

Britain: Labour's deputy leader challengers present their tarnished wares

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With Gordon Brown anointed as British Prime Minister Tony Blair's successor, after no one gained enough support to stand against him, the Labour Party deputy leadership race is being hailed as an arena for a battle over issues that matter to ordinary voters. This is being done in a desperate attempt by the Labour Party to posture as connected with the population at large.

There is no question that Labour has a lot to play for. Political hostility to the war and occupation of Iraq has become even more entrenched, with most people listing it as Blair's legacy. Moreover, the aggressive military grab for Iraq's oil resources—justified by lies and accompanied by a reckless disregard both for public opinion and human consequences—has become emblematic of a government in hock to big business and mired in corruption and deceit.

The consequences of this were made plain in May's elections, where Labour returned its lowest vote for decades in Scotland and Wales and lost some 500 council seats in England.

This has not prevented the deputy contest from being a desultory, uninspiring affair—the political equivalent of a corporate battle for the position of Deputy CEO. This is not simply the consequence of the fact that the position has no constitutional significance. More fundamentally, the six contestants underscore how hollowed out and disconnected from working people the party has become.

Labour is a party in name only. Membership has hemorrhaged by 200,000 since 1997, and many branches are defunct. The role of party conferences as nothing more than rubber stamps was amplified by the ejection of octogenarian Walter Wolfgang and his detention under the Terrorism Act.

The closing down of debate within the Labour Party was deliberate. Entirely beholden to the financial oligarchy, the government cannot tolerate the semblance of any control from “below”—even by such a politically compromised and neutered organisation.

What does concern the Labour leadership, however, is that the absence of any numerically significant social constituency may cause it to lose power in the next general election—especially if big business concludes that its interests will be more effectively served by a “reinvigorated” Conservative Party.

As Jon Cruddas, one of the challengers for the deputy leadership, admitted recently in the *Guardian*, Labour lost nearly 5 million votes between 1997 and 2005. “Four broad elements can be detected in this change: a significant movement away from us among workers in the public services; among black and minority ethnic voters; and among those described by marketing experts as ‘urban intellectuals’; and a huge shift away from us among working-class voters, especially manual workers,” he wrote.

Aptly for a party that has politically engineered a transfer of wealth

away from working people to the rich, Cruddas's “four elements” cover the majority of the population. As he continued, “In fact the only group where Labour support has actually grown between 1997 and 2005 has been among the professional, administrative and executive classes—but we cannot go on to win with them alone.”

The six challengers for deputy leadership epitomize this social and political shift in the party's base. All are New Labour apparatchiks, and differ only in policy nuance—as illustrated by their voting records on theyworkforyou.com—in how loudly they sing the praises of their soon-to-be former leader.

The latter feature is not only a personal characteristic. There is no question that, like others of their privileged social milieu, they would happily tread anyone under foot in their rush for advancement. But what cannot be done, under any circumstances, is to throw a question mark over New Labour's big business agenda and its neo-colonial foreign policy, personified by Blair.

Given the party's endorsement of the Iraq war, privatization, and other right-wing measures, it is no surprise that Hilary Benn topped the vote amongst members. Generously described as “uncharismatic,” his apparent personality shortfall is an expression of the party's political subservience to the powers-that-be.

The son of veteran Labour “left” Tony Benn, he has attracted the most interest because of his political pedigree and the contrast between his politics—pro-Iraq war, staunch Blair ally—and those of his father. The contrast is somewhat selective, given that Benn senior is characterized above all by his loyalty to the party apparatus and the fact that, when he was around the same age as his son is now, he was entrusted with key cabinet posts in both the Wilson and Callaghan governments as they sought to settle accounts with a militant movement of the working class.

[Theyworkforyou.com](http://theyworkforyou.com) lists Benn junior's voting record as “very strongly for” the Iraq war, the introduction of Identity Cards, foundation hospitals and student tuition fees and “very strongly against investigating the Iraq war.”

All of which places Hilary Benn on a par with the second deputy leader contender, Hazel Blears. Albeit only “strongly” in favour of tuition fees, her voting record otherwise is the same as Benn's. Blears is regarded as the most loyal Blairite of all the challengers. Indeed, her sole attribute is a willful blindness to political reality. She is a woman who behaves as if Labour is not detested and Blair widely considered beneath contempt. Her repeated reference to her sibling's job—“my brother is a bus driver”—is as close as Blears is prepared to venture in an effort to make any connection with working people.

The same is true as regards the third contender, Alan Johnson, who registers only slightly below Blears on the scale of Blair sycophancy.

Johnson's past association with the working class—he was formerly a postal worker before working his way up the ranks of the trade union bureaucracy—only confirms him as poacher turned gamekeeper. Like Benn he was “very strongly for” the Iraq war, the introduction of Identity Cards, foundation hospitals and student tuition fees and “very strongly against investigating the Iraq war.”

Both Blears and Johnson have warned against “turning back the clock” to the “politics of envy” by imposing higher taxes on big business and the super-rich.

This was a reference to calls by the remaining three contestants—Peter Hain, Harriet Harman and Jon Cruddas—for the future Prime Minister Brown to look at higher taxes on the super-rich as part of a strategy for narrowing social inequality.

In fact, to the extent that any of this sickly triumvirate has made even the vaguest noises about supporting such policies, they are well aware it counts for nothing. Brown is the joint architect of New Labour, a supporter of preemptive wars, who as chancellor has been responsible for implementing fiscal measures that have created an unprecedented gulf between rich and poor.

All six candidates backed Brown for leadership precisely for these reasons. Their flirtation with apparently more egalitarian proposals is a threadbare effort to cover over Labour's right-wing trajectory.

It is almost painful to watch Hain, the Northern Ireland secretary, affect some radical credentials. Like many that make up New Labour, he represents a layer of privileged petty bourgeois who in their youth were active in protest politics such as the anti-Apartheid movement—a toned down, British version of Germany's Joskha Fischer. Like Fischer, he is a firm supporter of “humanitarian” interventions, and his voting record is exactly the same as that of his supposedly more right-wing opponents.

Just months after the mass protests against the Iraq war and the invasion, Hain was insisting in Parliament that as a “Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for the Middle East, covering the Iraq desk for nearly two years, having been in the Foreign Office when much of the process was building up and a Cabinet Minister at the time of the decision to take military action, I can say categorically that I have seen intelligence ... which was conclusive on weapons of mass destruction.”

Even in January 2004, Hain still had the effrontery to claim, “We as a government are very confident ... about our whole policy on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction.”

Still Hain, who obviously believes the public's powers of recollection to be as limited as his own principles, wrote recently in the *New Statesman*, “The relationship between Labour and millions of progressive voters has become sour and distrustful. We have been careless, indifferent and, at times, needlessly offensive to the concerns and values of too many of our natural supporters.”

Harman is no better. She began her career in government as secretary of state for Social Security—charged with overseeing the further dismantling of Britain's welfare state. Despite losing this position, she was subsequently returned to the front bench in 2001 and has held a series of ministerial posts, including her latest in the Ministry of Justice. Like her counterparts, Harman was “very strongly for” the Iraq war, ID cards and privatised hospitals, and “very strongly against” investigating the Iraq war.

Cruddas is also recorded as being “very strongly for” the Iraq war and the introduction of foundation hospitals, and “very strongly against” an investigation of the Iraq invasion. Despite this, his only “moderate” support for ID cards, coupled with the fact that he is the

only contestant not part of the government, has led him to be presented as a “left-leaning Labour traditionalist.”

Cruddas has the backing of the Unite union, an amalgamation of Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union. Its joint general secretary, Tony Woodley, claimed that Cruddas's election as deputy leader “would be a tremendous step forward in terms of reconnecting the government with core voters”

But Cruddas's depiction as an outspoken critic of the Blair government cannot be squared with reality. The Dagenham MP is a former political adviser to Blair who, like Unite, supported Brown for Labour leader.

His manifesto extols the last decade of the Labour government, claiming that it has “helped millions of people share in the rising prosperity of the nation.” Just a few pages later, however, he admits, “Many have been excluded from the prosperity which the fortunate take for granted” and that “some key social divisions ... have become wider while Labour has been in power.”

Admitting that he was “wrong” to vote for the Iraq war, he maintains that the invasion was a temporary aberration. “This mistake should not obscure the strong internationalist record that Labour has built up since 1997,” he claims.

Cruddas calls for the “reintroduction of class as an economic and political category” so as to “rebuild the Labour coalition.” But in Cruddas's political lexicon, reconnecting with the working class is transformed into adopting yet more right-wing policies. Essential to the party's ability to reconnect with its traditional voters, he argues, is that it must address anxieties amongst the “white working class” over “migration patterns” that have been exploited by groups such as the British National Party. This dovetails with Brown's own demands to extol “Britishness.”

Whether Cruddas can win the deputy leadership, the outcome of which will be announced on June 24, such pandering to racial prejudice underscores the meaningless of what passes for distinctions between the “right” and “left” in official politics. Indeed, even raising the question of a possible return to Labour's previous reformist agenda is enough to provoke responses ranging from tortured apologetics to impassioned denials.

Appearing this week on a special edition of the BBC's *Question Time*, all six candidates discussed whether Labour was moving to the left. Cruddas responded by stressing that he represented “contemporary Labour” not “Old Labour,” while Hain said he was “Real Labour.” Johnson insisted that Labour still occupied the centre-ground; Benn insisted there was no “lurch back to the left” or “going back in time.” And Blears said there must be no return to “punitive,” by which she means redistributive, taxation.



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