

# Labour's Diane Abbott: Britain's Obama?

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The question exercising the minds of the labour bureaucracy and the entire British establishment is: "How do we control the movement of the working class that we know austerity measures will provoke?"

The cuts being introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition are the most damaging ever made in Britain during peacetime. Throughout Europe similar policies by the capitalist class are setting in motion oppositional movements.

In the past, the ruling class has relied heavily on the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, supported by the Stalinists and centrists, to head off embryonic revolutionary movements. But for the past 13 years a Labour government has taken the country into deeply unpopular imperialist wars and carried out every attack demanded by big business. The Stalinist regimes and parties themselves have collapsed, while the former "left" organisations have shrivelled into rightward-lurching appendages of a moribund Labour Party apparatus.

These are the considerations behind the late decision of the bureaucracy to lift Diane Abbott up onto the ballot, even though it meant the embarrassment of having to explain why the front-runner, David Miliband, and others had to hurriedly cast their nominations for her. Although the Labour leadership has previously come into low-level conflict with her, it looked across the Atlantic at the role being played by President Barack Obama and decided it may be worth following US capitalism's example. In Abbott's case gender as well as race would be used to detract from the central class issues.

This led to a spat between opposing sections of the capitalist press among those for and against her candidacy. This is not simply about Abbott herself, but expresses the very real nervousness these forces feel about a political situation that is fraught with dangers.

Only Labour MPs can nominate candidates for the leadership, and there had obviously been a great deal of discussion behind the scenes about the tactics they should pursue. All the leading lights in the contest were ministers in the last government and are tarred with the same brush. It is

not, as some have suggested, that they are all Oxbridge-educated white males. It is difficult to think of too many post-war Labour Party leaders that were not. The real problem for them is they are all looked upon with deep suspicion by workers and those sections of the middle class that opposed the war in Iraq and New Labour's right-wing policies.

Confronted with this dilemma the bureaucracy decided it may become necessary to present Abbott as the nominally more radical face of the Labour Party. She is, after all, fairly well known and makes regular television appearances on Andrew Neil's late night programme "This Week". There she is well paid to give a Labour insider's view. She uses this position to cover up for the Labour leadership, while cracking jokes and flirting on a sofa alongside Michael Portillo, the former Tory Defence Minister and Thatcherite pin-up boy.

Abbott's particular usefulness for the Labour bureaucrats is that she was one of the few Labour MPs to have voted against the 2003 Iraq war, while, as a black single parent, she can be promoted as somebody who shares the difficulties of minorities and working mothers everywhere. In the general election, hers was one of the constituencies targeted by the "Hope not Hate" campaign. The constituency, Hackney North and Stoke Newington, is one of the poorest in the country, and that campaign, which subordinated all class and political questions to the single issue of fighting the fascist British National Party, helped her double her majority.

The picture of Abbott as a rebel does not live up to any kind of objective scrutiny. As a Member of Parliament for the past 23 years, she has earned the kind of salary and lived the type of lifestyle most single parents can only dream of. Her opposition to the Iraq war was driven by her concern that Britain's national interests were being compromised. Moreover, it never involved her in any political struggle against the Labour leadership.

Abbott is from a working class family and was educated at a girl's grammar school in Harrow, before going on to study at Cambridge under the well-known historian, lecturer and

television broadcaster Simon Schama. On leaving university she went on to tread a not very dissimilar career path to the rest of the right-wing elements that make up the Labour Party. In 1976 she became an administration trainee at the Home Office, before going on to become Race Relations Officer at the National Council for Civil Liberties. She was working as a researcher and reporter at Thames Television when elected to Westminster City Council as one of the country's first black councillors in 1982. Abbott moved over from Thames to the breakfast company TV-AM in 1983.

There followed a spell as a press officer at the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone from 1985 to 1986 and then head of press and public relations at Lambeth Council from 1986 to 1987.

The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had developed a two-pronged strategy to deal with the inner-city riots that first swept Britain in 1980 and 1981. After the 1985 Broadwater Farm riot that led to the death of police officer Keith Blakelock, funding was directed towards building-up a black middle class entrepreneurial layer within these urban areas while intensifying the state attacks against working class youth on the council estates.

In the aftermath of the riots, the black US presidential candidate, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, visited London. Karen DeYoung, writing in the *Washington Post*, said he urged British blacks to “fight for your share of everything that's available, vertically and horizontally...in the labour movement, in the government, in property ownership”.

DeYoung went on to write, “Sons and daughters of Caribbean ownership have grown up in a homogenous white society that never planned for their existence and have shown little willingness to make a place for them”.

Abbott established close relations in the US and has lectured at Ivy League universities, including Harvard. It was while speaking at a black studies conference in Philadelphia in 1988 that she accused Britain of being “one of the most fundamentally racist nations on earth”. Rarely does she make any acknowledgement of the proud history the British working class has in the struggle against racism.

As soon as she became the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington in 1987, Abbott collaborated with another London Labour MP, Bernie Grant, in forming a parliamentary black caucus and has remained committed to organising black sections within the Labour Party. She joined the Campaign Group of Labour MPs of Tony Benn, which was a focus of groups sympathetic to the Pabloite United Secretariat.

With the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe and the social democratic parties in Western Europe throughout the 1980s, these petty-bourgeois forces moved rapidly to the right. Having earlier ascribed to the

national bourgeois in the third world countries a revolutionary role, these fake Trotskyists now insisted that the fundamental divisions in society were race and gender, and that these this overrode the conflict between the working class and the capitalist class. None of these positions would have conflicted with Abbott's own views.

Abbott served on various committees. She was elected to the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and also served on the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee, which addressed business and financial affairs, through much of the 1990s. She frequently met with bankers, financial regulators, and senior politicians. In addition she served on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, and in the early 2000s she established a special committee investigating gun-related crimes. She was quoted in the *Guardian* stating, “I urge the government to move away from an excessively ideological approach to the so-called magic of the private sector and to adopt a more pragmatic approach”.

Abbott was accused of hypocrisy when it was revealed that she had sent her son to the private, £10,000-a-year City of London School, after she had publicly criticised former Prime Minister Tony Blair and current acting-Labour Party leader Harriet Harman for doing the same thing. She was criticized in 1996 for writing in the *Hackney Gazette* that “blond, blue-eyed Finnish girls” in her nearby hospital in West London were unsuitable as nurses, because they “may never have met a black person before”. More recently she has deplored overseas workers being employed building the 2012 Olympic stadium site in east London instead of “our boys in London”, echoing Gordon Brown and the trade union bureaucracy's campaign for “British Jobs for British Workers”.

Despite her tarnished image, however, the Labour Party bureaucracy is desperate enough to test her out in the leadership contest. Significantly, its first point of controversy was not over a critique of Labour's policy, but her defence of her decision to send her son to private school—on racial grounds. In the *Daily Mirror*, Abbott declared, “I'm a West Indian mum and West Indian mums will go to the wall for their children.... That's what some of my colleagues on the Left would never understand. In the end you're coming from a culture where whatever you can do for your children you do.”



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