

A revealing episode: How Britain's radicals lined up behind Ken Livingstone

Julie Hyland, Chris Marsden
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On January 9 a specially appointed five-person panel of Labour's National Executive Committee will review an application by London Mayor Ken Livingstone to rejoin the Labour Party.

Livingstone was expelled from party membership for five years in 2000 when, having been blocked by the party from running as its official candidate for London mayor, he stood as an independent. Labour's gerrymandering of the selection procedure, coupled with its heavy-handedness in throwing out the longstanding MP, ensured that Livingstone won the mayoral contest, beating Labour's official candidate into fourth place.

Now the errant mayor looks set to be readmitted to the party two years early in a deal stitched up between him and party officials. Labour is to bend its own rules in order to readmit Livingstone in time for him to run as its official candidate in the 2004 mayoral contest. Labour hopes this will prevent it from losing the elections a second time, whilst Livingstone hopes to benefit from the backing of a party machine.

Livingstone is jubilant at the prospect of his return, describing his expulsion as an unfortunate mistake. "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," he said in reference to his own relationship with the Labour Party.

As this backdoor agreement wends its way through Labour's bureaucratic machinery, it is worth recalling the euphoric response among Britain's middle class radical groups to Livingstone's decision to run as an independent.

Despite his reputation as "Red Ken" due to his conflict with the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, Livingstone subsequently accommodated himself to Labour's right-wing shift under Blair. Only when this cut across Livingstone's plans to advance his political career as London's mayor did he find himself in opposition. But the Socialist Workers Party and others nevertheless welcomed Livingstone's candidacy, proclaiming it as the start of a socialist renewal within the working class.

The SWP argued that regardless of his political record, Livingstone's candidacy provided an alternative to New Labour that could be used either to recapture the party for the left or as a launch pad for a new workers' party. It warned, "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."

The Communist Party of Great Britain, publishers of the *Weekly Worker*, insisted that "the particular movement gathering around Livingstone represents a working class rebellion, however inarticulate and contradictory."

Livingstone was not quite so keen to become the unwitting champion of a new party movement, however. He made clear from the start that it was his intention to seek readmittance to the Labour Party at the earliest possible opportunity. "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 at the

time.

This did not prevent the radicals from coming together to form a joint slate, the London Socialist Alliance, which ran in the elections for the London Assembly promoting Livingstone's candidacy amongst working people.

Such opportunism is integral to the Socialist Alliance's perspective.

For years the radical groups insisted that whilst Blair's New Labour was a pro-capitalist party whose programme barely differs from that of the Conservatives, its links with the trade unions meant that it remained a workers' party. Having been forced reluctantly to make an organisational stand against Labour due to the hostility of broad sections of the working class towards Blair's government, they have still maintained their essential orientation to the labour bureaucracy.

The radicals insist that the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party is merely a temporary cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of the official workers' movement—represented by the trade unions as the mass organisations of the working class.

They therefore defined the essential task of the Socialist Alliance as one of winning any dissident Labourites and above all the "left" trade union leaders to the project of constructing a new workers' party. The character of such a party was also designed to maintain the subordination of the working class to the old bureaucracies. To call for the construction of a revolutionary socialist party was sectarian, they insisted, as it would prevent organisational unity with left reformist bureaucrats. Before workers can become revolutionary, they argued, it is necessary for them to pass through a centrist stage of development between reform and revolution. The task of socialists is to ensure this phase can be completed by establishing a "broad church" of leftist tendencies—through alliances with individuals such as Livingstone—within which revolutionaries can argue for the correctness of their policy.

In pursuit of this schema, the radical groups were forced to make extraordinary political gyrations designed to conceal Livingstone's actual political aims. They insisted that his political record and his subjective intentions were irrelevant. What mattered was the supposedly objective significance of his being forced out of the party, and that he must inevitably be only the first of a number of "lefts" who would be forced to take a stand against Labour.

What has come of these political fantasies of left rebellions within the bureaucracy three years on?

Livingstone had no independent political base from Labour on which to conduct the necessary groundwork for his election campaign and was happy to utilise the LSA as his foot soldiers—a role that the radicals were only too willing to fulfil.

From the start, however, he spurned the LSA's entreaties to join in a common slate. Whilst he was ready to utilise the anti-Blairite credentials accorded to him by the radicals in winning popular support amongst working people, he had no intention of frightening off London's corporate bosses by aligning himself too closely with a nominally socialist policy.

Nor did he want to queer his pitch with the Labour leadership, when he decided to press forward with his avowed intention to seek re-entry to the party at a later date.

As mayor, Livingstone has earned nothing but praise from big business for his promotion of the City and such policies as issuing a bond scheme to take forward the privatisation of the London Underground rail network. Now, with Labour fearing an electoral rout in the Greater London Authority and European parliamentary elections, he has made his pitch for readmittance into the party.

All that the radicals succeeded in doing was to foster dangerous illusions in the progressive character of a few disgruntled political careerists—whose loyalty is to the Labour Party apparatus despite their infrequent and feeble protests against Blair's worst excesses. Instead of providing a focus for a general political rebellion against Labour, the SA's embrace of Livingstone only provided one of the most noxious representatives of this layer with a power base from which to argue for his reinstatement into the party.

Yet even now, faced with Livingstone's decision to reapply for Labour membership, the radical groups have made no attempt to evaluate their previous policy.

When Livingstone was asking the National Executive Committee to be let back into the Labour Party, the SWP had little to say in the November 22 edition of their weekly paper.

The SWP asked, "Will Livingstone turn again?" But they already knew the answer and quoted him as saying, "If I'm offered it [Labour membership], I'll take it. I think both the prime minister and myself recognise we are not going to change each other. We have learnt to accept each other."

As if they had never endorsed him, the SWP complained that "his talk of 'accepting' Blair and working alongside him is not what the millions who want Blair out want to hear. What is needed is a clear socialist alternative to Blair and his dismal policies on every issue. Livingstone will be turning his back on that, and on many of the people who voted for him, if he does rejoin New Labour."

The SWP argue essentially for business as usual: "The fact that Livingstone wanted to get back in [to Labour] shows how we must redouble our efforts to create a viable electoral alternative to Labour to act as a focus for all those outraged by Blair."

Political amnesia is made doubly necessary for the SWP because—though spurned by Livingstone—like fickle courtesans they and other radical groups have turned their attention to a new object for their desire.

The November 22 comment on Livingstone appears beneath a larger piece designed to promote an electoral front that will stand against Labour in European elections this year. George Galloway, recently expelled from Labour, has been proclaimed the new front man for this grouping, provisionally entitled RESPECT (Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environmentalism, Community and Trade unionism).

There is no reason to believe that a project for a new party based on glorifying the political credentials of George Galloway is any more viable than one involving Livingstone. Galloway is cut from the same political cloth as Livingstone. An inveterate self-promoter, he is a prominent critic of Blair's support for war against Iraq but this is combined with a record of opportunist relations with the Arab bourgeoisie. Someone with a close political affinity with the old Stalinist parties, he was loyal to the Labour Party for over three decades—and has also made clear that he hopes to re-enter its ranks at a future date.

Even if this never comes to pass and Galloway stays with his radical allies for some time, he has endorsed RESPECT only because the SWP has agreed to his demands that it is conceived of as advancing only minimal reforms that do not threaten the profit system or antagonise big business unduly. Its founding appeal is directed in the broadest possible

terms—to the anti-war movement, "pensioners, students, trade unionists, Muslims and other faith groups, socialists, ethnic minorities and many others..."—and merely promises to address what it describes as "a crisis of representation, a democratic deficit, at the heart of politics in Britain".

The *World Socialist Web Site* is alone in being able to hold up its political record on Livingstone to scrutiny. We explained at the time of his standing for mayor:

"The real target audience for Livingstone is 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..."

"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.'"

We concluded, "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... 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."

The formulation of a socialist programme on which to base its own party remains the central political challenge facing the British working class. It is one that can only be met by rejecting the siren song of the radical groups to trust in one or other representative of the labour bureaucracy and to confine themselves to a political agenda that is acceptable to such inveterate opportunists.



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