

Labour chooses candidates for London Mayor: a process based on manoeuvre and media hype

Tony Hyland
27 November 1999

The process of selecting Labour's London mayoral candidate has been reduced to a series of bureaucratic measures by the party leadership to try and prevent Ken Livingstone MP from winning the nomination.

Livingstone was leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) before its abolition by the Conservative government in 1986. He has been the favourite to win the new post ever since Labour announced its plans for an elected Mayor and a Greater London Authority (GLA).

While trying to block his nomination, Prime Minister Blair has had difficulty finding an alternative candidate who has a clear chance of winning next May's election. Rather belatedly, Frank Dobson was forced to resign his cabinet post as Health Secretary and run. In an interview given to the London *Times* on November 5, Dobson made clear that his candidacy was a direct challenge to Livingstone. "This is a very serious decision for London and the Labour Party. It is a choice between harking back to the past or doing things in new and different ways for the future," he said.

Last week, the Labour selection panel met to draw up a short-list to go forward to the next stage of the selection process, from the four remaining candidates: as well as Dobson and Livingstone, actress and former Transport Minister Glenda Jackson and Ken Baldry, an Islington businessman. Labour's National Executive Committee had decided that all candidates must be vetted by the 13-strong panel and undertake a "loyalty oath."

While Jackson and Dobson were approved automatically, Livingstone was summoned twice before the selection panel, with the last meeting lasting five hours. In dispute was his refusal to endorse, without reservation, the party's manifesto. This was all the more remarkable, as it has not even been written yet.

Blair has particularly objected to Livingstone's opposition to the planned partial-privatisation of the London Underground. Livingstone has specifically voiced opposition to Railtrack being awarded the franchise to run part of the

network. The national railway infrastructure company was singled out for criticism in the interim report into October's Paddington rail disaster, which claimed 31 lives.

The selection panel pulled back from disbaring Livingstone due to the furore this would have created, particularly as opinion polls have consistently shown that he could win the election even if he stood as an independent. The *Evening Standard* commented, "The bottom line for Mr Blair, however, is that if Mr Livingstone now stands as an independent candidate for mayor, he will probably win. This would be even more of a disaster and humiliating for Downing Street than a recalcitrant Labour mayor."

Having passed the first hurdle, the Labour leadership must now rely on the final stage of its undemocratic selection procedure if Livingstone is to be eliminated. All short-listed candidates will be submitted to a tri-partite "electoral college." This comprises just one third individual London party members, one-third London MPs, Members of the European Parliament and GLA endorsed candidates, with the remaining third decided by trade union block vote, wielded by the union bureaucracy according to membership size.

This formula ensures that those who will defer to the Blair leadership will exercise a disproportionate influence. It means that the votes of 75 elected officials are of equal weight to those of some 69,000 individual party members.

The unions are under no obligation to ballot their London members. This is the second time that the Labour leadership has relied on the trade union block vote, it had claimed to oppose as "undemocratic". Blair previously used it to impose his favoured candidate to head the Welsh Assembly earlier in the year.

There are some difficulties using the mechanism on this occasion, however. Ken Jackson, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), is being threatened with legal action by his London members if he does not hold a ballot or hustings debate. The three

largest trade unions have agreed to ballot their members. The Rail Maritime Trade union (RMT) and the Manufacturing-Science-Finance union (MSF) have threatened legal action against the Labour Party after they were disbarred from participating in the selection process as they had paid their membership dues late.

Ballot papers for the electoral college will not be sent out for another two months and London's Labour Party members will vote between January 26 and February 16. The late vote is a delaying tactic aimed at helping Dobson make up lost ground with Livingstone.

Blair's opposition to Livingstone's candidacy became even more vitriolic once the MP's name was allowed onto the short-list. In a full-page article in London's main paper, the *Evening Standard*, November 19 entitled "Why we must stop Ken, by Tony Blair," the Prime Minister wrote, "The people of London did not want the GLC abolished. But let us not be fooled into thinking Labour in London was popular in those days... The leading figures in the Labour Party were people like Ken Livingstone, Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill. The policies were not just disastrous for Labour. They deprived the public of a choice that wasn't the Tories. Now, this is the issue: has Ken Livingstone really changed? If he hasn't, he would not be right for Labour or London.

"Neil Kinnock, John Smith, me and the members of the Labour Party did not go through the struggle and effort we did to create New Labour, only to throw it all away and return to the disastrous politics of the early Eighties. The events of this week are enough of a reminder of that era to convince us all that we should leave those days behind for good."

The Prime Minister's intervention is all the more unprecedented given Livingstone's efforts to prove his compliance to the Labour leadership. The MP has pointed out that he has voted with the government 98 percent of the time in the House of Commons. As a member of the Labour Party's National Executive, he said recently, "I'm a moderate. Blair's memory of the 80's is distorted," and has pledged to toe the leadership's line should he be elected.

The Labour Cabinet is composed of many political figures that have a similar political pedigree as Livingstone. Former GLC members Paul Boateng, Tony Banks and Margaret Hodge have all held ministerial posts. Frank Dobson was considered a radical during his time at Camden council.

Yet Livingstone has attained totemic status in the bestiary of New Labour, alongside Arthur Scargill, leader of the miners union. Blair holds both of them up as representatives of Labour's "demon" past—the "scourges" of militant trade unionism and "tax and spend" policies.

Livingstone's tenure at the GLC coincided with a major confrontation with the Tory government over its plans to

slash public spending and introduce privatisation. Under Livingstone, the GLC subsidised a cheap fares policy on public transport, making up the shortfall in funding received from central government by increasing local rates. The GLC was stripped of this power by the Rate Act of 1984, known as "rate-capping," and London Transport was taken out of its control. In April 1986, the GLC along with six other Metropolitan councils were abolished.

Like his Tory predecessors, Blair uses Livingstone's record at the GLC to attack any policies that do not serve the exclusive interests of big business. It is also useful in demonstrating just how thoroughly Labour has abandoned its previous reformist programme.

Blair's problem is that the more the Labour leadership attacks Livingstone, the more it enhances his appeal. The privatisation of London Buses and the south-eastern railway network has led to the fragmentation of the capital's transport system. Transport workers suffer low wages and commuters pay exorbitant fares for a service that is unreliable and unsafe, while company directors receive massive profits. Another side effect has been the capital's grid-locked roads and worsening pollution.

But the state of London's transport system is symptomatic of a far broader decline in the living standards and working conditions of many workers in the capital. In July, the London Research Centre published the report *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in London*. This revealed that in 1991 the share of income held by the richest fifth of households was 63 percent, compared to just 5 percent for the bottom fifth. The number of people sleeping rough in 1995-6 was 81 percent higher than in 1978 and the capital has 64 percent of the worst public housing stock in England. A malignant sign of the social crisis has been the increase in the cases of tuberculosis, a disease associated with squalid and unsanitary living conditions.

Livingstone has not raised any of these issues, nor is he likely to do so. The Labour leadership's concern, however, is that any criticism of its transport policy could open up a minefield. What about the government's ending of student grants, cuts in disabled benefits, plans for further privatisation, etc? This is the real reason for Blair's nervousness and his reliance on political manoeuvre and media hype.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact