

Labour Party rigs candidate selection process for London mayor

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This week the Labour Party leadership succeeded in blocking Ken Livingstone as its candidate for London Mayor, but only by rigging the selection proceedings. In the process, the political credibility of the Labour government was delivered a further blow.

Opinion polls consistently show that Livingstone, ex leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) and MP for Brent East, would beat any other candidate in the mayoral race scheduled for May. Labour's selection process confirmed his popularity within the party. Amongst rank-and-file members in London Livingstone secured 59 percent to former Health Secretary Frank Dobson's 48.1 percent. Overall, Dobson only secured the nomination by the narrowest of margins—51.5 percent to 48.5 percent.

To ensure Blair's favoured candidate was selected, the Labour leadership utilised an electoral college, made up of London party members, affiliated trade unions and other organisations, and London Labour MPs, Euro MPs and prospective candidates for the soon to be established London Assembly.

Dobson was only endorsed by those unions that refused to ballot their membership, and received just 28 percent of trade union votes compared to Livingstone's 72 percent. Steps were taken to disqualify two rail unions and a clerical print union branch from backing Livingstone—they were disbarred on the technicality that their affiliation dues were late.

Dobson only achieved a majority amongst Labour MPs, Euro MPs and Assembly candidates—with 65 of the 75 delegates voting in his favour. Under the rules of Labour's electoral college, the vote of one MP was worth the same as 1,000 rank-and-file party members. One former Euro MP, Pauline Green, was allowed to vote even though she had retired last December. The *Guardian* newspaper commented: "In France, people used to be divided into three estates so that the nobility and the clergy could always outnumber the common herd by two estates to one. This ceased in 1789. It is New Labour's achievement to revive the system with a special Blairite twist."

The depths to which the Labour leadership has been prepared to sink in order to eliminate Livingstone could provide the subject matter for a particularly black comedy. Vitriolic personal attacks by everyone from Prime Minister Tony Blair to Livingstone's former colleagues at the GLC have portrayed him as a one-man threat to democracy and free-enterprise, who would do more damage to Britain's capital city than the Black Death and the Great Fire of London combined. When Livingstone expressed certain sympathies with the anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrators in Seattle, this was jumped upon on as proof that London would teeter on the brink of anarchy and mayhem if he became Mayor.

Blair expressed his concern that Livingstone could use the position of Mayor as "a focus of discontent with the Labour government." The character of these attacks is even more bizarre, given the fact that Livingstone is a member of the Labour Party's ruling executive and has voted 98 percent of the time with Blair in Parliament. He played a prominent role defending the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia against criticism from his former allies on the party's dwindling left wing.

Livingstone's policy differences with the Labour leadership in his campaign for the Labour nomination are confined to the issue of the planned privatisation of the London Underground, and are of minimal scope. Livingstone endorsed Labour's 1997 election manifesto pledging partial privatisation of the "Tube", but he now insists this was never "understood... to imply the transfer of tracks, signalling, stations, tunnels and depots to three private companies." He has sought to distance himself from outright privatisation amidst growing public anger following last autumn's Paddington train crash that claimed 31 lives. Under Labour's plans, Railtrack, the private company implicated in the Paddington disaster, was due to take a major stake in a privatised London Underground.

Blair, however, is haunted by the spectre of Livingstone's past reputation as a left-winger. Livingstone's popularity within the party and the general public is largely based upon

his identification with the Greater London Council he led up until its abolition in 1986. The right-wing press and the Thatcher government labelled him “Red Ken” because of his cheap fares campaign for London Transport and other reformist policies.

The abolition of the GLC and the other metropolitan councils was a key component of the Tory government's offensive to dismantle the welfare state, cut public spending and introduce privatisation. To do so, they sought to eliminate all expressions of local representation as a possible focus of opposition, even if this meant leaving the capital without any form of citywide government.

Thatcher's attacks only served to bolster Livingstone's image among many workers. The intervening years, which have witnessed a major increase in social inequality and deterioration in the average Londoner's quality of life (especially with regards to social provisions and public transport), have only reinforced confused feelings of nostalgia for the days of the GLC. Amongst those bourgeois layers who once railed against Livingstone's for espousing black, lesbian and gay rights he is now generally regarded as a harmless eccentric, who poses no threat to big business whatsoever. He was voted the favoured Labour candidate by the London Chamber of Commerce, and only narrowly lost to the Conservatives as their preferred Mayor.

However, Blair does not believe he can afford such largesse towards Livingstone for a number of reasons. Though Labour presented the creation of an elected London Mayor and Greater London Assembly as a democratic redress for the abolition of the GLC, it is anxious that this is not interpreted as providing a forum to extract social reforms from central government. Whatever Livingstone's professions of loyalty, Blair fears that his election will raise unwelcome expectations amongst the electorate.

Blair built his own political reputation on his supposed defeat of the “Loony Left”. He has portrayed himself as the man who single-handedly rescued the Labour Party from the electoral oblivion to which it had been consigned by Livingstone, Tony Benn, Arthur Scargill and other “ogres” drawn from Thatcher's fevered imagination. His heavy-handed attempts to reassure big business and former Tory voters of the finality of Labour's break with its reformist past, and to prove that his word is law within the party has made him a laughing stock even amongst his target audience.

Blair's political ineptitude may have succeeded in wrecking any chance of success for Labour in the Mayoral contest. Although his political estimation of Livingstone is wildly off-beam, Blair rightly fears growing opposition to his government. Rising discontent within Labour's ranks over Blair's authoritarian leadership is only a pale reflection

of the anger and disgust felt by broad sections of the working class towards Labour's right wing social policies. In every recent parliamentary by-election, and in the last round of local government elections, Labour's vote plummeted. In many working class inner-city wards, overall turnout fell as low as 10-20 percent.

Labour's treatment of Livingstone has only increased the likelihood that the mayoral election will become a plebiscite on the Blair government's record in office. Livingstone's popularity has increased by seven points since Blair launched his high-profile attacks on him. An ICM poll for the *Evening Standard* showed 61 percent of respondents favoured Livingstone standing as an independent. The Rail Maritime and Transport union's London regional council has denounced Labour's mayoral selection as a fix, and called on Livingstone to stand as an independent candidate, “based on the massive democratic mandate given him by our movement”.

Before losing the selection contest to Dobson, Livingstone insisted that he “will do deals with the City, the Government, with anyone. I bet in eighteen months from now, Tony Blair will genuinely say ‘looking back we really misjudged Ken, he has turned out to be great.’” Two days after the result was announced, he warned that the mayoral contest could become a “referendum on London's right to govern itself” unless plans to privatise the London Underground—endorsed Tuesday by Dobson—are abandoned. “The issues will be the following: Will London have a transport system imposed on it that it does not want? Should London have a candidate imposed on it that it does not want? In other words, does London have the right to govern itself, or is devolution to be a charade?” He added that he had already received more than 1,000 emails and 350 letters urging him to stand as an independent.

Livingstone is an inveterate opportunist and self-publicist. He would prefer to force a change of heart on Blair so that he can continue his career in the party and take a stab at securing the fat salary and countless media opportunities accompanying mayoral office. But if Blair forces him to choose between the two, then the aspirant Dick Whittington may seek his street paved with gold as an independent candidate.



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