

Britain: Labour Party leadership paves way for the return of Ken Livingstone

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London's mayor Ken Livingstone could be readmitted to Labour Party membership within months under a deal struck between the former MP and party officials.

Livingstone was expelled from the Labour Party for five years for standing as an independent in the first elections for a London mayor held in May 2000.

Months earlier Livingstone had been selected as the party's official candidate in a ballot of London party members. But his candidacy was vehemently opposed by the party tops. Prime Minister Tony Blair in particular was concerned that Livingstone's former association with the party's left wing would compromise efforts to use the post of mayor, and a newly devolved Greater London Assembly, to create a more business friendly environment in the capital. Declaring that Livingstone's candidacy would be a financial "disaster," Blair ensured that additional weighting given to the votes of MPs and party functionaries blocked Livingstone's nomination. Livingstone responded by running as an independent.

Blair's actions caused rancour within the Labour Party, with one-third of all local party branches declining to send delegates to its annual conference in protest.

Far more damaging for Labour was the fact that Livingstone's victimisation and the perception that he was an opponent of the right-wing orientation of Blair helped win him victory at the polls in 2001. He secured some 35 percent of first preference votes, whilst Labour's Frank Dobson limped in to fourth place.

Blair's readiness to readmit Livingstone has concentrated media attention on the prime minister's opportunism and the lack of any popular base for his government. Labour clearly feared that its original choice of candidate for the mayoral contest, Nicky Gavron, would get a drubbing worse than that suffered by Dobson. Opinion polls show that she is already trailing fourth. Having lost heavily in recent local council elections, the party leadership is anxious to avoid a further haemorrhaging of support. But Labour has no one from within its own ranks that is capable of exciting popular support—hence the turn to Livingstone.

Whilst Blair claims that Livingstone's application will go through the usual channels, there is every indication that his readmittance is a done deal. Gavron was persuaded to stand

down as party candidate in order to leave the field clear for Livingstone, issuing a statement that she supported "Ken's readmission to the Labour Party and his adoption as Labour candidate."

Livingstone has said that if he is adopted as party candidate, he will nominate Gavron as his running mate for deputy.

Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) has made clear it will stop at nothing, including riding roughshod over the party constitution, to make sure Livingstone is readmitted.

Party rules stipulate that an expulsion must stand for a minimum of five years—Livingstone has been out for less than four. But Labour Party Chairman Ian McCartney has said that so "unique" are the specific issues surrounding Livingstone that the NEC will be able to use its discretion in breaking the constitution.

In order to overcome opposition to Livingstone's readmittance within the party, Blair even rigged the readmittance procedure. According to reports, senior cabinet members including Chancellor Gordon Brown, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had reacted furiously to the plan to bring Livingstone back in from the cold, fearing it was effectively a statement of political bankruptcy on Labour's part. Prescott was quoted as telling the NEC meeting considering Livingstone's application, "I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him."

As usual, however, the trio quickly fell into step with Blair—voting in favour of Livingstone's return to the fold. The NEC supported the mayor's readmittance by 25 to two, with just Dennis Skinner and Michael Cashman voting in opposition.

The prime minister was reportedly in favour of Livingstone's application bypassing the NEC altogether, by "devolving" the decision on his readmittance to London party chiefs. Under a deal stitched up between Blair and his critics, however, Livingstone is to be questioned by a specially appointed NEC panel on January 9. Consisting of McCartney, NEC chair Mary Turner, Labour Treasurer Jimmy Elsby and union leaders Margaret Wall and Mike Griffiths, it will almost certainly recommend Livingstone's readmittance. Their recommendation will then be put to a ballot of London party members, in which the unions—who have also backed Livingstone's application—hold half the vote.

MP Clive Solely made clear Labour's desperation in a statement. Having played a key role in barring Livingstone from standing as Labour's candidate three years ago, Solely has joined the call for his readmittance on the grounds that it is the only way to prevent the party's defeat a second time round. "We have to bite on the bullet and let him back in, although it sticks in the throat a bit," he said.

"It's partly about getting our party activists to come out and work in the election, because party morale in London is low, and a majority of the London members are in favour of him re-entering. It's also about getting voters to focus on voting Labour in the mayoral, Greater London Assembly and European elections."

The general secretaries of trade unions covering the public sector, engineering, transport, communications and Fire Brigades, also signed a letter to *The Guardian* urging support for Livingstone's re-entry, arguing that if Labour were beaten in the June 4 mayoral contest it would certainly suffer defeat in elections for the European Parliament and local authorities to be held the same day.

But Labour are not the only ones guilty of the most grotesque political opportunism. In this regard Blair has met his match in Livingstone himself.

As the leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) until its abolition by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in 1986, Livingstone built up a reputation as "Red Ken," marrying the advocacy of limited social concessions such as cheap fares with "left" sounding rhetoric in support of the Palestinians and Irish independence. Livingstone was always careful, however, to ensure that his demagogy never fundamentally conflicted with the financial imperatives of the City of London.

Whilst he held a leading position on the party's left wing, he never used his influence to mount a thoroughgoing political challenge to the Labour Party leadership or do anything that would threaten his parliamentary career. And like many of his contemporaries on the left, he never allowed the rightward shift of the party under the leaderships of Neil Kinnock, John Smith and then Blair to force him into opposition. He remained loyal to Labour even as, under Blair, Labour abandoned its previous social reformist programme and expunged any connection between the party and the working class.

Only when the right wing threatened to encroach on his own political ambitions by disbaring his candidacy for London mayor did Livingstone feel compelled to act—all the while stressing his continued loyalty to Labour. In a statement made following his decision to stand as an independent, he again made clear that he did not intend to mount any political challenge to Labour. "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 said, stressing that he hoped that one day Labour would "take me back. And they will, because I am an engaging little worm."

Still Livingstone utilised his expulsion from the party to cast himself in the popular imagination as a "rebel" and an opponent of Labour's big business agenda, especially its plans to privatise the London Underground rail network. In his pitch towards London's financial elite, however, he made clear he would ensure a restructuring of public spending that would enable greater inroads by the private sector. His "bond" scheme for the Tube network was privatisation in another guise and won him support in the City, as did his tax on vehicles using roads in central London—no small factor in Labour's decision to consider his readmittance.

The ruling elite has Livingstone's measure. Earlier this year he was named the "most important British politician on public policy" by the *Guardian* newspaper, whilst the Political Studies Association declared him "politician of the year."

Not even his denouncing of President George W. Bush as the "greatest threat to life on Earth" and his decision to organise a party for antiwar protesters during the US leader's state visit to Britain last month gave Blair pause for breath. Instead the NEC meeting at which Livingstone's application was to be considered was merely delayed to avoid any additional embarrassment for either side.

Livingstone himself is ecstatic at the prospect of his return to Labour's fold, telling reporters before the NEC meeting, "There are some people who get married, get divorced and then after a few years apart decide that they miss each other terribly... and they get remarried."

But Livingstone's readmittance will not provide the panacea that either Labour, or Livingstone, are looking for.

Livingstone's own base of political support is in fact extremely narrow. Only one third of Londoners voted in the previous mayoral elections, meaning that the mayor only secured the active support of just over 10 percent of the electorate even when he was riding on a wave of political hostility to Blair's government. Now that he is to stand once again as Blair's ally he could lose far more votes than the 13 percent of Londoners who stayed loyal to Dobson and Labour.

Polls indicate that Livingstone's realignment with Blair will cost him dearly, with one-quarter of his former supporters stating they would not vote for him again.

With Labour having already lost significant areas of the capital during this year's local authority elections, including Livingstone's former safe seat of Brent East, rather than providing an electoral "safety raft" the Blair/Livingstone pact could very well tip both in the water.



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