

Crisis envelops UK Labour leadership contest

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Labour Party leader Ed Miliband resigned last week following the party's rout in the May 7 general election, but a crisis is already enveloping the contest to find his replacement.

Front-runner Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Umunna announced his withdrawal on Friday, just days after declaring his leadership bid. Umunna told reporters that the pressure and scrutiny he had undergone in the last few days was not "a comfortable experience" for him or his family. He insisted that there was no scandal behind his decision to withdraw.

Earlier this week, former army officer Dan Jarvis, MP for Barnsley Central since 2011 and currently shadow minister for justice, announced that he would not be putting his name forward in the contest after all. Jarvis declared, "It's not the right time for my family. My eldest kids had a very tough time when they lost their mum [in 2011] and I don't want them to lose their dad."

The Labour leadership contest is a poisoned chalice. Despite years of austerity and attacks on social conditions, the Conservatives still managed to win 331 parliamentary seats and 36.9 percent of the vote, giving them an unexpected 15-seat parliamentary majority. Labour ended up with 30.4 percent of the vote and 232 seats—the party's worst defeat since 1987.

In Scotland, once a heartland for Labour, the party lost all but one of its seats. Many of its leading lights were kicked out. The Scottish National Party, campaigning on a supposed anti-austerity ticket, swept the board. Labour fared no better in England, seeing a significant part of the anti-Tory vote going to the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Greens.

Labour's response is to lurch even further to the right. Immediately after the election, Miliband was roundly condemned as being too left-wing, focusing on the party's "core" working class vote and failing to appeal to "aspirational" Conservative voters. A chorus

of demands erupted for a return to "New Labour" and the legacy of Blair.

Both Blair and his chief strategist Peter Mandelson threw their weight behind Umunna, a suitably shallow and opportunist vessel. After becoming an MP in 2010, the former solicitor served as Miliband's parliamentary private secretary before being rewarded with the post of shadow business secretary less than 18 months after entering Parliament.

His politics find suitable expression in a posting on the ASmallWorld website, known as "Myspace for Millionaires", requesting the name of nightclubs in London where he didn't have to mix with the "trash" and "C-list wannabes".

Umunna's ability to "not come across as political" won the praise of the head of the Confederation of British Industry's employers' group, John Cridland, who assured reporters that he was "a guy with whom we can do business".

During the election campaign, Umunna insisted that Labour would be a "resolutely pro-business government". Afterwards, he insisted that Labour had to say it was not "afraid to say we want to help people make their first million". He declared, "We need a different, big-tent approach—one in which no one is too rich or poor to be part of our party," along with "drastic" political reform including a "massive" devolution of power to our cities, regions and towns.

Umunna has penned articles promoting "Blue Labour", the "Flag, faith and family" project pioneered by the academic Maurice Glasman, which stands for the dismantling of social provision utilising nationalism, anti-immigrant measures and a more corporatist relationship with the trade unions.

Trade union leaders had said they would block Umunna's leadership bid. Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite union, criticised those who claimed that Labour lost the general election because it

was too left-wing. He declared, “Labour didn’t lose votes by proposing to tax the wealthiest a bit more, or intervene in the housing and energy markets. It did lose support because of its muddled message on austerity.”

This is just hot air. In 2013, he enthused over Miliband’s adoption of Conservative “One Nation” rhetoric and that Labour was “the natural, historic, vehicle” for the working class. Shortly before the election, he repeated that the Labour Party “is our party. We built it, to serve us, the people” and that Miliband’s flagship pledges are “our policies.”

Miliband’s flagship pledges included the assertion that his party would be a more “sensible” advocate of austerity, and would implement a “budget responsibility lock”, clamp down on immigration, defend the European Union and maintain Britain’s role as a leading military power.

Reports suggest that McCluskey and other trade union leaders are contemplating backing the right-winger Andy Burnham, the shadow health secretary. Elected an MP in 2001, he was regarded as a Blairite technocrat, dedicated to the New Labour project as culture secretary, chief secretary to the Treasury and health secretary. In that role, he laid the groundwork for the privatisation of the UK’s first NHS hospital at Hinchingbrooke.

In the leadership contest following Gordon Brown’s resignation, Burnham came in a miserable fourth place after campaigning on the mantra of “aspirational socialism”. Today he says, “Our challenge is not to go left or right, to focus on one part of the country above another, but to rediscover the beating heart of Labour,” adding, “That is about the aspirations of everyone, speaking to them like we did in 1997.”

Yvette Cooper, who became an MP in 1997 and is forever tainted with the Blair-Brown years, wants Labour to “move beyond the old labels of left and right” and states, “Labour lost because we didn’t convince enough people in all parts of the country that we had the answers to match up with their ambitions.”

Cooper has been shadow home secretary for the past four years, during which time she attacked Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May from the right on border controls, immigration and extremism. In March 2013, she delivered a major speech, apologising that Labour had let in too many Eastern European workers and calling for immigration to be “properly

controlled.” She criticised the Tories for failing to reduce “net migration” and presiding over a system that “isn’t working at the moment and [it] has got significantly worse since the election.”

Liz Kendall, elected MP for Leicester West in 2010 and currently the shadow minister for care and older people, called for “a New New Labour.” She has said that in the NHS, “What matters is what works”, whether it be public or private.

Historian Tristram Hunt, MP and shadow education secretary, declared the party should take its time to carry out a “brutal post-mortem” about its “underlying philosophy and thinking”. Labour would only win if the party championed “aspirational” voters, he said.

According to the *New Statesman*, “the left of the party is also hoping to get a candidate on the ballot paper” in the form of Labour Party deputy chair Jon Trickett or former National Union of Mineworkers president and parliamentary Trade Union Group chair Ian Lavery. But that they will get nowhere is borne out by the decision of Socialist Campaign Group chair John McDonnell not to stand. He told the magazine, “I’ve done it enough times and been blocked from getting on the paper. How many times can I be hit by that?”

In 2010, when he stood as the candidate of the party’s putative left wing, McDonnell withdrew when only 16 out of a total of 258 Labour MPs were prepared to support him. The WSWS wrote then, “The simple reason for McDonnell’s defeat is that the left wing in the Labour Party is an insignificant and impotent rump” and that his “alternative programme” setting out “a radical new course to challenge the consensus” within the Labour Party were “anathema to the party for which he functions as a loyal political apologist”.



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