Britain: Brown crowned as Blair's successor after no contest

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Gordon Brown was crowned Britain's prime minister elect yesterday, after his only potential challenger in the Labour leadership contest conceded defeat.

Left candidate John McDonnell said it was impossible for him to mount a challenge after gathering the backing of just 29 Labour Members of Parliament of the 45 required. Brown won the backing of 313 MPs, equivalent to 88 percent of all Labour MPs.

For days, political commentators had urged a leadership contest to satisfy public opinion and undermine opposition demands for a snap General Election. After Michael Meacher MP had stood aside on Monday to enable McDonnell to go forward as the party's sole "left" representative, the media expressed its hope that a contest would soon be under way.

The *Guardian* leader May 15 declared that "it is in the interest of democratic politics, the socialist left, the Labour Party, Mr. Brown and the country that Mr. McDonnell succeeds in getting enough backing.

"Public opinion objects to a coronation and is right to do so. Parties are, or ought to be, participative bodies in which members are able to choose their leaders from a range of candidates."

More importantly, in what was a common theme throughout the media the *Guardian* argued that a contest, which McDonnell would certainly lose, would enable Brown to prove his right-wing credentials. It would "prevent the left, and especially some oppositional trade union leaders, from seeking to claim after a Brown coronation that they speak for a wider segment of party and union opinion than they actually do."

Writing in the same newspaper, Tom Clark acknowledged that McDonnell's opposition to the Iraq war and Labour's privatisation of essential public services meant "he is speaking for many more than those who share his traditional strain of socialism."

It was precisely for this reason that "a battle with McDonnell is firmly in his [Brown's] interest," he continued. "By defining him against the Left, it will show him to be an heir of Blair," he went on, whilst his almost certain "crushing victory ... will also give him a legitimacy that he might otherwise lack."

McDonnell himself had pleaded with MPs to give him support, "so that Labour Party members are given the democratic right to elect the next leader of the Labour Party."

McDonnell had made the terminal decline of the Labour Party central to his candidacy. Speaking at a Fabian Society debate on Sunday evening, he explained frankly that "the shocker for me ... is how little there is left of the Labour Party out there. Constituencies not meeting, a third of our constituencies don't send delegates to the Labour Party conference anymore, because they know what sort of stitch-up it is."

A leadership contest would reinvigorate the party, he continued, by demonstrating that Labour "is the same broad church it was under [former Labour leader] John Smith—left, right and centre."

On Tuesday evening McDonnell reminded his fellow MPs, "Year in, year out we rely on Labour Party members to deliver our leaflets, knock on doors, and fund the party with their small subscriptions and yet they will be excluded from participating in this election unless Labour MPs nominate me in the next 24 hours."

Within hours he had thrown in the towel, after it became clear his plea had fallen on deaf ears.

Such was the anxiety for a contest that some newspapers had even suggested Brown should "lend" McDonnell some of his own supporters to enable him to get the requisite number of nominations.

But on Wednesday, McDonnell accused Brown of sabotaging his campaign. Some of the chancellor's backers had initially leant their support to Meacher's candidacy so as to keep him out of the contest, McDonnell alleged. After Meacher had agreed to withdraw in McDonnell's favour, these individuals had refused to transfer their nominations, leaving him 16 short of the target.

There is no doubt some truth in McDonnell's claims. As

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one of the few MPs to have voted in opposition to the Iraq war, the upper echelons of the Labour Party would have been concerned at the impact of any public discussion on the invasion and the multitude of equally unpopular actions taken by the government—especially under conditions in which Brown is pledged to continue them.

In what now transpires to be the only debate of the entire leadership contest, Brown had told Sunday's gathering of the Fabian Society that he would carry forward "New Labour policies for the next election." He rejected demands for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq and defended the opening up of essential public provision to private capital.

Denouncing calls to redress social inequality, Brown insisted, "What we've got to be clear about" is that "we are New Labour and we're not going back to where we were 20 years ago."

The scale of McDonnell's failure, however, cannot be attributed to electoral maneuverings. Rather, it is testimony to the utter rottenness of the Labour Party as a vehicle through which the concerns of working people can find any political expression.

Not only could McDonnell not garner the backing of just 45 MPs—out of a total of 355—he did not even get the support of some within his own Socialist Campaign Group. So-called lefts Bob Marshall-Andrews, David Anderson and John Austin signed up instead to nominate Brown.

This is despite McDonnell making clear his readiness to work under a Brown leadership. At the Fabian Society hustings, McDonnell praised the chancellor as "a man with the brain the size of Mars," who had contributed to New Labour's "real successes." Never the less, the party had to recognise that it had "alienated ... section after section, almost systematically, of that broad coalition" that had brought Labour to power in 1997: "We can have a leadership debate based on policies, a comradely debate, a friendly debate, and then obviously after that we'll unite to defeat the Tories, it's as simple as that," he promised.

Such reassurances were wasted. The government feels able to ignore McDonnell's warnings about Labour's moribund state because it knows that it is not the dwindling number of leafleters or "small subscriptions" from party members on which it depends for power, but billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch. Moreover, it is acutely conscious that Labour's alienation from the broad mass of the population is not a mistake, as McDonnell suggests, but absolutely necessary if it is to be free to impose the dictates of big business and the super-rich.

McDonnell's defeat is an unmitigated disaster for those who claimed that some vestige of Labour remained committed to social reformism. Petty bourgeois radical groups such as the Socialist Worker and the Socialist Party had praised McDonnell's candidacy on these grounds, arguing that it would revitalize the "left" and galvanise the trade unions.

The *Socialist Worker* claimed that an opinion poll at last year's conference of the Trade Union Congress had recorded McDonnell winning the support of 59 percent of delegates, compared to 10 percent for Brown.

"McDonnell's campaign deserves support from every trade unionist," it urged. "A strong showing by McDonnell would be a step forward for the whole left, inside or outside the Labour Party."

In reality, the TUC has just as much interest as Labour in suppressing any public debate. It was instrumental in the fashioning of New Labour, refused to support the mass protests against the Iraq war, and has played the pivotal role in enabling the government to hold down wages and implement its privatisation agenda.

Far from providing the basis for a fight-back by the "left," the TUC has signed up en bloc to a Brown premiership with all that it entails and, behind the scenes, will have had a major role in ensuring the chancellor's unchallenged succession. McDonnell's request that the Transport and General Workers Union urge the 90 or so Labour MPs it sponsors to back him got nowhere. (It should be noted that Blair himself was a TGWU-sponsored MP.)

The leadership non-contest confirms the character of the Labour Party as a right-wing rump that is deeply hostile to working people, a fact amplified by the contest for deputy leader. All six challengers—Harriet Harman, Peter Hain, Hazel Blears, Jon Cruddas, Alan Johnson and Hillary Benn—are former Blair allies who have entered the contest only because it advances their career while confirming their loyalty to New Labour and its neo-conservative course.

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