

# Come Back Ken, All is Forgiven

ON 16 December the Labour Party National Executive Committee agreed by 25 votes to 2 to begin the process of readmitting Ken Livingstone to the party, so that he can stand as the Labour candidate for London mayor in June 2004. At the time of writing, he still has to be interviewed by an NEC-appointed panel, and there is the theoretical possibility that John Prescott, who has made no secret of his bitter opposition to Ken's return, might yet throw a spanner in the works. But it seems odds on that by 6 January Livingstone will once again be a member of the Labour Party.

Unlike last year, when the Blairites organised frantically to prevent the NEC agreeing to Livingstone's readmission, the 16 December decision was taken at the direct instigation of Blair himself, and against the well-advertised opposition of senior figures in the party – not only Prescott but also Gordon Brown, Charles Clarke and Neil Kinnock. The reasoning behind Blair's eagerness to reinstate the man he predicted would prove "a disaster" as London mayor has been identified by numerous commentators. After the Brent East by-election it was clear that the Labour Party faced humiliation in next June's elections to the Greater London Authority. Not only was the party's candidate Nicky Gavron heading for a probable fourth place in the mayoral contest, but there was the real possibility of the Tories emerging as the largest group on the London Assembly, giving them a big boost in the run-up to the next general election.

Blair's "place in history", with which Clare Short claims he is obsessed, hinges largely on his success in reversing years of general election defeats for Labour and driving a divided and impotent Tory Party to the margins of British politics. Yet, after Brent East, he confronted the real prospect of ending his political career by presiding over a Tory revival and losing his chance of a cherished third term.

The irony is that in order to extricate himself from this predicament Blair should be forced to turn to Livingstone. From the start, the New Labour project has been based on the assertion that the only way the party can win electoral support is by repudiating the traditions of Old Labour and of the left in particular, shifting the party's programme sharply to the right and seizing the political ground usually occupied by the Tories. Livingstone, as the symbolic figure of the '80s Labour left, represents everything that was supposed to make the party unelectable. Hence Blair's almost hysterical reaction to the idea of Livingstone being selected as Labour's mayoral candidate in 2000. His pragmatic decision to take advantage of Livingstone's broad-based political popularity amounts to a tacit admission that Ken has completely demolished the ideological justification for New Labour.

David Blunkett, who has supported his leader on the issue of Livingstone's readmission, has commented that Ken is no longer the left-wing firebrand he was twenty years ago. Blunkett, who

has moved so far to the right since the days of the "socialist republic of South Yorkshire" that he can now allow Michael Howard to appear by comparison as a sensitive liberal on asylum rights, might be considered something of an expert on repudiating one's leftist past. However, he profoundly misunderstands the situation if he see a fellow renegade in Livingstone.

Ken's commitment to equality and diversity – exemplified by the Respect Festival and the London Partnerships Register – represents a self-evident political continuity with the GLC of the early '80s. Furthermore, his long running legal battle to prevent the imposition of the Public Private Partnership on the London Underground, and his uncompromising opposition both to the Iraq war and to George Bush's recent state visit, illustrate the gulf that separates Livingstone's politics from those of the Blair government. He has pursued a clear alternative agenda to the New Labour programme of privatisation, marketisation and imperialist warmongering, and it is obvious which the electorate prefers.

Although the mayor has very limited powers, he has used these to the maximum effect. Deprived of control of the Tube until last July, he has concentrated on achieving a dramatic improvement in bus services. This has been made possible by the introduction of the congestion charge, which has proved – contrary to the hopes of his enemies and the fears of some of his supporters, including this writer – both successful and popular. In short, Ken has shown that the way for the left to demonstrate that it is a credible political force is not by propagandist attacks on Blair but by winning office and using it to implement a progressive programme.

Although elected as an independent in 2000, Livingstone has pursued a firm orientation towards the broad labour movement, working closely with the London trade unions and with the majority of the Labour Group on the London Assembly. Unlike George Galloway, who has utilised his own expulsion for the sectarian and entirely futile purpose of launching a new socialist alternative to Labour, Livingstone's independent candidacy was always conceived as a tactical detour within an overall strategy of conducting a political struggle within the Labour Party itself. This tactic now looks like paying off brilliantly.

Livingstone's reinstatement has the potential not only to defeat the Tories and Lib Dems in London next June but also to revitalise the Labour Party, in the capital and even nationally, by providing a focus for a radical alternative to New Labour. Those members who have resigned, or just let their membership lapse, demoralised by the apparently unbreakable Blairite stranglehold on the party, will hopefully now be reactivated. In future years, when it comes to assessing politicians' places in history, Ken's triumphant comeback may be seen as a turning point in the fight to reclaim the Labour Party.

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