

As party leadership contest unfolds

# British Labour backs Conservatives' welfare cuts

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Labour's interim leader, Harriet Harman, has insisted that the party back austerity cuts unveiled by the Conservative government that will plunge millions deeper into poverty.

She was speaking after Conservative chancellor George Osborne outlined an additional £12 billion in welfare cuts in his "emergency" budget last week.

A cap on the total amount of welfare benefits payable to a family of £23,000 in London and £20,000 elsewhere is to be combined with deep cuts to tax credits—a supplement to those on low pay.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the measures will see the poorest 10 percent lose almost 7 percent of their net income, or around £800 a year, with the next poorest tenth losing even more—around £1,300 a year. Overall, many would be "significantly worse off" as a result of the changes, with the IFS estimating that 13 million will be poorer by an average of £260 per annum.

Speaking to BBC1's "Sunday Politics, Harman warned against "blanket opposition" to Conservative cuts. "We're not going to be voting against the Welfare Bill, we're not going to opposing the Household Benefit cap", she said.

Harman was backed by Labour's education spokesman, Tristram Hunt, who warned that Labour must not choose a "comfort blanket" or risk being "condemned to oblivion."

Their remarks were intended as a warning that the current contest for Labour leader must not be the occasion for the party to try and tap into widespread anti-austerity sentiment and tack left.

The leadership contest is the outcome of the massive losses sustained by Labour in the May 7 General Election. With Labour running as the advocate of more "sensible" austerity, millions rejected the party as simply another

variant of the Tories. It was all but wiped out in Scotland by the Scottish National Party running on a supposedly anti-austerity ticket, and lost support in many of its former strongholds in England, enabling the Tories to take office with just 36 percent of the vote.

Within hours of the result, then-leader Ed Miliband announced his resignation.

Liz Kendall was the first to throw her hat in the ring, winning the backing of 41 Labour MPs. Considered the Blairite favourite, the little-known MP was a contributor to Labour's "Purple Book", a right-wing tract in favour of further privatisation, cuts in welfare and law and order.

She was joined by Andy Burnham, who served under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. A supporter of the Iraq war, he held the positions of health secretary and education secretary, respectively, under their Labour administrations, and won the backing of 68 MPs. Yvette Cooper, who came in second to Burnham with 59 nominations, served under Gordon Brown's premiership in the Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions. Cooper and Burnham voted in favour of the Conservative-led coalition government's first household benefit cap in 2014.

With the competition clearly intended to rubber-stamp a further shift to the right by Labour, the party's minuscule group of "left" MPs—gathered around the Socialist Campaign Group/Left Platform—were finally stirred into action, forcing a last-minute application to the race by Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn is a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a columnist for the Stalinist *Morning Star*. An MP since 1983—the longest standing in the contest—he has made a profession of verbal opposition to Labour's most right-wing measures, while managing never to rock the boat.

Prior to the General Election, Corbyn signed up to a statement of the Left Platform consisting of proposals for a few vague reforms, such as a “wealth tax”, while stressing that “The Labour Party in Government is still the only means of securing a governing administration that can assist in moving towards that vision of a socialist society we aim for.”

With Labour suffering a rout, the left rump of the party felt obliged to make a show of standing a candidate.

Even so, Corbyn was put forward only after a series of better-known names refused—with Socialist Campaign Group leader John McDonnell telling the *New Statesman*, “I’ve done it enough times and been blocked from getting on the paper. How many times can I be hit by that?”

To get the required 25 nominations, Corbyn was dependent on convincing Labour’s right that his participation was necessary to give the contest a democratic gloss and prove that some faction of the party was at least nominally opposed to austerity.

To this end, in a last-minute appeal, Deputy Party Chairman Jon Trickett called on MPs to ensure Corbyn met the required nominations, arguing that his involvement would strengthen the party. “Colleagues may not agree with every part of Jeremy’s vision, but surely everybody recognises that a voice such as his should be heard,” he said.

Writing in the *Left Futures* blog, Jon Lansman urged that Labour could only survive if it is able to “strengthen the Labour movement away from Westminster” and “ensure it reaches out to communities and workplaces....

“Jeremy Corbyn may not win this election but if he gets on the ballot paper, he’ll widen the debate and change” the campaigns of the other candidates, he argued.

Only in June, the *Guardian* was commenting that Corbyn “looked like someone going through the motions, rather than launching a serious bid to become the next Labour leader.”

Indeed, having secured nomination, Corbyn has centred his campaign on trying to encourage his “fellow candidates” to support a “peoples’ quantitative easing.” Complaining that “This government has no strategy to move beyond the low-pay, low-skill, low-productivity economy,” he has called on Burnham, et al., to support a “new mandate” for the Bank of England “to upgrade our economy” and finance “brick-and-mortar” projects.

Despite its muted character, Corbyn’s nominal anti-austerity stance has won a broader appeal than anticipated. In the last weeks, he has emerged in second place in the nominations from constituency parties

(CLPs)—seen as indicative of wider support—with 28, just behind Burnham on 36 and ahead of Cooper on 22 and Kendall on just 4.

He has been helped by Labour’s new rules of “one member, one vote”, whereby anyone can pay £3 to join the party and is eligible to vote in the contest. *Left Futures* backer and *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones and pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Action and the Socialist Workers Party have used the change to support a Labour membership drive to build Corbyn’s support.

Last week, Unite—Britain’s largest trade union—threw its weight behind Corbyn. Burnham was considered a shoo-in for the nomination, but Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, who is bitterly hostile to any break with Labour, made clear that his executive’s stance was necessary if the party was to retain any credibility.

Speaking at the annual Durham Miners’ Gala last weekend, McCluskey announced that 50,000 Unite members had signed up to vote in the leadership ballot, warning that the parliamentary party needed to “start acting like an opposition.”

That brought forward the response of Harman and Hunt, along with an e-mail from the right-wing pressure group Labour First urging members to back anyone but Corbyn. Group secretary Luke Akehurst said, “We clearly do not share Jeremy Corbyn’s politics and believe these would destroy Labour’s chances of electability.”

Corbyn responded by insisting that Labour was a “very broad church,” capable of accommodating all views.

“I think what we need to say is, let’s not choose an arbitrary date to go into budget surplus,” he pleaded. “Let’s instead look at the issues of the question of poverty, the question of the waste that poverty brings about, and the need for economic expansion rather than an arbitrary date for budgetary surplus.”



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