

Britain: Labour leadership beset by talk of splits, coups and legal challenges

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Reports have revealed the extraordinary efforts by sections of the Labour Party to stop veteran “left” MP Jeremy Corbyn from winning the contest for party leader.

The contest was triggered by the resignation of Ed Miliband on May 8, following the party’s disastrous showing in the general election. Having embraced much of the Conservative Party’s austerity policies, Labour was all but wiped out in Scotland and lost support in England and Wales.

The election, the first held under the “one member, one vote” system, was intended to put the official imprimatur on Labour as the Tory Party Mark Two. Of the three candidates originally nominated by MPs, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper served in the previous Labour government and supported the Iraq war, while Liz Kendall’s pitch has been to insist that she is the one true heir of Tony Blair and New Labour.

To lend this right-wing contest an air of democratic legitimacy, several of Corbyn’s opponents backed his last-minute entry into the race. The trouncing of a leading light in the Socialist Campaign Group—which consists of just 10 Labour MPs—would only help their agenda, they reasoned.

Instead, Corbyn is leading in the polls and is tipped to win the race. His criticisms of government austerity and social inequality have seen him take the lead among both longstanding Labour members and the 300,000-plus people who have registered as supporters to vote in the race.

So hostile is the Labour leadership to any hint of opposition to the free market that some have sought to get the election called off or declared invalid, claiming Corbyn’s lead is the result of “hard-left” infiltration.

A team of Labour Party staff are currently attempting to weed out any “suspect” names amongst the 610,000

members and supporters registered to vote, including examining their social media accounts. This has been sickeningly designated as “Operation: Icepick,” in reference to the assassination of Leon Trotsky.

Such methods have so far turned up very little, frustrating calls for a halt to the contest. Nonetheless, it is reported that acting leader Harriet Harman did explore the possibility of “pausing” the election.

Harman held a meeting with “Labour officials and party lawyers three weeks ago to discuss concerns about the election contest,” the *Telegraph* reported, but was told that delaying the election “would not be legally possible.”

However, Harman has “instructed lawyers to ensure that the leadership election cannot be subject to a judicial review in the High Court after the result is declared on September 12.”

Having failed to stop the election through such means, efforts were made to encourage Burnham, Cooper and Kendall to withdraw from the contest. Pro-Blairite Dan Hodges, writing in the same newspaper, said that a party “grandee”, alleged to be New Labour architect Lord Peter Mandelson, had approached “all three camps with the suggestion that they all withdraw from the race, thereby invalidating the contest and forcing a halt to the election. This was briefly considered, but rejected, after Labour Party officials said that in those circumstances Corbyn would automatically be elected leader.”

Hodges claimed that a further last-minute attempt to get Cooper and Kendall—trailing badly in the polls—to withdraw, leaving the way clear for a Burnham victory, also failed.

The final result—to be announced on September 12—will be decided under the Alternative Vote system. If no candidate passes the 50 percent mark, the one

with the least votes is eliminated and his or her second preference vote redistributed among those remaining. If there is still no winner, the candidate in third is eliminated and his or her preferences redistributed.

While it is suggested that Kendall was amendable to standing down—she is certain for last place—Cooper, currently in third, rejected the plan. Despite the hysteria over a Corbyn victory, no agreement could be found between the self-serving cliques that constitute the Labour Party. Cooper’s camp denounced calls for her withdrawal as “sexist” and “old-style bullying from the boys” and instead went on the attack against Burnham, claiming that she is the only one really prepared to take on Corbyn.

This was after Burnham had appealed for leading Labour officials to stop “circling the wagons.” Presenting himself as the only “candidate who can unite our party,” he praised Corbyn for bringing “real energy” to the race.

Cooper’s attack on Burnham was the first time that a contender had publicly called on another to stand aside. But her provocative stance only increased concerns among party heads that Burnham supporters will place Corbyn as their second preference, increasing his chance of victory.

Since voting papers went out last week, a succession of former Labour leaders and prime ministers made public appeals to “Stop Corbyn”—from former prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to former leader Neil Kinnock.

On Sunday, Brown spoke in London to insist that opposition to spending cuts, inequality and war would leave Labour “unelectable.” His appearance was seen as a corrective to two interventions by Blair that had the effect of increasing support for Corbyn. That the Labour leadership considered Brown’s to be a counterweight to Blair’s contribution underscores just how alienated the party is from public sentiment. He is the man most closely associated with the “light-touch” regulation of the City of London that contributed to the 2008 financial crisis and who then helped engineer the massive bank bailout that followed using public funds.

With reports that almost 70 percent of the votes have been cast, on Thursday the *Guardian* revealed that a Labour committee had voted not to “undertake extra due diligence on voters” in the contest, citing notes “leaked” from the meeting. Party lawyers had sought

an “extra stage of verification in order to protect Labour against a legal challenge by unsuccessful candidates,” the paper reported.

The pro-Labour newspaper has made no secret of its hostility to Corbyn, and its report makes clear that some within the party are preparing a legal challenge should he win.

Meanwhile, the *Telegraph* cited “informal talks” about a challenge to Corbyn should he be elected as leader, including the triggering of another leadership contest. Hodges has suggested that the leadership is divided between those intending to withdraw all support from Corbyn, making his position untenable, and those who will stay “behind enemy lines and [keep] fighting,” constructing an “independent base” from which to “strike out against him when they judge the time is right.”

In the meantime, Corbyn is as supine as he has been throughout his 32 years on Labour’s backbenches—the very period during which the party has entirely shed any of its reformist baggage. He welcomed Burnham’s “inclusive tone” towards his campaign, promising that he would include the former minister in his cabinet should he win and declaring, “From day one, whoever wins must pull the party together.”

He has urged those in the parliamentary party “who don’t necessarily agree with everything I say” to recognise that the election has provided Labour with “the greatest opportunity” to “reconnect with people across this country, to bring people back who were seduced into voting Tory or [UK Independence Party] because they didn’t see us offering a real alternative.”



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