

# Britain: Brown wins without a contest — Where now for the Labour left?

Wednesday 30 May 2007, by [Socialist Resistance \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2007).

We can all say good riddance to Tony Blair. It was fitting that it was the war that got him in the end. However he tried he could never shake off the lies and bloodshed involved.

Gordon Brown will now be crowned Labour leader and then Prime Minister on June 27. There was never going to be a Blairite challenge to Brown (despite massive media speculation) short of some dramatic and unforeseen development, even if some of the Blairites did keep their options open. There is nothing between them other than personal ambition and Brown was in an unassailable position. It's goodbye Blair, but Blairism continues.

The central issue for the left, however, is the failure of the Labour left to raise a challenge the first time since 1931. Despite campaigning tirelessly up and down the country for months John McDonnell fell well short of the 45 nominations he needed from Labour MPs to stand. Michael Meacher's hopeless 'centre left' candidacy collapsed with even less, and most of those would not transfer to McDonnell.

It is a defeat of historic proportions. Failure to achieve a contest - after ten years of New Labour's policies its war-drive, neo-liberal agenda, and sleaze is a disaster. It means that the most right-wing and treacherous Labour leader since Ramsay MacDonald has been able to replace himself in his own image without a contest. Compare this with the time when Tony Benn missed the deputy leadership by a mere 0.5%. The change is staggering.

Brown won a clunking 318 nominations, including the support of several soft left MPs such as Bob Marshall-Andrews and John Cruddas who nominated Brown. It was not even that MPs had to agree with everything John McDonnell said in order to nominate him. They could have endorsed him to ensure a political debate and a democratic process.

It was a huge vote of confidence from Labour MPs which will strengthen Brown's neo-liberal agenda and undermine potential opposition to his future actions.

Predictably the Labour left are in denial. The *Labour Left Briefing* editorial says: "Socialists outside the party will be quick to claim that this is the end of the Labour left. We beg to differ". John McDonnell says: "We're now in a stronger position to fight for socialist policies than we have been for years". Geoff Martin says that the campaign has: "dug a solid foundation for a revitalised left that we can build on in the future". This is whistling in the wind.

Geoff Martin argues that the problem was amongst Labour MPs, not party members. Every winnable seat which comes up for selection has a Blairite parachuted in, he says. Alan Simpson argues that the left was robbed of a contest by the threshold of 45 nominating MPs. He describes it as a "coup".

Of course Blair has been promoting Blairite MPs, and, of course, the election rules were not drawn up to help the left. But these things do not explain Brown 318, McDonnell 27. The fact is a strong grass roots left in the party would have resulted in more nominations. The left was not even a factor

MPs had to take into account when they decided who to nominate. There was a no price they had to pay for nominating Brown rather than McDonnell. On the Labour Party NEC, when a motion was moved to reduce the required number of nominations it got only two votes.

The problem is not just amongst MPs. In fact, after the MPs, it is inside the Labour party, amongst its declining membership, where the victory of new Labour has been most complete. Far more complete than amongst the electoral base of the Labour Party much of which has been well to the left of Labour for a long time.

The fact is, the major radicalisations of the past 10 years from Seattle to the mass anti-war movement have found no detectable echo inside the Labour Party, all the development have been outside.

Of course Brown was lying when he said he would have welcomed a contest. He would have welcomed nothing of the sort. McDonnell could have done well in the unions, where ballots were held, and the last thing he wanted for the next six weeks was a continuous pressure from the left. That is why Brown ensured John McDonnell never got on the ballot paper. His claim that his principles stopped him giving the green light to some McDonnell nominations is nonsense.

McDonnell's defeat throws the Labour left into serious crisis. No spin can hide it. The project of reclaiming the Labour or the idea that the Labour Party is a fruitful arena for the left to work in have been dealt a devastating blow.

The only practical proposal John McDonnell makes as a way forward after all this is a call for people to attend the Labour Representation Committee conference in October. But what is it going to talk about? It is unlikely to conclude, as the original LRC did at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the trade unions and the working class needed independent labour representation in the form of a new political party. It is more likely to say, "carry on regardless".

And what happened to the awkward squad? Many of them have become the Gordon Brown squad! John McDonnell failed to win the support of any major union for his campaign. McDonnell got the support of some smaller unions mostly outside of the Labour Party. But neither Derek Simpson, Tony Woodley, Dave Prentis or any of the general secretaries of the big unions were prepared to back him. They rushed to support Brown - despite the pay freeze, pensions crisis, and job losses he has imposed on them. They would rather seek crumbs from his table than back a left candidate.

Woodley and Simpson managed to get both wings of 'Unite' to support Gordon Brown, having opposed support for John McDonnell. The TGWU section of 'Unite' declared itself "proud" to have nominated Brown saying that it will give him "our full support as Prime Minister in working to tackle social inequality". Meanwhile Brown was getting set to put the boot into the public sector unions.

All this has implication for Respect, which should be taking the initiative to open or re-open a dialogue with those on the left who are currently not in Respect as to how they see the way forward.

The *Morning Star* and the CPB are a case in point. They are likely to find it increasingly difficult to cling to a policy of reclaiming Labour. Apparently a new discussion has already opened up on this internally in the CPB. The *Morning Star* had already called a conference in June on "Politics After Blair" at which the issue will now be unavoidable.

This also has implications for the RMT-sponsored shop stewards network founding conference which is taking place on July 7<sup>th</sup>. The Socialist Party's Campaign for a New Workers party has already been promoting a debate around the crisis of the Labour left.

George Galloway put Respect's role well in his response to the situation in Socialist Worker:

"Over the coming weeks we will be seeking to discuss with key figures in the trade unions, on the left, in the Labour Party and across the progressive spectrum as a whole what initiatives might be taken to rally and unify our forces. Respect has aspirations to advance the whole left as well as our part of it".

He puts it very well. This is exactly the kind of situation Respect was created to address. But it is a pity he did not think of this over the last two years when he has opposed most proposals to make Respect more democratic and accessible to new people. He should have thought about it when he has refused to be accountable to Respect like with his appearance on Celebrity Big Brother where he made Respect look ridiculous in front of the very people he is now quite rightly in favour of approaching.

He has opposed Respect being built as a political party and not a loose coalition dominated by the SWP and himself, which leaves little room for the individual non-aligned activist to function.

The fact is that the obstacles to building a viable left alternative are not all with those who retain illusions in the Labour Party. There are also problems in the failure of the left outside of the Labour Party to build a united and pluralist alternative which can be attractive to them.

Respect must never-the-less rise to this situation. It may not be as well placed as it should be but there is no other organisation which can play this role. Its recent election results show that clearly enough.

But Respect needs to be open and flexible in this situation to any new forces from the Morning Star or the trade union left. It should do whatever is necessary to ensure that new forces have space to make their influence felt. If it can do this it could break it out of its current impasse and open up a new stage of development.

Respect's task in this process is to turn the tide of politics back towards the left. Rebuild ideological and practical opposition to the market. Work with the left in the unions to build an independent pluralist left alternative alongside the struggle to regenerate the unions and rebuild trade union strength and organisation.

---

## **P.S.**

\* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 389 - May 2007.

\* Socialist Resistance is a socialist newspaper produced by British supporters of the Fourth International in conjunction with other marxists.