

London Mayoral elections: Labour's neo-cons and the left apologists for Ken Livingstone—Part Two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series analysing the political issues in London's May 1 elections for Mayor and the London Assembly. The first part was posted March 14.

New Statesman Editor Martin Bright is unabashed about his adoption by the neo-conservatives. In a July 2006 *Observer* article, he explained how he was being “feted by the right” after his exposure of “Whitehall’s love affair with radical Islam” had earned him plaudits from “none other than David Frum, the neoconservative Bush adviser credited with coining ‘axis of evil.’” But it “is no shame for those on the left opposed to the rise of radical Islam to build alliances with conservatives prepared to call fascism by its real name”—a disingenuous statement given Bright’s willingness to ally with the most fervent advocates of American global military power.

Another contributor to the *Evening Standard*’s campaign against Livingstone is Nick Cohen. A one-time Labour supporter and *Observer* columnist who postured as a left critic, Cohen is one of the most prominent signatories to the Euston Manifesto, first published in the *New Statesman*. A paean to “liberal” imperialism, it called for a “new progressive democratic alliance” to defend the policy of military intervention so as to safeguard “democracy.” The manifesto won support from a number of pro-Labour journalists, such as Will Hutton and Oliver Kamm, author of *Anti-Totalitarianism: The Left-wing Case for a Neoconservative Foreign Policy*, and was endorsed by William Kristol in the US, co-founder of the Project for the New American Century and a leading advocate of war against Iraq.

Writing in the *Standard* January 9 under the headline “You can do it Boris—just wow us with your true grit,” Cohen informed his readers that he had been through Conservative candidate Boris Johnson’s policies “and found much to admire.” This despite Johnson, an unreconstructed Thatcherite, having had to make a public apology only recently for a 2002 article in which he referred to “piccaninnies” and “tribal warriors” with “watermelon smiles”—the same inflammatory terms utilised by Enoch Powell in his notorious 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech defending racial discrimination and advocating an end to immigration.

The accusation that the government has not been sufficiently resolute in prosecuting the “war on terror” at home is extraordinary. Under Labour, the threat of terrorism has been used to overturn fundamental civil liberties, including habeas corpus. Organisations have been banned and people, mainly Muslim students, jailed for reading material on the Internet said to be linked to terrorism.

Bright and Cohen’s evolution underscores the profound rightward shift within a layer of former “leftists” since the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and in response to the decay of the old social democratic parties and trade unions.

Analysing the rush by former pacifists and radicals to demand military intervention against Serbia during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the

December 1995 statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International, “Imperialist war in the Balkans and the decay of the petty-bourgeois left,” explained how these profound changes had “removed an essential prop for those who engaged in protest politics in a previous period.”

The leftism of this social layer, the statement continued, was based not on the independent capacity of the working class, but on the apparent strength of the Stalinist and social democratic or Labourite bureaucracies. The demise of the latter meant that the “workers movement no longer provides the petty-bourgeois left with the same sources of employment or paths to political influence,” while the policies of free-market deregulation and privatisation had provided a powerful social impulse for their conversion to the side of the bourgeoisie.

For a time, this embrace of Thatcherite economic nostrums could still be combined with a liberal stance on sexual and racial issues. The Labour Party especially promoted identity politics, based on race, religion and sexual preference, as it sought to junk any connection with the working class and social reforms and refashion itself as the preferred party of big business.

Now sections of the bourgeoisie have determined this policy is no longer sufficient and acts as a fetter on its broader, long-term ambitions. If British imperialism is to intervene determinedly in the fight to control strategic markets and resources globally, and particularly in the Middle East, the government must recognise that this will provoke opposition and prepare accordingly. Increasingly, the new mantra is that at home, just as abroad—you are either with us, or against us.

That some of the most vociferous proponents of this doctrine have emerged from the likes of the *New Statesman* and the Euston Manifesto group is proof of the political putrefaction of the Labour Party. This hollowed-out, bureaucratic apparatus, entirely divorced from any democratic control by the populace, much less the working class that once formed its primary constituency, has functioned as the main political representative of the neo-conservatives in Britain for more than a decade. As such it has become the incubator of the most right-wing, antidemocratic tendencies.

No mention of this is made by those now lining up to defend Livingstone. Rather than alerting working people to the dangers posed by the absence of a genuinely progressive alternative to Labour, they argue that a “progressive alliance” means supporting the very same party that has spawned Bright and his cohorts.

Labour’s Compass group issued a statement signed mostly by Labour MPs and National Executive Committee members—“Progressive forces unite behind Mayor.”

“Livingstone is a standard bearer for real progressive politics,” it claimed. “Of course, like all of us, Livingstone operates in the here and

now. For London that means the domination of the Square Mile in the form of financial capitalism. He cannot be expected to address such forces at once or alone....

“The battle lines are clear. It’s them and us. And Ken Livingstone is us. We urge every progressive voter, activist and organisation to get behind the campaign to re-elect Ken Livingstone.”

Writing in the *Guardian*, Seumas Milne argued, “A defeat for Livingstone would not just be a blow to the broadly defined left, working-class Londoners, women, ethnic minorities and greens. It would represent a wider defeat for progressive politics, in Britain and beyond.”

Despite the increasingly personal character of the attack on him, Livingstone has said little about the fact that the opposition campaign is led by individuals associated with Labour and its periphery—arguing instead that he should be judged on his record. London is booming, he argues, and the key test is “whether London is ahead of New York” in the “contest for number-one city in the world.” As the official Labour candidate, it is not possible for Livingstone to identify the pronounced right-wing trajectory of his own organisation without its damaging his electoral chances.

As it is, the *Economist* forecast that Livingstone’s candidacy for the Labour Party was damaging his ability to trade on “Brand Ken.” In the *Guardian*, February 27, 2008, Sunder Katwala expressed similar fears over Labour’s ability to mobilise a sufficient vote: “In a low-turnout election, Johnson’s ability to mobilise the suburban vote and those uneasy with London’s diversity and openness could take him across the winning line,” Katwala wrote. Livingstone needed to be able to “mobilise London’s broad progressive majority, winning enough support from Lib Dems, Greens and others to see off” the Tory challenge, thereby offering “a major reason to be cheerful about Labour’s chances of political recovery nationally.”

In the drive to engineer such a “recovery,” declared opposition to the “neo-cons” is being used to support the very party that has championed the Bush doctrine of military intervention, the further redistribution of wealth from working people to the rich and the dismantling of democratic rights.

Yet again, the various petty bourgeois left groups have signed up en masse to this political charade.

George Galloway, whose Respect Renewal group split from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) last year, has announced he will not challenge Livingstone for mayor. “There is an urgent need for change” in London, Galloway has said. “Just not the change from Livingstone to Boris Johnson.”

“In these new and developing circumstances, it would be self-indulgence, a luxury the left can no longer afford, to stand a candidate of the left against Livingstone for mayor.” Galloway has said he intends to form a “progressive slate” for the assembly, with himself as a candidate, to act as a check on the mayor.

The SWP is in the somewhat difficult position of having declared months ago that Stop the War Coalition leader Lindsey German would run for mayor. But in a statement on her campaign, German went out of her way to stress “I have many points of agreement with Ken Livingstone—his anti-racist and anti-imperialist policies are a credit to London and he has seriously attempted to cut car use in the city.... We should defend Ken against attacks from the right, and we should support him against the Tory candidate Boris Johnson and his right wing agenda.”

“However that does not mean that we can or should be uncritical.”

But what does this mean for the SWP’s campaign? With some relief, German explained that “Everyone has two votes for mayor, for their first and second preferences, so the second votes of the smaller parties can be distributed between the two lead candidates.... It is very important that we don’t let the Tory in, which is why I will be calling for all my voters to give Ken their second preference.”

According to reports, at one election meeting, German dismissed charges that her candidacy would damage Labour’s chances, stating that it would actually help Livingstone because the Single Transferable Vote system meant “we will gain votes for Ken.” In other words, the SWP doesn’t take its own campaign seriously and knows that it will not hurt Labour.

Similarly, for the Socialist Party (formerly the Militant), the elections pose “an invidious choice between a former left who has embraced a big business agenda and a Thatcherite throwback. Both offer neo-liberal policies and will continue to preside over obscene poverty and social deprivation while the City wallows in wealth.”

“The situation is crying out for a new workers’ party but, unfortunately, once more an opportunity has been lost,” it complained, following the decision of unions such as the Rail and Maritime Transport not to stand candidates. This meant there was “no coherent working-class alternative.”

The “Socialist Party is normally opposed to policies of ‘lesser evilism,’” it stated. “But there are occasions when different factors, especially working-class consciousness, compel us to modify our approach. In this case, through gritted teeth, like many London workers, we recommend a second-preference vote for Ken Livingstone.”

There is nothing new in the line-up of the former radical groups. When Livingstone stood as an independent in 2000 they came together to form a joint slate, the London Socialist Alliance, which promoted his candidacy. At the time, they argued that Livingstone’s success could be a force for reinvigorating the party or providing the nucleus for a new workers’ organisation. This was despite Livingstone’s stipulation that he intended to rejoin Labour at some future point. Even when he was readmitted to the party in time for the 2004 elections, these groups called for second preference votes to be cast for Livingstone.

Respect Renewal, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party all claim to be involved in the fight to construct a new workers’ party. But when the chips are down, they immediately back Labour as the “progressive” choice. No matter how far Labour goes in its attacks on the working class and its support for neo-colonialism, the various left groups insist that it remains the “lesser evil,” which workers must defend if they are to beat back the attacks of the right.

But if support for Labour is truly a means of defending the essential class interests of working people, then why is there a need for a new party?

In truth, none of these groups believe it is possible to fight for a politically independent workers’ organisation. That is why, whenever the right rears its head—and even if substantial sections of that right are identified with the Labour Party—their response is always the same: defend Labour. One thing is guaranteed: as the election looms ever closer, their currently limited criticisms of Livingstone and the Labour Party will become even more circumspect.

The furore around the London mayoral contest does raise important issues. There is no question that a factional fight over political policy is raging within broad layers of the ruling elite, and within the Labour Party itself. Faced with the significant setbacks suffered by US and British imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan and the prospect of economic recession, some are demanding a drastic realignment of domestic politics in line with the battle being waged for global hegemony, which must entail even greater “sacrifice” from the population—especially as regards its democratic rights.

As always, the left groups claim that this can be dealt with by tactical manoeuvres on the electoral front. While warning of the threat from the right, they treat this development as if it can be resolved by putting a cross in the correct place on a ballot paper. But the bitter furore surrounding the London election is not a temporary, conjectural episode. Its roots lie in the deepening crisis of the world capitalist system and the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms and social tensions this is generating.

The absence of a socialist alternative is not a secondary factor in this situation. It is the fundamental issue confronting working people. So long as the working class does not have any independent means of articulating its opposition to social inequality and the threat of war, the ruling elite are determined to resolve the crisis on their own terms.

Concluded



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