

London mayoral elections: Livingstone offers no alternative to Labour Party's pro-business politics

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18 April 2000

After Prime Minister Tony Blair successfully blocked Labour MP Ken Livingstone as the party's official candidate for London mayor, Livingstone decided to stand as an independent. He has now been expelled from the Labour Party.

Livingstone's decision has proved popular with the majority of working people in London, who see the possibility of registering a protest against the Blair government. He seems set for victory on May 4, with polls showing him holding a decisive lead over Labour's official candidate Frank Dobson, the Conservative Stephen Norris and Liberal Democrat Susan Kramer.

His attempt to gain Labour's nomination as mayoral candidate came at a time of growing disgust amongst workers at Blair's right-wing social policies. In recent by-elections, and in last year's local government elections, Labour's vote plummeted, especially in the inner cities, losing the party control of traditional strongholds such as Liverpool and Sheffield to the Liberal Democrats.

Livingstone benefited from the growing concerns within the party at this loss of support amongst its traditional constituency, combined with opposition to Blair's erosion of inner-party democracy. In the selection ballot for the mayoral candidate he easily beat Dobson amongst London party members, and in those trade unions where ballots were held. He lost only because of the weighting given to the votes of London MPs and party functionaries, and the block vote for Dobson by trade unions that had not balloted their members. On April 14, it was revealed that fully a third of all (local) Constituency Labour Parties have decided not to send delegates to the party's annual conference in the autumn, in an anti-Blair protest. A party spokesman told the *Guardian* newspaper, "OK, there is a problem and a Livingstone problem across the country".

Advancing himself as a critic of the worst excesses of the Blair government, Livingstone believes that the party's ditching of its old reformist program and embrace of free-market nostrums has gone too far. He has also dubbed the mayoral elections, "a referendum on whether London's first elected mayor will bring self-government to the capital, or merely be a facade with all real decisions taken centrally".

His credentials as a left-winger are somewhat threadbare, derived from his time as leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) up until its abolition by the Thatcher government in 1986. The Tories were seeking to carry out massive cuts in social spending by curtailing the local tax-raising powers of the Labour-controlled Metropolitan Councils. To justify these measures, the pro-Tory press demonised Livingstone as "Red Ken", though he only ever advanced certain limited social reforms such as a cheap fares policy for London transport. The fact that the Conservative government and the pro-Tory press attacked him made him a popular figure amongst workers, which has only been reinforced by the Thatcher-style red-baiting against Livingstone by the Labour leadership today.

Livingstone is still capable of resorting to populist rhetoric to build his support amongst working people. He recently told the youthful readership of the *New Musical Express* that global capitalism kills more people every day than Hitler, and praised the anti-World Trade Organisation protests in Seattle. But he has no intention of leading a revolt against Blair or the party he has been a member of for 31 years.

In the *Independent* newspaper of January 13 last year, he appealed to Blair to make clear his intention to remain party leader for two full governmental terms. "Why on earth should a successful Prime Minister stand down from the most exciting and challenging post in British politics when they are barely 50 years old? I wouldn't be surprised if Tony Blair ends up beating Clem Attlee's record of 20 years as Labour leader, at the age of 61. I might even be able to look down at him delivering a graveside eulogy at my own funeral!"

Had he not been forced to by the intransigence of the party leadership, Livingstone would have never stood against Labour. Even deciding to stand as an independent, he told the *Evening Standard*, "I will not be setting up a new political party and I still hope one day to be able to return to the Labour Party." He told the *Observer*, "I want them to take me back. And they will, because I am an engaging little worm."

There are, nevertheless, clear differences of perspective between Livingstone and Blair. Livingstone is concerned that Labour's wholesale adoption of Thatcherite economic and social policies will produce a political catastrophe. He regards his main task as prospective London mayor and an influential force within the Labour Party to prevent this from happening.

His criticisms of the government retain certain echoes of what he advanced when he was head of the old GLC, but only if this is correctly understood. His advocacy of social reforms during the 1980s was not based on any commitment to socialism and the working class. He views reforms as an essential mechanism for stabilising the profit system and safeguarding the interests of big business and the privileged middle class layers he represents at a time of explosive class antagonisms.

Livingstone wrote a personal tribute to Labour MP Tony Benn, the recognised leader of the party's left wing, following his announcement he was retiring from Parliament at the next election. Writing in the *Independent* newspaper last year, he drew attention to Benn's move to the left of the party during the 1970s and 80s: "The crisis of the post-war consensus [between the main social classes] in the 1970s was such that it would either be deepened—which meant, overwhelmingly, that it had to be democratised—or it would be smashed. Bennism and Thatcherism were the only two games in town, and the victory of Thatcherism, sealed in the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985, was the great domestic political event of our generation. From then on, the Labour movement has been boxed in and forced into retreat. Tony's great contribution was, and is, to fight for

an alternative.”

In a paper “Democratic Socialism versus 19th Century Liberalism”, presented to the conference “Debating Labour's Future” in July 1999, he noted that in that year's European elections, “New Labour actually presided over a Labour share of the vote lower than at any nationwide election since the 1920s.”

He added that “recent events are just a foretaste of what will hit us if the Millbank Tendency's [Labour HQ] infamous 'project' to break Labour's links with the unions, silence its rank and file and merge with the Liberal Democrats is ever allowed to reach fruition.”

He wrote in the *Independent* in January last year, “The creation of the Labour Party was not some unfortunate sectarian error. It was inevitable that a new party would rise to fill the void left by the Liberals and inevitably that party would define itself in terms of its relationship to the Tories.... Labour's success was that it gradually came to represent both working class and middle class interests and created a welfare state that benefited both.”

Parliamentary reforms and the creation of the welfare state have maintained social peace in the past and are needed today in light of the social polarisation between rich and poor, Livingstone argues. “British society and politics has to get out of the tax-cutting mentality before we end up like the Americans, who cannot resolve any of their social problems because they have a culture in which any politician who favours tax rises is treated as if they have just farted in public.”

His model is provided by the European social democratic parties in France and Germany, which he says “specifically rejected the neo-liberal lunacies of Thatcher and Reagan.... Those who argued for a proper welfare state during previous Labour governments had no doubt about the importance of providing services that appealed to both middle class as well as the poor.”

Livingstone has repeatedly warned that Labour's economic policies are both shortsighted socially and because they fail to recognise the imminence of a world recession. He warned at the time of last year's March budget that 40 percent of the world economy was already in recession: “In these circumstances monetary policy alone cannot be relied upon to prevent a recession. Gordon [Brown] should therefore have taken the opportunity of this budget to use a big increase in taxation on high incomes and dividends in order to fund a sharp increase in public spending, particularly investment.”

The real target audience for Livingstone are not the millions of ordinary working people in London, but the handful of business leaders he is seeking to convince that he holds the political panacea for the ills affecting British capitalism. His praise for continental social democracy is bound up with his belief that the interests of Britain are best served by a more pro-European orientation than that of the Blair leadership: “The truth is that the only way to oppose America's imperial economic interests is to build a Europe with a high level of welfare and social provision, strong enough and democratic enough to resist American ambitions.”

A speech he made to a conference on the future of the world's major cities, “Congress of Metropolis 99”, clearly showed the character of Livingstone's pitch to the London financial elite: “The mayor and assembly for London must preside over a much more responsive planning system which allows the private sector to move rapidly into new fields of technological advance.... London is now ripe for a period of major reform and innovation. The old in-bred public school-educated City financial elite has been blown wide open by the change of personnel and working practices in the last twenty years.”

Livingstone also appeals to the City by demanding a restructuring of public spending to benefit the capital at the expense of Britain's regions. “Londoners are still subsidising the rest of the country,” he says. “For each pound London puts into the national exchequer we get back only 75 pence. It is clearly no longer acceptable that Londoners should be

supporting a level of public spending in Gordon Brown's [Scottish] constituency which if applied to London would transform all our problems by providing another £4.4 billion a year for vital investment in modernising our city.”

There are clear parallels between the positions of Livingstone and those of the former German Finance Minister and chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Oskar Lafontaine. Like Lafontaine, he also cautions against the potentially explosive consequences of uncritically adopting the “Anglo-Saxon” economic model. Lafontaine's essential message was to insist that European capitalism developed its own political agenda based on a recognition of the social threat posed by working class disaffection and the need to compete effectively with the US. Both Livingstone and Lafontaine act as loyal defenders of the interests of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and their respective ruling classes. In recognition of this fact, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) chose Livingstone as their second favourite candidate after the Conservative Norris.

Britain's middle class radical groups have hailed Livingstone's campaign, describing it variously as either an opportunity to renew the Labour Party as a vehicle for the social interests of working people, or the start of a political movement of the working class to form a new party. They have formed a joint slate, the London Socialist Alliance (LSA), for the elections to the London Assembly, which supports Livingstone's bid to become mayor.

The largest of these groups, the Socialist Workers Party, opined, “The political argument in London is no longer Labour or Tories, but New Labour or Livingstone. And Livingstone is associated with the left despite his own disclaimers. The worst mistake of any socialist would be to stand back from this ferment on the grounds that Livingstone is afraid to put forward all-out socialist arguments.”

A spokesman for Workers Power, a small group within the LSA and the Labour Party, said, “There is still a struggle going on (and the Livingstone affair will probably remain part of that struggle in the months to come). We are not neutral in that struggle. We fight Blair's attempt to destroy the remaining influence of the working class over the Labour Party.”

The *Weekly Worker*, published by former Stalinists who emerged from the now defunct Communist Party of Great Britain, wrote: “A movement, through its own momentum, can transform itself into something completely unintended by the leader who initiated it ... the particular movement gathering around Livingstone represents a working class-based rebellion, however inarticulate and contradictory, against the programme and control-freakery of Blairism. Even if it can be confined within the limits of bourgeois politics, it must, at least at first, have a relative leftwing character, because of the man's own history.”

The endorsement of Livingstone by the radicals has a dual purpose. On one level, they see association with Livingstone as a way to benefit themselves. For example, in explaining why “The LSA must become the pro-Livingstone slate in the minds of his popular base”, the *Weekly Worker* noted, “Just five percent [of the vote] would give us a seat on the GLA” thanks to proportional representation.

Politically their campaign, while masquerading as an attempt to stimulate rebellion against the labour bureaucracy, ties workers to one of its most opportunist representatives.

A Livingstone victory would not further the cause of the working class. In all probability, it would just be a prelude to a rapprochement between Livingstone and Blair. Both have indicated as much. Support for Livingstone's mayoral candidacy is certainly a distorted expression of the disaffection with Labour found amongst working people, but it also illustrates the present absence of any coherent political opposition to Labour. Thus far, despite the widespread disillusionment with Blair's government, all this has produced is a vague belief that a vote for Livingstone will deliver New Labour a bloody nose. Workers know that

they have been attacked and betrayed by the government, but do not yet possess an alternative socialist vision with which to combat this. It is this issue that must be addressed if a genuine challenge to Labour is to be mounted, rather than merely tail-ending an internal squabble within the ranks of the party bureaucracy over how best to preserve their own influence and manage the interests of capital.



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