

Britain: What is revealed by Labour's leadership contest?

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This week Jack Straw, leader of the Commons, announced that he is to run the campaign of Chancellor Gordon Brown to become leader of the Labour Party and the new prime minister of Britain.

On the face of it, it seems he will have an easy time. Prime Minister Tony Blair still refuses to set out a date for his departure, but there are widespread suggestions that he will stand down shortly after the May 3 elections in Scotland and Wales—thus triggering a potential seven-week campaign.

No one with any prospect of winning has so far come forward to challenge Brown. The National Executive Committee this month stated that Brown would appear at party election meetings even if he faced no contest. But even now, there are those within the party who are far from resigned to what would be effectively a coronation.

Indeed, such is the level of factional warfare within the party that Straw appears to have made his announcement so as to keep a potentially damaging conflict under control. As someone who helped run Blair's own bid for party leader in 1994, he has presented himself as a unifying force between the rival Blair and Brown wings of the party.

But his announcement is also intended to dissuade anyone within the upper echelons of New Labour from mounting a challenge to Brown at the eleventh hour. Foreign secretary during the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, Straw said he would mount a "vigorous campaign" for Brown, and that his announcement had received "very, very positive responses from a very broad spectrum of the parliamentary party."

Such claims were belied by the outburst from European Commissioner Peter Mandelson. A key Blair supporter, he stated that the public had "uncertainties" about a Brown leadership and that it was "obvious" the chancellor should face a contender.

One possible challenger who may yet come forward is Environment Secretary David Miliband, the former head of Blair's policy unit.

Former Education Secretary Charles Clarke has said that Miliband would make a "good candidate and a good prime minister." Along with Health Secretary Alan Milburn, Clarke is behind the web site *The 2020 Vision*, launched as an opportunity to "debate future policies with both the party and

the public." Though denying that *2020 Vision* is directed against Brown, Mandelson is amongst those to have contributed to the site, as is ex-minister Frank Field who has also backed a Miliband challenge.

Other contributors include Tony Giddens, author of the pro-Blair "Third Way" agenda, and Lord Hollick, the ex-newspaper baron. With extensive contacts in the City of London, Hollick is considered to be ideally placed to raise the funds necessary for a leadership challenger.

On Sunday, the *Observer* reported that Blair had said should Miliband stand he "will win."

There is not one iota of principle involved in the bitter conflict between the Blair and Brown factions. As joint architects of Labour's abandonment of its reformist policies in favour of a determinedly big business agenda, Brown was encouraged to suspend his own leadership ambitions in 1994 with the promise that Blair would stand to one side in his favour at some future point.

That point has been a very long-time coming, leading to bitter recriminations by the chancellor and his hangers-on. Nevertheless, throughout Labour's 10 years in office Brown has backed all of the government's deeply unpopular measures—not least the war against Iraq. And only last week Brown staked his claim to Number 10 by unveiling a budget that increased incomes taxes on the poorest paid workers while slashing corporation taxes.

It is a measure of how far to the right Labour has moved that the only serious threat to Brown comes from a possible Blairite challenger.

On what now passes for the party's left wing, only two MPs have announced they intend to challenge Brown—John McDonnell and Michael Meacher. But far from indicating significant ideological conflict within the party, their campaigns are an attempt to lend an appearance of life to a political corpse.

McDonnell is chairman of the Labour Socialist Campaign Group. Despite opposing the Iraq war, he has remained in government since 1997, claiming that it is possible to reinvigorate the party. When he first announced his leadership bid last year, he made clear that he regarded it as vital to put up a left-wing candidate if the party was to retain any hope of

popular support.

The government had “broken up the broad coalition of support Labour has relied upon throughout its history to bring it to power,” McDonnell said, and had “systematically alienated section after section of our supporters.”

He added, “If you do not change the policies you will have a smooth transition ... to [Conservative leader David] Cameron.”

But McDonnell’s prospects of re-energising popular support for Labour amongst its former supporters in the working class are not helped by the reduction of the party’s left wing to a rump.

The Socialist Campaign Group consists of just 24 MPs, most of whom are over 50 and two of whom are due to retire from politics before the next general election, including the group’s treasurer Alan Simpson.

McDonnell’s chance of even getting on the leadership ballot was always slim, as this required the endorsement of at least 44 Labour MPs. And of the party’s affiliated trade unions, only the rail union Aslef has publicly backed his candidacy despite McDonnell making the restoration of trade union rights one of his main slogans.

Meacher’s decision to contest the election means that there is even less chance of either of them securing enough support to stand. Indeed, whatever support he does muster will be from those wishing to humiliate McDonnell and who see even his milk-and-water socialism as too left-wing to be acceptable. Before he announced his retirement, many within the Socialist Campaign Group were expecting Simpson to be the left’s candidate.

For his part, Meacher has accused McDonnell of announcing his bid “without consulting his colleagues” and has argued that his candidacy is intended to give “the centre-left the chance to run a candidate who can pass the nominations threshold.”

He has described his voting in favour of the Iraq war as “the biggest mistake of my political life,” claiming that his was misled by the government’s “highly selective manipulation” of evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction. His opposition to Blair is essentially nationalist, arguing that Labour needs “a new foreign policy which is based on fundamental British interests, not subservience to the US, particularly over the Middle East.”

Meacher’s candidacy has been opposed by veteran Labourite Tony Benn and others, who argue that he is too compromised a figure and jeopardises McDonnell’s campaign to “re-engage with Labour members, supporters and trade unionists.”

The pathetic efforts of the party’s ever dwindling left to maintain some political standing in the working class has met with the support of Britain’s radical groups, who have all hailed McDonnell’s leadership bid.

The Socialist Workers Party comprises much of the political leadership of George Galloway’s Respect-Unity coalition in England and Wales as well as Tommy Sheridan’s “Solidarity—the Scottish Socialist Movement.” It insists,

“McDonnell’s campaign deserves support from every trade unionist. It is an important chance to raise a discussion about ditching Blairism as well as Blair,” going on to claim that “A strong showing by McDonnell would be a step forward for the whole left, inside or outside the Labour Party.”

Not to be outdone, the Scottish Socialist Party reported approvingly McDonnell’s claims that his bid for leadership would bring about the “restoration of trade union rights, an end to privatisation, direct investment in council housing, and withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Such spurious claims only demonstrate that, notwithstanding their efforts to put some organisational distance between themselves, the Blair government and New Labour, the SWP, SSP et al function as a political adjunct of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. They do not represent a genuine socialist alternative, but cheerleaders for Labour’s left flank—and a possible new home for those MPs, local councillors and union apparatchiks who might conclude that any association with the party of Blair and Brown represents electoral suicide.

The fight against imperialist war and for social equality cannot be achieved by supporting any section of the Labour Party, but only in a political struggle against it.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing regional lists in the elections to the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly on May 3. In the West of Scotland, the SEP’s five-strong regional list is headed by Chris Marsden, SEP national secretary. In South Wales Central, the four-strong list is led by Chris Talbot, a member of the SEP’s Central Committee and a regular correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site* (See campaign web site)

The SEP’s campaign is directed towards the development of a genuinely socialist alternative to the old workers organizations that politically organized and justified the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and which have spearheaded a massive redistribution of wealth away from working people to the rich.

We call on all workers, youth and students looking for a progressive way forward to read our election manifesto, vote for our party lists and sign up to participate in our campaign.



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