

# Britain: Behind the suspension of London Mayor Ken Livingstone

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Every so often, an incident occurs that reveals issues more fundamental than those presented as its immediate source.

The suspension of London Mayor Ken Livingstone by the unelected Adjudication Panel is one such episode. In its own way, it is indicative of a political system in which relatively small groups of wealthy and influential people are able to pursue their political vendettas behind the scenes and entirely divorced from any democratic control by the population.

On Friday, February 24, the Adjudication Panel announced it intended to suspend Livingstone from office for four weeks. Its patently anti-democratic decision was made not because Livingstone had broken any laws, but because of a private exchange he had with Oliver Finegold, an *Evening Standard* reporter, which the panel deemed “unnecessarily insensitive and offensive.”

The three-body panel is an adjunct of the Standards Board for England, which was brought into being by the Local Government Act of 2000. Supposedly part of the Blair government’s commitment to tackle political sleaze and corruption, it is another example of how political power has been further shifted into the hands of unelected and largely unaccountable organisations and individuals.

Charged with investigating potential breaches of the code of conduct for local authorities, the Standards Board, whose chairman and 11 lawyer-members are appointed by the Lord Chancellor, is invested with sweeping powers, including disqualifying a person from office for up to five years.

The arbitrary character of its verdict against Livingstone is underscored by the fact that only last year the Board cleared Conservative councillor Jack Sayers of breaching the code for his statement that “Jews run everything in Britain and practically run America.”

Livingstone’s suspension has been widely criticised in the media, including the Murdoch-run press. On February

28, the High Court agreed to stay the suspension, which was due to begin the following day, so that Livingstone can mount a legal challenge. Prime Minister Tony Blair is said to be backing the mayor’s challenge, which could take months.

Since he was readmitted to Labour membership two years ago, Livingstone has performed to the satisfaction of the major corporations and the Blair government. The powers-that-be judged his introduction of congestion charges in the capital to be a great success, and he has successfully led the political campaign to ensure that London will host the 2012 Olympic Games. Just this past January, Livingstone attacked workers on the London Underground subway system for taking strike action against the undermining of safety conditions, denouncing them for punishing “ordinary Londoners.”

But his efforts to maintain some political credibility amongst the electorate by presenting himself as an independent and “outspoken” figure have at times brought him into conflict with sections of the political establishment.

He has antagonised influential Zionist circles for his public criticisms of Israel’s abuses of the Palestinian people, at one point saying they “border on crimes against humanity” and on another occasion calling Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a “war criminal who should be in prison.”

Following the July 7, 2005, terrorist bombings in London, Livingstone sought to portray himself as someone who could bridge religious, ethnic and political divisions, solidifying himself with “moderate” Muslim leaders and clerics and criticising the most draconian aspects of the Blair government’s “war on terror,” such as the proposal to introduce 90 days’ detention without charge.

This also earned him the antipathy of some Conservative politicians and pro-Zionist Labour Party

members, as well as the *Evening Standard*, published by Associated Newspapers.

More significantly for the newspaper group, in January 2005, Livingstone said he wanted Associated to quadruple its £1 million payment for distributing its free newspaper *Metro* in Underground stations, and let it be known that he would invite other newspaper groups to bid for the exclusive contract when it expires in 2010.

Such was the background to the exchange between Livingstone and *Standard* reporter Oliver Finegold on February 8, 2005, outside a reception marking 20 years since Labour's former culture secretary, Chris Smith, became the first openly gay member of Parliament in Britain.

A tape of the conversation, which was being recorded at the time by Finegold, has the reporter announcing himself as being with the *Evening Standard*, to which Livingstone responded, "Oh, how awful for you."

Pressed by Finegold about the party he had just attended, Livingstone asked, "Have you thought of having treatment?" and then, "What did you do before? Were you a German war criminal?"

When Finegold responded, "No, I'm Jewish. I wasn't a German war criminal," Livingstone said, "Well you might be, but actually you are just like a concentration camp guard. You're just doing it 'cause you're paid to, aren't you?"

On February 11, the *Evening Standard* published a transcript of the recording under the headline, "Who Said What When Ken Clashed with Reporter."

On February 14, 2005, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Professor Eric Moonman, president of the Zionist Federation, filed complaints with the Standards Board of England, precipitating a formal investigation into whether Livingstone had breached the code of conduct of the Greater London Authority.

At the same time, the Conservative Party chairman of the London Assembly, Brian Coleman, referred Livingstone's remarks to the Commission for Racial Equality and moved a motion on the London Assembly to demand the mayor apologise.

The Labour Friends of Israel, a prominent pro-Zionist grouping in the Labour Party that includes some of its wealthiest supporters, also backed the censure motion.

Their efforts to manufacture a row occurred just as the International Olympic Committee was visiting London to judge its suitability as a venue for the 2012 games. With the corporate elite anxious to ensure that nothing affect its lucrative bid, the prime minister was drawn publicly into

the row, calling on the mayor to "apologise and move on," whilst Labour's National Executive threatened an investigation into his behaviour.

It was against this backdrop that Labour Party members on the London Assembly quickly fell into line, ensuring that the motion of censure was carried unanimously.

Livingstone refused to apologise for his remarks, and this was cited by the Adjudication Panel in its ruling last month that the mayor had brought "his office or authority into disrepute."

Jon Benjamin, the director general of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, said last week that his organisation had "never said the mayor is anti-Semitic." Nevertheless, this accusation is implicit in the charge made against Livingstone. Whilst some might take offence at his remarks to Finegold, no one has yet explained how a disparaging comment against Nazi concentration camp guards could be interpreted in this way.

At the Adjudication Panel hearing, Livingstone's lawyers argued that Finegold had "doorstepped" the mayor and had told Livingstone to "f\*\*\* off" in a five-second gap in the tape recording, though this is denied by the journalist.

At the time of their exchange, Livingstone said his comments were directed against the *Daily Mail*, also published by Associated Newspapers, which was one of the most vocal British media supporters of Hitler during the 1930s.

There are indications that the Adjudication Panel's decision to suspend Livingstone took the media and political establishment by surprise. The general consensus within official circles is that the action was imprudent and potentially dangerous.

That such a body could set itself above the electorate only underscores the undemocratic essence of what now passes for official politics.



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