

## ELECTION ANALYSIS

## LIVINGSTONE

## A long march to the right

THE underlying assumption behind Ken Livingstone's campaign for re-election as London's mayor was that the votes of the left were in the bag, and that his key job was to capture the votes of the right.

The fact that Livingstone used his last election leaflet to talk up his tough stance on crime—while attacking Tory Boris Johnson for not supporting mandatory five-year jail sentences for anyone caught carrying an illegal firearm—was a capitulation to a right wing agenda.

This was a tragedy for the man who, as the head of the Greater London Council in the 1980s and subsequently as a Labour MP, was once the embodiment of the radical left for many thousands of people.

But Livingstone's march rightwards has been a long process.

Barred by a rigged selection process from standing as the Labour candidate for London mayor in 2000, he stood as an independent and thrashed both his official Labour and Tory rivals.

He regularly used his position to speak out against the invasion of Iraq and to combat racism.

In 2004 Tony Blair readmitted Livingstone to Labour and he was re-elected as mayor on a Labour ticket—but with a much reduced majority.

Many who had previously voted for Livingstone were stunned that he returned to Labour at precisely the time when opposition to the war in Iraq was at its height.

## Dwindling

Livingstone's strategy was to try to use his position and policies to shift Labour leftwards, but it soon became clear that association with New Labour was damaging him.

Instead of taking Labour leftwards, New Labour started dragging Livingstone rightwards.

On the questions of war and racism Livingstone rarely wavered, but he increasingly positioned himself as a champion of the City, the financial centre of London.

While millions of Londoners faced an acute housing crisis, Livingstone encouraged new office blocks and luxury developments.

On crime and anti-social behaviour, the mayor's rhetoric began to resemble that of the home office.

And on transport, a key question in the capital city, Livingstone presided over some of the highest bus, train and tube fares of any European city, and used his position to attack the London Underground workers' RMT union.

During this year's election it became clear that the enthusiasm that millions in London previously had for Livingstone—when they thought he would be a bulwark against New Labour policies—was dying.

In the end it was Livingstone's association with the government and its assault on working people that broke both him and those on the left in London who attached themselves so closely to him.

Yuri Prasad



Jubilant from Labour supporters in 1997 as Labour is elected



Labour members console each other after last week's election

# Eleven years on—how hope turned to despair

by SIMON BASKETTER

THE APPALLING election results last week have sparked a refreshing, if slightly panicked, debate inside the Labour Party.

While Gordon Brown mumbled about listening, and cabinet ministers expressed their loyalty and warned of the futility of turning left, others in the party reflected the anger and disillusionment of the members and voters.

The leftish Labour grouping Compass wrote, "New Labour is now dead."

"The strategy that saw the party continually triangulate interests and concerns, tacking endlessly to the right,

doing what the Tories would do, only doing it first, fixating on a mythical middle England and denying that free market policies are having a damaging effect on society is now finished."

## Hand-wringing

In a damning critique, Labour MP Jon Cruddas said, "Our people are abandoning us, we're sinking fast and no amount of hand-wringing and promises of 'listening and learning' from election night will change that."

"The New Labour attitude that you can kick the workers from pillar to post because 'they've got nowhere else to

go' has reached its ludicrous conclusion."

Left wing MP John McDonnell said, "After the worst results in 40 years it is intellectually unsustainable for ministers to simply tell the electorate that the government is listening."

"Prevarication will only lead to a Tory government. What people want is decisive action to change the policies immediately."

Unfortunately, there is an underlying theme to some of the critique which accepts elements of New Labour spin.

For instance Cruddas also said, "There are things we can learn from Boris Johnson and

from David Cameron as well. They seem to be more emotionally literate than us."

"Boris Johnson is connecting with people emotionally and it's not just because of the celebrity."

Johnson, he said, offered voters "a sense of optimism".

This reflects mistaken assumptions about why New Labour was elected in the first place.

The initial success of New Labour at the polls was not based on a successful appeal to the middle class, but rather on ordinary people's opposition to the right.

So from the early 1990s people joined Labour and voted for

them, not so much as a positive affirmation of New Labour's rightwards drift but as a reflection of a deep desire to dump the Tories.

## Declining

That's why people were joining Labour precisely up to the 1997 election.

Its membership and vote have been declining dramatically ever since.

Labour now begins from a very low base.

It had been lucky up to now as the collapse of the Conservative Party enabled it to hold parliamentary majorities on a declining vote.

This no longer holds true.

## Nature of Labour is at root of crisis

EVERY PREVIOUS Labour government has provoked a major rebellion from the left after it betrayed the hopes that had led to its election.

The collapse of Ramsay MacDonald's government in 1931 pushed the entire Labour Party to the left. It also strengthened the forces, inside and outside the party, that were demanding that the leadership go further to the left.

Before it was electorally defeated in 1951, the post-war Labour government descended into crisis.

Once Labour was in opposition, the left developed into a mass movement, fighting for the party leadership. It took the full weight of the trade union bureaucracy to beat it back.

The same pattern repeated itself with the two Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s.

The right wing policies pursued by the 1974-79 Labour government provoked a massive left wing rebellion after Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election victory.

Tony Benn became

champion of the Labour left, though he was eventually isolated.

The basic power set-up of the Labour Party—the ruling alliance between the parliamentary leadership and the trade union bureaucracy—ensured that the left always lost. The process of betrayal, rebellion and eventual defeat became a mechanism through which the party renewed itself.

## Generations

Pressure from the left helped the party to keep up a connection with its working class base. The Labour left movements also helped to draw fresh generations of activists into the party.

Despite the fact that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's governments have been the most right wing so far, this process has not yet been repeated.

This is not because there are no moves to the left. But they have bypassed Labour.

A handful of Labour MPs have campaigned with principle. But their efforts haven't been accompanied by

a renewal of the left's base inside the party.

This is partially about how the Labour Party has been stopped from making decisions. But the membership has also changed. Disillusioned activists have dropped out, while the suits and careerists have stayed.

The courting of the rich to back the party has done more than create the odd funding scandal—the rich don't go on the knocker at election time.

Although Labour has never been an instrument of radical change, its hold on the trade unions leaders is strong. But the support of union members is begrudging at best.

The electoral system, a century of Labour voting, the imbalance of media coverage and other factors make it very difficult for new parties to establish themselves electorally.

But unless there is a credible force to the left, people who hate the war and who believe in public services, not private profit, will face a rotten choice.

They can grudgingly vote Labour—or not vote at all.

## The failed strategy of reclaiming Labour

THE ALTERNATIVE of "reclaiming" Labour has proved a dead end.

First the left rested its hopes on an influx of new members who would throw out the right and reinstall "real" Labour policies.

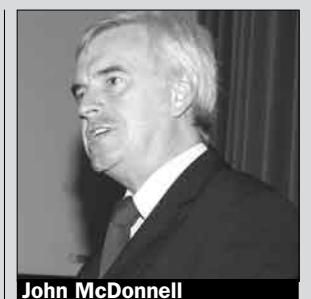
When that didn't happen it was claimed that the trade union members would force their delegates and representatives at Labour conference to shift the party's policy leftwards.

Next it became a matter of hoping that a group of left union leaders would do it from above.

And finally the hope was that Gordon Brown would be better than Tony Blair.

All have proved false. The crisis of New Labour is deep-seated and organic, not just some passing fad.

It is of course possible that Brown will be forced to make some concessions to the left if strikes and protests grow.



John McDonnell

A rise in class struggle would see many New Labour leaders "rediscovering" an interest in more radical rhetoric.

But what we need now is an honest debate about how we can create an alternative for ordinary people.

Socialists outside the Labour Party very much want to work with people inside the party in joint activity wherever possible.

But the critical arena of struggle lies outside Labour.

And loyalty to Labour will hold that project back.