

# Britain: Ken Livingstone and his “left” disciples

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The "Progressive London" conference held last month was nothing of the sort.

Some 600 people were in attendance, including Labour ministers and members of parliament (MPs), trade unionists, Liberal Democrats, Greens and others such as the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The meeting was to promote the type of "progressive policies which have made London such a success and a place where people from all walks of life and cultural backgrounds can be themselves and come together around common goals."

Although described as the coalition's "launch", it has been functioning for some time. It was initially brought together by Ken Livingstone, then Mayor of London, as part of his bid for re-election in May 2008 against the Conservative Boris Johnson. With the Labour Party hemorrhaging support over its support for the Iraq war, Washington's policies of extraordinary rendition and clandestine torture, and its big business policies more generally, Livingstone had sought to build a broader alliance to shore up his vote.

But Livingstone himself was considered part of the establishment. Having made his peace with the Labour leadership, he had denounced the government for its attempt to tax wealthy "non-doms" (officially not resident in Britain for tax purposes), attacked striking London Underground workers as "selfish" and defended then Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair over the police shooting of Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes.

"I used to believe in a centralized state economy, but now I accept that there's no rival to the market in terms of production and distribution," Livingstone had said. This record made him popular in the City of London, but did nothing to help his campaign. Instead, the Tories, with the support of the *Evening Standard*, were able to capitalize on allegations of corruption and use Livingstone's promotion of identity politics based around race and sexuality to rebuild its support in London's better-off suburbs and narrowly win the poll.

Since then, the global economic crisis has hit the UK and London particularly hard. With "Progressive London", Livingstone hopes to tie in the support of the Liberals, Greens, and other nominally "left" organizations, to resuscitate his political career and hopefully that of Labour as well.

"Progressive London" states that the recession has "changed not only the economic but also the political situation. If the government meets this challenge effectively it can translate its advantage over the Tories—whose support for old fashioned Thatcherism is now discredited—into a reversal of its political fortunes".

This led to the bizarre spectacle of some of those most closely linked to the fashioning of New Labour and its adoption of "old fashioned Thatcherism" trying to take their distance from the political and social disaster they helped to bring about.

Livingstone warned the audience against dwelling on the past. We should not "look back to a world that is dying rather than the world we can bring into being," he said. Referring to the economic crisis and the social and political tensions it is generating, he said it was imperative to unite because "we have a desperately short time."

Respect Renewal MP George Galloway made clear the demand for "unity" meant there must be no political opposition to Labour, warning any one "on the left" contemplating standing against Livingstone in the 2012 mayoral contest to think again.

## The crisis of New Labour

Pride of place in this charade was given to the 91-year-old historian Eric Hobsbawm. With an air of impending doom he lamented that "time is not on our side" and berated New Labour for "swallowing" the free market and having "lost the tradition" of the class struggle. This had left Labour and

the unions "unable to provide an effective left party as in Germany", he said. This was in reference to Die Linke, the party formed by former members of the Social Democrats led by ex-finance minister Oskar Lafontaine and the East German Stalinists of the Party of Democratic Socialism.

Hobsbawm joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936. The CP worked for decades to politically subordinate the working class to the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy based latterly on its 1951 programme "The British road to socialism". This formally declared that socialism would come about by winning a majority in parliament for a "People's Government" based on the Labour Party, the trade unions, the Co-operative and Communist Parties.

By the late 1970s, this rationale for supporting Labour was threadbare. Labour had implemented the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and was involved in major confrontations with the working class, leading up to the "Winter of Discontent."

Hobsbawm, in the CP's theoretical journal *Marxism Today*, came forward with others to present the theoretical justification for the Labour Party's lurch to the right. In a 1978 lecture entitled "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" he argued that left parties could no longer base themselves on the working class, as it was losing its central role in a "post-Fordist" world characterized by the decline in manufacturing.

After the victory of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, Hobsbawm went on to call for a tactical vote for the Social Democratic Party, which broke from Labour to the right. He subsequently became an adviser to Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, who launched a witch-hunt against the party's left with the aim of ending any connection with the working class and freeing Labour to embrace Thatcherite policies of transforming Britain into a low-wage, deregulated economy and the City of London as the major centre of global financial speculation. He gave his full support to Kinnock's efforts, including his policy review setting out to supplant Labour's past commitment to social ownership—an aim officially realized by Tony Blair when he finally ditched Clause IV of Labour's constitution.

Today, however, the crisis of the capitalist profit system has left New Labour and its allies reeling.

Hobsbawm argued that the "future belongs to mixed economies," while *Guardian* journalist Seumas Milne (another longtime Stalinist) and Graham Turner, a member of the Left Economic Advisory Panel, argued for a new version of "Keynesianism" to kick-start the economy. Turner is the author of "The Credit Crunch", and argues that the current crisis is the result of bad policy decisions, most important of which was "moving jobs abroad", leaving "a

demand gap in the West that in the end got filled by credit growth."

The denunciations of "neo-liberalism" and calls for "nationalization" have nothing to do with a genuinely progressive, socialist answer to the crisis. They are not aimed at reorganising the economy on the basis of social need and under the democratic control of working people, but at safeguarding the interests of British capital against its major rivals.

Turner, for example, has argued that the solution to the crisis is to "reorientate our economy away from an obsession with financial services towards more meaningful industries. It is possible for Britain to be a successful financial industry along side with tighter regulation too."

Writing in the *Guardian* on the eve of the conference, Livingstone stated the public sector was necessary to counter the "economic shock" caused by the recession. In particular, the failure of the free market meant that "massive investment in London's infrastructure in areas such as transport, housing and other public services" was necessary, not only to "counter the downward spiral of recession, but it is equally vital over a prolonged period to meet the competitive challenge that is now coming from Asia, to make London more competitive."

All this is couched in terms of green polices and boosting "employment and living standards". But the full reactionary implications of these statements were spelt out by Livingstone's former Director of Economic and Business Policy, John Ross. He is a member of the Socialist Action group which has its origins the split from the Fourth International in 1953 on the basis of an orientation to the Stalinist and Labour bureaucracies.

Ross repeated his call for the Labour government to follow the Chinese "model" of state-control of banks and industry. This would enable resources—including labour—to be centrally directed and allocated, he argued. Brushing off criticism of the dictatorial nature of the Chinese regime, he said that a lot of rubbish had been written and it was the economic system rather than the political system that was important.



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