UK Labour leader Corbyn includes pro-austerity, pro-war Blairites in shadow cabinet

Chris Marsden
15 September 2015

Newly elected Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn named his shadow cabinet Monday, with the senior position, shadow chancellor of the exchequer (finance minister), going to John McDonnell, a fixture of the Labour Party "left" and chair of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs and the Labour Representation Committee.

McDonnell rose to prominence in the 1980s as the Greater London Council's chair of finance under its leader Ken Livingstone. He was previously considered a more high profile "left" than Corbyn and is the only MP to have defied the party whip more times than Corbyn.

After winning a landslide of nearly 60 percent in the contest for Labour Party leader, a vote that was an across-the-board repudiation of the right-wing leadership associated with former prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Corbyn could hardly have picked a Blairite for the number two position.

McDonnell's appointment is both a sop to those who voted for Corbyn, and a fig leaf to conceal the otherwise conventional and conformist character of the shadow cabinet, which comprises a majority of shadow ministers who opposed Corbyn in the leadership contest and oppose his positions on key policy issues, ranging from nuclear weapons to renationalisation.

The appointment has been denounced in the media, which have dredged up every left statement McDonnell has ever made, focusing on his stated desire to "ferment the overthrow of capitalism."

But as he takes his place in the top leadership, McDonnell is advancing only the mildest of economic palliatives. He states that neither he nor Corbyn are "deficit deniers." He wrote in the *Guardian*, in his role as Corbyn's campaign manager, "Let me make it absolutely clear that Labour under Jeremy Corbyn is committed to eliminating the deficit and creating an economy in which we live within our means."

To do this, he argues that public spending can be cut by ending "the subsidies paid to landlords milking the housing benefit system, to the £93 billion in subsidies to corporations, and to employers exploiting workers with low wages and leaving the rest of us to pick up the tab."

McDonnell has spoken of introducing regulation to separate "day-to-day and investment banking; legislation to replace short-term shareholder value with long-term sustainable economic and social responsibilities as the prime objective of companies; radical reform of the failed auditing regime; the extension of a wider range of forms of company and enterprise ownership and control including public, co-operative and stakeholder ownership; and the introduction of a financial transactions tax to fund the rebalancing of our economy towards production and manufacturing."

The only concrete policy he has laid out to overcome the impact of austerity is the introduction of a £10 minimum wage and restoration of tax credits for working families.

None of this rises to the heights of official Labour policy during much of the party's history up to the 1980s, or even McDonnell's own previous statements. More importantly, it in no way addresses the monumental scale of the social and economic disaster created by capitalism in Britain and internationally.

To reverse the rightward trajectory of British politics, and more so the Thatcherisation of social life that proceeded apace under Blair and New Labour, in which a criminal financial oligarchy looted the economy at the expense of millions of working people, demands nothing less than the mobilisation of the entire working class against the ruling class and all its political servants. Only in this way can the massive redistribution of wealth and the reorganisation of economic life that is required to end poverty be realised in the face of the bitter opposition of the ruling elite this would meet.

© World Socialist Web Site

Instead, Corbyn is trying to square his pledge to put an end to austerity with a commitment to maintain unity in the Labour Party.

To this end, he has chosen a shadow cabinet that includes those who are bitterly hostile to the policy shifts he publicly advocates. Innumerable careerists who have loyally backed the party's right-wing policies either maintain a leadership role or have been allotted a new one.

Many of the shadow cabinet backed Andy Burnham against Corbyn for party leader and Burnham himself was given the plum role of shadow home secretary.

Corbyn retained Hilary Benn as shadow foreign secretary and appointed Maria Eagle as shadow secretary of state for defence. Benn and Eagle have supported every UK military operation since the Iraq war, including most recently supporting military airstrikes in Syria, and are in favour of maintaining a British nuclear capability. Both support continued British membership of the European Union, despite its role as the imposer of austerity measures in Greece and throughout the continent.

Former Shadow Culture Secretary Chris Bryant was reported by Sky News' Darren McCaffrey as having been initially offered the defence portfolio. "Jeremy was up for it," he quoted overhearing former chief whip Rosie Winterton say. But Bryant responded to the invite by insisting on "a 30-minute conversation about what would happen if we had to invade Russia." He later told the press, "I worry that we have not got enough proper armed forces in this country to be able to defend ourselves … I profoundly disagree with [Corbyn]... on NATO, Russia and things like that."

Bryant was nevertheless appointed by Corbyn as shadow leader in the House of Commons.

Others allotted significant places in the shadow cabinet include Lord Falconer, the lord chancellor and secretary of state for constitutional affairs under Blair and his former flatmate, and Luciana Berger as shadow minister for mental health.

Corbyn would have appointed more Blairites but for their decision to go into open opposition. Those who refused to serve under Corbyn include former Shadow Health Minister Jamie Reed, former Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt, former Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions Rachel Reeves, former Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government Emma Reynolds, former Shadow Chancellor Chris Leslie, and the other two of Corbyn's leadership rivals, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall.

Hunt now leads a newly formed group of right-wing MPs, Common Good, which has been dubbed "The Resistance," alongside former Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Ummuna, whom Corbyn also made an effort to include in his cabinet. Ummuna said that he could not accept a position because Corbyn had refused to rule out campaigning for Britain to leave the EU in the referendum promised by Prime Minister David Cameron. But yesterday, Hilary Benn insisted that Labour under Corbyn was ruling out a campaign for a vote to quit the EU "under all circumstances."

On the basis of crude parliamentary arithmetic, Corbyn and his supporters will argue that he could do little else but make an appeal across the party. His actual base in the party machinery is indeed extraordinarily narrow. Only 15 Labour MPs out of 232 backed his candidacy on the basis of political agreement, while fewer than 500 of 6,000 Labour councillors lent their support.

More fundamentally, however, Corbyn's impotent choices are shaped by his goal of preserving party unity, which is already being placed above his commitment to shift Labour away from its pro-austerity, pro-business and militarist agenda.

If Corbyn was serious about waging a politial struggle aganst "New Labour," he would have declared war on its architects and supporters, formed a cabinet on that basis, and prepared a struggle to boot the right wing out of the party. Instead, he has made all those who voted for him hostages to a venal clique of right-wingers who will sabotage every anti-austerity initiative and do all in their power to defend the super-rich.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site