

Seven Blairite MPs resign from UK Labour Party

Robert Stevens, Laura Tiernan**19 February 2019**

On Monday, seven right-wing MPs resigned from the Labour Party at a press conference held in London's County Hall at Westminster.

Chuka Umunna, Luciana Berger, Mike Gapes, Chris Leslie, Ann Coffey, Angela Smith and Gavin Shuker announced they would sit as independents in Parliament and be known as The Independent Group (IG). Their website was already up and running.

The split heralds a fundamental realignment in politics that has been long in the making. In their political declaration all seven—dyed in the wool representatives of the Blairite pro-European Union remain faction of the ruling elite—declared their opposition to the “hard left” policies of party leader Jeremy Corbyn on Brexit and again utilised confected claims that Corbyn is a supporter of anti-Semitism.

Berger has been a central figure in the anti-Semitism witch-hunt. She has spent months denouncing Corbyn, declaring that the party under him was “institutionally anti-Semitic”—an assertion she repeated at yesterday’s press conference.

Outlining what Berger described were their “principles and values,” the MPs each made a short presentation, emphasising their supposed commitment to Labour traditions. These amounted to a hymn of praise to Blairism and the ability of a section of the working class to join the upper middle class by dint of individual effort and hard work.

Beyond Umunna and possibly Berger, no one beyond their immediate constituencies would know who these nonentities were.

Chris Leslie, MP for Nottingham East, condemned Corbyn’s “outdated ideology” that was “hostile to business ... to them the world divides between oppressor and oppressed enemies.”

Three of the MPs delivered cringeworthy accounts of their working-class backgrounds that could have been

written by Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher’s speech writers.

“For my parents,” said Smith, “working class pride was not about enjoying poverty and wearing it as a badge of honour. It was about self-respect and believing we could do better. ... Most people are like my parents, they do not want to be patronised by left-wing intellectuals who think that being poor and working class constitutes a state of grace.”

Gapes’ own farcical speech moved from “a council house in Chigwell Essex” to Cambridge University, via a brief period volunteering as a teacher in Swaziland, which apparently taught him “the importance of fighting racism, poverty and injustice.” A lifelong Labour bureaucrat who spent 15 years working at the party’s national headquarters, Gapes told the press he had fond memories of “fighting the Trotskyists” in the 1970s and ’80s.

Umunna played on identity politics, telling the press conference he was “one quarter Irish, one quarter English and one-half Nigerian.” His Nigerian father had “no money” when he arrived but became a “successful entrepreneur” showing “Britain at its best.”

In the Group’s “Statement of Independence,” foreign policy and “national security” concerns were at the forefront: “Labour now pursues policies that would weaken our national security; accepts the narratives of states hostile to our country; has failed to take a lead in addressing the challenge of Brexit and to provide a strong and coherent alternative to the Conservatives’ approach; is passive in circumstances of international humanitarian distress; is hostile to businesses large and small; and threatens to destabilise the British economy in pursuit of ideological objectives.”

The UK’s pivotal role in NATO would be preserved and relations with the European Union (EU) maintained: “We believe in maintaining strong alliances with our closest European and international allies on trade,

regulation, defence, security and counterterrorism.”

With the Tories committed to Brexit and Corbyn’s leadership (at this stage) denying backing for a second referendum or “People’s Vote,” yesterday’s split represents the emergence of a right-wing cross-party, pro-EU, pro-NATO militarist formation.

The IG statement concluded with a call for likeminded Tories and Liberal Democrats to follow suit: “Sitting as the Independent Group of MPs we appeal to colleagues from all parties to consider the best interests of the country above short-term party-political considerations and choose to do likewise.”

According to a report in yesterday’s *Telegraph*, if May pursues a no-deal Brexit, “a Tory minister and four Conservative backbenchers appear poised to defect to the new Independent Group.” The newspaper’s political editor tweeted: “PM was warned by Amber Rudd, David Gauke, Greg Clark & David Mundell she faces resignation of 22 ministers & members of Govt over no-deal Brexit ... In a meeting in No. 10 they urged her to publicly commit to extending [Article 50] in the event a deal cannot be reached.”

The *Guardian* reported that Scottish Liberal Democrat Christine Jardine has “refused to rule out a future merger between the Lib Dems and the new breakaway group of former Labour MPs.”

Yesterday’s desertions will escalate the demand of the Blairite right that Corbyn toes the line on Brexit—just as he has on every other policy issue—and instructs his rank-and-file followers to abandon all talk of deselecting right-wing MPs, making sure that no other MPs feel “compelled” to follow the seven renegades.

Corbyn was elected party leader in 2015, after annihilating his Blairite opponents with the backing of hundreds of thousands of Labour members who supported his professed opposition to austerity, inequality and war. In 2016, 172 Labour MPs—the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party—backed a no-confidence motion in Corbyn over Brexit.

This political vipers’ nest is now lashing out with renewed confidence thanks to Corbyn’s self-abasement. It is his constant appeasement of the right that has allowed the seven MPs to walk out instead of being booted out by Labour’s members.

Yesterday’s PLP meeting erupted in applause after Blairite MP Louise Elman told colleagues that unless Labour changed “we are not fit to govern.” Ian Austin MP, another Blairite, warned, “I can see more people taking the same course of action.” Corbyn’s deputy-

leader Tom Watson spoke for them all, telling the party room, “I would like to place on record my complete respect for Luciana and my understanding of the decision to which she has been driven.” Labour had been “slow to acknowledge we had a problem and even slower to deal with it.”

Watson added, “If someone like Luciana no longer believes there is a home for her in the Labour Party then many other colleagues will be asking themselves how they can stay.”

From thousands of Labour Party members and supporters, the message on social media was clear: good riddance to bad rubbish. Labour’s right-wing MPs are hated. But from Corbyn and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell came yet more pathetic appeals for unity.

On Sunday, with everyone aware a split was being finalised, McDonnell was interviewed on the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” and was still pleading with the Blairites not to go.

Their fawning continued Monday after the seven had decamped, with Corbyn declaring: “I am disappointed that these MPs have felt unable to continue to work together for the Labour policies that inspired millions at the last election ...”

McDonnell added, “I’m disappointed they’ve left because I wanted them to stay and work with us to implement the [2017 general election] manifesto we all stood upon ... we should be working together for the long-term interest of the country so I’m disappointed.”

He issued a video, begging, “For our country’s sake, let’s pull together.”

The Momentum group headed by Jon Lansman—falsely presented as a grassroots organisation—dutifully issued its own calls for party unity.



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