

After four years of Corbyn, Blairite Sir Keir Starmer frontrunner in UK Labour leadership contest

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The main contenders to succeed Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn have been announced, with a field dominated by the Blairite right-wing.

Corbyn announced he would stand down as party leader following Labour's landslide defeat in the December 12 general election, losing 59 seats to Boris Johnson's Conservatives.

On Monday evening, Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) agreed that nominations from MPs would begin the following day, with the overall ballot to be closed on April 2 and Corbyn's successor revealed April 4.

The NEC stipulated that MPs standing must win the backing of 22 MPs or MEPs and at least 5 percent of constituency parties (33) or three affiliated bodies—two of which must be trade unions.

Corbyn was elected Labour leader promising an end to the pro-business, pro-war Blairite era, with the backing of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters in 2015. Four years on, the leadership contest makes clear that he did not change the character of this right-wing, pro-imperialist party one iota.

Just one of the six of candidates for leader—Rebecca Long-Bailey—is even recognised as a supporter of Corbyn. Since the election, his supporters—there are only around 20 MPs who identify themselves as part of Labour's "left"—have been desperately seeking agreement on who should be the Corbynite "continuity" candidate.

Two MPs were considered, Ian Lavery, the former National Union of Mineworkers leader, and Long-Bailey, the MP for the northern seat of Salford and Eccles. After the election, shadow cancellow John McDonnell declared his own intention to leave the shadow cabinet and named Long-Bailey as his favoured candidate to preserve Corbyn's political legacy.

But even with the threshold lowered by the Corbynites so that MPs standing for the leadership now require the backing of just 10 percent of MPs (down from the previous 15 percent), it was feared that two "left" candidates may not be able to secure enough support to get on the ballot. In the end, it was agreed that Long-Bailey would stand alone.

Long-Bailey is one of six candidates, with Corbyn's shadow Brexit secretary, Sir Keir Starmer, the clear favourite among MPs, followed by a gaggle of other right-wingers made up of Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry; Clive Lewis, the shadow minister for sustainable economics; and backbenchers Lisa Nandy

and Jess Phillips.

Standing for the deputy position are Angela Rayner, the shadow education secretary; Richard Burgon, the shadow justice secretary; Dawn Butler, the shadow minister for women and equalities; Khalid Mahmood, the shadow Europe minister; Ian Murray and Rosena Allin-Khan.

Of the entire list of 12 standing for leader and deputy, only four were Corbyn backers—Long-Bailey, Rayner, Burgon and Butler.

Long-Bailey has no popular standing in the party, having previously been a commercial lawyer and only joining Labour "around 2010" before being elected an MP in a safe seat five years ago. She owes her position to Corbyn's inner circle, who quickly elevated her into the shadow cabinet.

Long-Bailey's political record, though limited, at least proves there are no essential differences between the Corbynite and Blairite factions of the Labour party. The pattern was set in an interview in May 2015, a few weeks before being elected, with independent local newspaper, the *Salford Star*.

Asked about the around £100 million in cuts that had been imposed by Labour-run Salford council, including 1,200 job losses, Long-Bailey said, "We understand that we are going to have to deal with the economy in the state we find it on May 7 [general election day]. And to be credible we have to show what we can do ..."

Everyone had to wait until Labour got into office and was able to "clamp down on tax avoidance," she said.

Under Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband, from 2008 Labour councils pushed through tens of billions in cuts in every major urban area. After Corbyn took over from Miliband, he and McDonnell sent a letter in December 2015 to all Labour councils instructing them to continue setting a "legal budget" and to "take all actions necessary to bring the budget back into balance."

In the first two years after Long-Bailey became Salford's MP, £55 million in cuts were imposed. For 2019/20, the council is slashing another £13 million from services it provides.

Long-Bailey has staked her leadership bid on nationalist jingoism and appeasement towards the Blairites. When announcing in the *Guardian* that she was considering standing, Long-Bailey called for the party to respond to the election defeat, with particular reference to the loss of votes over Labour's Brexit policy, by espousing a form of "progressive patriotism."

Asked on BBC's "Today" programme if she would authorise a nuclear strike as prime minister, she replied, "If you have a deterrent you have to be prepared to use it. ... And of course, any country that was considering pushing the nuclear button needed to realise that we were facing nuclear annihilation right across the whole world. But, yes, a leader would need to be prepared to engage in that if they were going to use the nuclear deterrent going forward."

Long-Bailey declared last year that Labour MP of 44 years standing, Chris Williamson, should not be allowed back in the party. A lifelong anti-racist and leading Corbyn backer, Williamson was forced out of the party by the Blairites after being falsely accused of anti-Semitism without his leader lifting a finger in his defence.

Speaking on "Today," Long-Bailey went further still in endorsing the Blairites witch-hunt campaign, stating, "We weren't strong enough on anti-Semitism and I've been quite clear about that before ... Ultimately, he [Corbyn] has to take responsibility as the leader of the party."

She insisted that Labour must be bound by whatever recommendations are made by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the body currently investigating allegations of anti-Semitism in Labour after being prompted by the Zionist Jewish Labour Movement. The EHRC can institute legal proceedings which could end in criminal proceedings against the Labour Party and its leading officials, including Corbyn.

Long-Bailey and her running mate, Angela Rayner, have both rejected their designation as "Corbyn continuity" candidates. Rayner told Rupert Murdoch's *Sky News*, "We are the Labour party. We are not left, right-wings of the Labour Party. We've got to get away from these divisions, and demarcation lines ... We've got to come together now and heal those divisions."

"[T]he first thing is to make sure we're the broadest church as possible and I think I've proven that in my [four] years in Parliament and in my years in the movement."

She told the *Guardian*, "I don't consider myself to be of one political persuasion or another. I'm not a Blairite, I'm not a Corbynite, I'm not a Brownite."

Long-Bailey and Rayner are the continuity candidates inasmuch as Corbyn's entire period as leader was centred on appeasing the right and stressing his own commitment to "party unity."

This is epitomised by the fact that the two most prominent Blairite challengers are Corbyn's Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer and his Shadow Foreign Minister Emily Thornberry.

Starmer, a leading QC, was Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) from 2010-2013 and in that role was head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). As DPP, he played a critical role in the persecution and incarceration of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange after his arrest in London in 2010, when Sweden first sought his extradition on false sexual allegations.

The CPS opposed a decision by a lower court to release Assange on bail and appealed to the High Court. Starmer said, "The general position and the nature of the arrangement is absolutely clear. The Crown Prosecution Service acts here as agents of the government seeking extradition, in this case the Swedish government. These proceedings are brought as agents of the Swedish government."

Within a year of leaving his post as DPP, for which he was knighted, Starmer was chosen to be a Labour MP.

Thornberry, also a lawyer, holds the title of Lady Nugee. As shadow foreign secretary, she played a pivotal role in insisting that Corbyn, as party leader, drop all opposition to the renewal of the UK nuclear weapons programme and for Labour to back NATO and commit to the 2 percent of GDP target for military spending.

Clive Lewis, portrayed as of the "soft left," is an infantry officer graduate from the elite Sandhurst Military Academy, who served in Afghanistan in 2009. As Corbyn's shadow defence secretary he supported Trident renewal and pledged that a Labour government would fulfil its commitments to NATO, including those under Article 5 pledging to go to war in defence of another NATO ally.

In 2016, Lisa Nandy appeared at a conference of the Blue Labour group alongside a host of right-wingers including its founder, Labour peer Maurice Glasman.

Blue Labour criticises Blairism from the right, railing against how a supposed belief in "internationalism" has blinded the party to the "legitimate" fears of immigration undermining wages and straining social provisions and urging an agenda based on advocating for "family, faith, and flag."

Jess Phillips, who likes nothing more than to talk about Jess Phillips, played a leading role in the Blairites efforts to remove Corbyn as Labour leader. Her political style is epitomised by her statement to the *Guardian* in December 2015, just three months after Corbyn was elected, that she had told him "and his staff": "The day that ... you are hurting us more than you are helping us, I won't knife you in the back, I'll knife you in the front'." In another altercation, she told Corbyn's Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott to "f*** off."

Such is Corbyn's political legacy in preserving the Blairites' domination of the Parliamentary Labour Party that Starmer was the first candidate to secure the necessary nominations, including the backing of a major union, Unison. By Wednesday, Starmer had 41 nominations from MPs and Members of the European Parliament. This was more than double that of Long-Bailey who was trailing with 17 nominations. Phillips had 16 and Nandy 12.



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