

London Mayor Boris Johnson's return to "traditional Tory values"

Marcus Morgan, Paul Mitchell
7 July 2008

It is only two months since the newly elected Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson promised he would, with a new broom, sweep clean the sleaze and corruption he declared characterised the outgoing administration under the Labour Party's Ken Livingstone.

Johnson also proclaimed that his mayoralty would be a return to "traditional Tory values." As it has turned out, it is this pledge that is being realised as his own administration has begun to fall apart amidst accusations of racism and the type of "sleaze and corruption" he promised to root out.

Last week, longstanding allegations of financial and sexual misconduct against deputy mayor Ray Lewis ended in his resignation, and forced Johnson to set up an inquiry.

The media hailed Lewis's appointment as deputy mayor for young people as a shrewd move aimed at countering adverse reports of comments made by Johnson in an article on Tony Blair in which he referred to "picaninnies" with "watermelon smiles."

Lewis's Eastside Young Leaders Academy in Edmonton, London, and its "tough love" ethos of army-style drilling, religion, uniforms and discipline, was proclaimed as the real answer to gang-related violence.

In the past several days, however, it was revealed that the former Church of England Minister had had restrictions placed on his ministry because of a series of allegations of sexual and financial misconduct against parishioners. In 1993 he was accused of "sexually inappropriate behaviour" by two members of the congregation at St. Matthew's, West Ham and he was banned from preaching for six years.

Two years later he was accused of failing to repay a total of £41,000 borrowed from three parishioners, though the investigation was subsequently dropped. Lewis also faces accusations of assaulting pupils at his academy, all of which he denies.

The Lewis resignation follows that of Johnson's chief policy advisor, James McGrath. When asked by a journalist if Johnson's election would provoke a flight of black Londoners back to the Caribbean, McGrath replied, "Well, let them go if they don't like it here."

Johnson mounted a feeble defence of both men, but then dropped them fairly quickly.

McGrath was chosen as an advisor by fellow Australian, Lynton Crosby, the architect behind Johnson's electoral campaign who earlier spearheaded electoral campaigns for former Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

Central to the campaign was a barrage of allegations of misconduct against Livingstone and his leading aides. Almost daily, the conservative *Evening Standard* newspaper ran stories charging the Livingstone administration with corruption. This claimed its first scalp shortly before the election, when Lee Jasper—the focus of many of the unproven allegations of corruption—resigned his post as Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities following the leaking of sexually explicit emails he had sent to a female friend in an organisation that received funding from the Assembly.

However hostile a section of the Tory press was to Livingstone, he retained the backing of the City of London as its favoured candidate and also had the support of newspapers running the political spectrum from the *Financial Times* to the *Guardian*. It is a measure of the widespread resentment and hostility felt towards Labour—and towards Livingstone himself—that this failed to win him re-election and that Johnson's posturing as "Mr. Clean" was partially successful.

Livingstone's defeat coincided with the disastrous performance of Labour in the May 3 local elections, as the party continues to lose what remains of its working class base and is deserted by the better-off traditional Tory and "swing voters" it won in 1997.

Johnson benefited on both counts. Turnout among Labour supporters was down while Johnson successfully mobilised his own party's "natural constituency."

In addition, Labour's reputation as a party of big business, sleaze, incompetence, authoritarianism and militarism could no longer be countered by Livingstone invoking his radical past. Labour promoted Livingstone's support in the City of London, but the Greens, Respect Renewal and the Socialist Workers Party's Left List, together with the *Guardian*, promoted him as the "progressive candidate" and sought to mobilise support in the inner-city areas, particularly amongst black and Asian workers.

But such claims could no longer be reconciled after two terms in which Livingstone made his peace with Labour after first

being elected as an independent. He famously denounced striking London Underground workers as “selfish” and defended Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair after an Old Bailey jury convicted the Met of corporate failure over the killing of innocent Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes. Livingstone insisted there were no grounds for the resignation of this “incredibly talented officer,” stating that the court’s verdict might make stopping suicide bombers more difficult.

Anyone foolish enough to believe that Johnson’s would be the “clean hands” administration he had promised has soon been disabused. Johnson’s record since taking office has provided a glimpse of what can be expected.

Once in power, he quickly set about appointing his own cronies—an army of consultants and advisors—stating bluntly that “it is not intended that the fees for these (other) individuals will be made public.” Reports suggest that many will receive a salary of more than £100,000.

The chief executive of the London Development Agency (LDA)—which declares itself the “Mayor’s agency responsible for driving London’s sustainable economic growth”—was sacked and Harvey McGrath, former chairman of the hedge fund specialists the Man Group, nominated in his place.

A “forensic audit team” has been set up to investigate allegations of corruption in the LDA and Greater London Authority, headed by the former editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* Patience Wheatcroft, who had stirred up controversy after censoring a critical article about Conservative leader David Cameron.

Multimillionaire former asset stripper and private equity chief Tim Parker was made first deputy and chief executive, as well as being appointed the new chairman of Transport for London. Full delegated powers over major planning decisions were given to Ian Clement, an unelected advisor from Bexley Council, who became notorious for cutting the “meals on wheels” scheme for pensioners.

Johnson has appointed Simon Milton as director of planning, but had to backtrack after it was revealed that he is also chairman of the Local Authorities’ chief lobbying group. Although losing his title, he will still remain in Johnson’s office in the role of consultant.

Munira Mirza, a former radical, has arrived at the heart of a Tory administration as the new cultural advisor to the mayor, thanks to her opposition to “multiculturalism” and professions that the extent of “Islamophobia” is exaggerated. She writes for the Policy Exchange think tank, whose founder Nick Boles will likely work on marketing for the mayor along with Dan Ritterband, a former Saatchi & Saatchi advertising executive.

Policy Exchange, which is described as the most influential think tank “on the right,” is headed by Charles Moore, former editor of the Thatcherite *Spectator* magazine—a position held previously by Johnson. The organisation was embroiled in controversy only recently over allegations that documents it circulated to prove the influence of Islamic extremists in

Britain’s mosques were fakes.

Once in office, Johnson swiftly implemented the right-wing policies outlined in his manifesto. Central to this agenda is to “beef up the police presence on our streets by increasing police numbers and cutting red tape at the Metropolitan Police Service.”

Within hours of his election, dozens of extra police were deployed to carry out random “stop and search” procedures across the city in “Operation Blunt 2,” exploiting the media frenzy over youth-related gun and knife crime in the last few months. This has not been addressed on the basis of tackling the wider issues of poverty, job opportunities and social inequality, but by increased police powers and a zero tolerance policing policy.

In a city with the dubious honour of having the most surveillance cameras in the world, Johnson has also promised more closed circuit TVs.

These initiatives closely parallel those undertaken by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, whose critics have argued that the fall in street crime had more to do with enrolling an extra 7,000 officers than with any strategic master-stroke, and that much crime simply moved to neighbouring districts. Bloomberg made a special visit to London’s City Hall to congratulate Johnson on his electoral victory, but the content of their meeting has remained a strictly confidential.

Another indication of the real agenda of the new mayor is in his attitude to low-income earners. Johnson has cancelled the cheap oil deal Livingstone made with the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez last year and declared that he will annul applications for cheap fares, which have benefited more than 80,000 Londoners on Income Support benefits. Livingstone used the deal as part of a handful of populist gestures to buttress his neo-liberal economic policies, making sure they did not conflict with the fundamental interests of the City of London, or compromise his record in promoting London as a magnet for global capital.

It is Livingstone and Labour that have paved the way for a deepening of the assaults they began on the working class in London, only now with Boris Johnson at the helm.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact