

London's new mayor Ken Livingstone appoints "inclusive" cabinet

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Ken Livingstone was officially sworn in as London's first directly elected mayor on Monday, May 8 following elections on May 4 for the newly created Greater London Authority (GLA).

Livingstone had been forced to run as an Independent, after the Labour Party had rejected his nomination as its official candidate due to his former association with the party's left wing. On hearing the results, the new mayor made clear his hopes to return to Labour's fold, pledging that the GLA would not become a platform of opposition to the Blair government.

He made good his pledge within 48 hours, when he agreed to set up an "independent panel of experts" to examine funding of the London Underground or Tube train system. The issue dominated in the mayoral contest, with Livingstone opposing the Blair government's plans for part-privatisation of the system. Pledging to fight to keep "a unified underground system in the public sector", he argued for the "cheapest possible method" for underground modernisation "which the evidence indicates is raising bonds backed by a combination of fares and government grant". On BBC television on Sunday, Livingstone had threatened that he would seek a judicial review if the government pushed ahead with its scheme.

The "panel of experts" scheme was advanced by Simon Jenkins, former editor of the *Times*, as a means of finding out if "there was any common ground between the government's and [Mr Livingstone's] position on the Public-Private Partnership for the Tube". It appears that in return for Livingstone's agreement on the panel, Labour candidates elected to the GLA have accepted positions in his cabinet—offered as part of continued efforts to mend bridges with his

former party.

Nicky Gavron, a leading Labour right-winger, has accepted the post of deputy mayor. Gavron is the millionaire ex-wife of publishing tycoon Lord Gavron, and is described as "the Quango Queen" because of her membership of some 30 non-elected planning and cultural administrative bodies. Labour member Lord Harris, who represents Brent and Harrow constituency, has accepted the post of chair of the new Metropolitan Police committee.

The agreement is particularly striking, given that Labour is in a hugely weakened position in the capital. Its official candidate, Frank Dobson, came a poor third in the mayoral contest on a day that saw Labour unable to mobilise working people in local elections across the country. Voter turnout fell as low as 12 percent in some areas, and just one-third of Londoners voted in the GLA elections—despite weeks of high-profile campaigning in which Blair sent out over a million "personal letters" to the capital's Labour voters. Blair faced the possibility that Labour would be a minority in the very body it had brought into being, ostensibly in an effort to reinvigorate local democracy. Outnumbered by Conservatives and others in the new assembly, this would be a disaster for the government. The capital generates 17 percent of Britain's GDP and the post of London mayor has the widest personal mandate in the country.

The deal is a rather speedy confirmation that Livingstone hopes to use his position to rescue Labour from a threatened debacle in the next General Election. Despite disagreements with Blair, Livingstone has consistently rejected any break from the Labour Party and refused the overtures of various radical groups during the mayoral contest.

The new mayor will be just as alarmed by the sharp

drop in Labour's vote amongst the working class as Blair. Moreover, his campaign was also unable to galvanise substantial support. Livingstone now heads an administration elected by just one-third of the electorate: an administration, moreover, positively supported by little more than one-fifth of Londoners in the earlier referendum on its creation.

In the absence of any viable social base, Livingstone has adopted Blair's model of so-called "political inclusivity". This involves cobbling together cross-party alliances as a means of trying to enforce deeply unpopular measures. Livingstone's GLA cabinet amounts to a government of national unity in miniature. In keeping with his Churchillian mission to rescue his party from itself, Livingstone spoke after the vote about the need for "magnanimity in victory". As the "job of Mayor is to unite all of the capital", he would be seeking as broad-based an administration as possible.

Later he claimed an "historic first" by going to the Tory group of assembly members and explaining to them how he intended to run the executive: "I said I'd be allowing each of the party groups to appoint a member of my cabinet to be there as their representative, to have a voice." Tories, Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats have all been offered seats.

The high-profile appointments of black activist Lee Jasper, former adviser on race relations to the Metropolitan Police, to liaise on race and police issues, and east London councillor Kumar Murshid to advise on economic regeneration, does not change the right-wing character of Livingstone's plans for the GLA one iota. Jasper in particular is a tame critic of the establishment, well known for combining anti-racist rhetoric, black nationalism and naked careerism. Both he and Murshid will be relied on to try and quell opposition amongst Londoners to police brutality and social deprivation and mobilise the ethnic vote for Livingstone.

During the election Livingstone spoke with the proverbial forked tongue—making demagogic references to the brutality of capitalism in the morning and then holding friendly chats with City brokers in the afternoon. He will not be able to maintain such an unholy combination for long. London is the most socially polarised city in Britain, in which unspeakable levels of poverty exist cheek by jowl with fabulous wealth.

The City made clear it had no real problem with the new mayor. A former economist for the London Chamber of Commerce said that "the elected mayor will be prescribed in terms of what he can really tinker with in the economy, but he will be an important figurehead". Digby Jones, director general of the Confederation of British Industry, said, "Let's put the rhetoric behind us and get on with making London the capital city where everyone wants to do business and live."

Jones described resolving London's transport problems as the "overwhelming business priority". This is not simply about which form of capital raising venture should be used for the Underground. The changes require an offensive against the wages and conditions of the capital's transport workers. As *This is London* news service spelt out, "Tackling the overmighty Underground workers, last survivors of the public service unions which caused such havoc to Britain for a century, is one of the key priorities for any future ruler of London."

In his role as unsolicited advisor to the government, Livingstone's main note of dissent was over Britain's entry to the European single currency, the euro. But on this, too, he is in line with substantial sections of British capital and the trade union bureaucracy—who fear sterling's high value is cancelling out Britain's competitive advantage as a cheap labour platform. With the Ford car company expected shortly to announce an end to assembly line production at its Dagenham plant next year, with the loss of 4,000 jobs, Livingstone took up the demand for devaluation of the pound and British entry to the euro. Speaking before a City audience at mergermarket.com's first annual awards ceremony for advisers to mergers and acquisitions, Livingstone said that euro membership was "crucial" because without it London would not remain the financial capital of Europe.



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