning of Livingstone's supposed links with Sinn Fein. The Labour Party leadership also has a folder on all party MPs who are charged with "disloyalty". The list has been compiled using the party's excalibur computer system, and is now being used to monitor all "dissident MPs".

The NEC is expected to bar Livingstone from the ballot of its 69,000 members in London on the grounds that his criticisms of the government make him unfit to stand on the Labour ticket. Party spokesmen have

highlighted what they call Livingstone's "impractical and foolish" hostility to business. One cabinet minister, when asked what they would do about Livingstone, said, "We are talking to the cement manufacturers. The best thing would be to throw him in the Thames and chuck a bucket of newts after him." (Livingstone has a passion for keeping newts.)

As well as trying to prevent Livingstone from standing, the government is doing everything to prevent the post of mayor from becoming a power base for any dissenting views. The Greater London Authority Bill now going through parliament will contain two clauses that provide central government with a bureaucratic stranglehold over the proposed London Authority. Clause 27 states, "The Secretary of State may by order make further provision for preventing [the mayor] from doing anything ... which is specified in the order." Schedule 13 stipulates that even if the new authority levies any new charges to motorists (one of its few revenue-raising powers), the government may seize these and give them directly to the treasury to use as it wishes.

In another move to defeat Livingstone, Labour is putting forward Home Office Minister Paul Boateng as a potential candidate. In the past, Boateng was a spokesman for the party's left wing and was associated with Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s, before it was abolished by the Thatcher government, which saw it as an obstacle to implementing sweeping cuts in social spending. The bombastic style of the man at that time was epitomised by his 1987 acceptance speech on becoming an MP, in which he declared, "Today Brent South, tomorrow Soweto!" He has since undergone the same

transformation as many of his former left colleagues, becoming a favourite of Tony Blair.

Like Boateng, Livingstone is part of this same political layer that have largely abandoned their previous radical posturing and now loyally serve Blair's New Labour. But even his past reputation and occasional criticisms of the government's worst excesses are too much for the party leadership to stomach. For them, he remains the "Red Ken" of the 1980s, one of those designated by then Conservative Prime Minister Thatcher as a threat to free enterprise. This is something with which Blair does not wish to tarnish the image of his business-friendly government.

The real Livingstone is somewhat different. His response to the campaign against him was to issue an open letter, which was published in the January 29 edition of the *Guardian* newspaper under the heading; "I only want to help". He writes, "Press speculation suggests some of your [Blair's] advisers are still urging you to back a procedure which could be used to keep my name off a ballot of Labour's 70,000 London members on who should be the party's candidate for mayor. If I were elected, they are said to have argued I would use the position to undermine the Government and so it would be better to put up with a week of bad headlines than four years.

"I want to put such absurdities to rest once and for all and give you a categorical assurance that, if Londoners voted for me to be their first elected mayor, I would work with your government, not against it. It is important that such a pledge is on the record, rather than simply part of some private understanding.

"There is simply no question whatever of my seeking to use the mayorship as a platform to wage political warfare against this Government. That is what a Conservative mayor would do. Not only do I have no interest in destabilising the Government, but also no Labour mayor could get away with such behaviour. To those who claim my assurances cannot be relied on, I would point out that in 30 years as a Labour Party member, and I have never given such a commitment and failed to honour it."

Livingstone went on to say that he would be prepared to have one of Labour's preferred choices, the TV presenter Trevor Phillips, as his deputy and has agreed that any reform packages he implements would be within the economic constraints set out by

Chancellor Gordon Brown. "I do not," he insisted, "find myself in a position of ideological conflict with Government."



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