

## Socialists and Ken Livingstone

Wednesday 13 February 2008, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2008).

The whole of the left should condemn the hysterical Thatcherite campaign against Ken Livingstone led by the Evening Standard and Channel 4. It is the war against the GLC all over again. As Seumas Milne said in the Guardian recently: "Just as in the time of the GLC, Livingstone is denounced for consorting with dangerous leftists and terrorist apologists". The Channel 4 Dispatches programme was an hour of character assassination against Livingstone designed to obscure the politics of Tory right-wing buffoon and racist bigot Boris Johnson which are difficult to sell to a multi-cultural London where a third of the population are from ethnic minorities. The hour-long programme poured out streams of empty allegations designed to promote the election campaign of Johnson.

The irony, however, is that whilst the attack on Livingstone reflects the days of the GLC, that is not the case with Livingstone himself. "Red Ken" is of no more than historical significance. Little of his politics today reflect his politics of those days. This is particularly the case when it comes to areas of administration over which he has direct control as Mayor of London. Where issues are outside his domain, however, where words rather than action are involved, he is often a lot more radical.

It is precisely over his actions, however, which he must be mainly judged. And there is the problem. His actions today regarding RMT picket lines, the privatisation of services, the City of London or the Metropolitan police are completely unacceptable. Such actions would have horrified the Livingstone of the GLA years. It is for these reasons that he is not supportable today as he would have been then.

This is the background to the current discussion as to whether the left should support Ken Livingstone for a third term in May. The discussion is made more acute by the success of the witch hunt against him which has allowed Boris Johnson to emerge as a serious contender. And the replacement of Livingstone by Johnson would be a setback for London and a boost for the Tories in their preparation for the general elections where similar methods will be used against new Labour.

In order to discuss this question sensibly, however, we have to sort out the distinct aspects of it especially differentiating the question of the vote from that of giving him political credibility and support. The first of these aspects is a tactical question, the second is not.

Fortunately the ballot for Mayor is by transferable vote, which makes this rather easy. With a transferable vote system the voter is able to cast first and second choice votes. The first can therefore be a political choice (the person you would most like to see elected) and the second can be used to stop the person you least want in the run-off between two leading contenders. And since Livingstone is sure to be in the top two such an approach is fully applicable to this particular election. In fact giving Livingstone your first preference vote rather than your second would make no difference at all to the figures, you would still only be giving Livingstone one vote.

For example in the 2004 mayoral election Respect stood Lindsey German and called on its supporters to cast a second vote for Livingstone, and many of them did. The same should apply this time. If there is a credible left wing candidate put up against Livingstone we should vote for that candidate and cast a second vote for Livingstone. This would allow us to vote for a clear anti-neoliberal and pro-class struggle voice whilst supporting Livingstone against Johnson. We (as Socialist Resistance) would argue for this approach inside Respect Renewal and represent a minority

view on it if unsuccessful.

### **So what is Livingstone's political record over the past eight years?**

The first thing to remember is that Livingstone rejoined new Labour and made his peace with Tony Blair, which weakened the left and strengthened new Labour. Since Brown took over he has been largely silent about him saying that he prefers to make his points in private rather than criticise him in public. Brown must be very happy indeed with that situation. In fact Livingstone is now wholeheartedly the New Labour candidate for Mayor of London. They regard their initial reluctance to have been a false alarm.

It's true that Livingstone has opposed the war in Iraq and very consistently. He called on Londoners to attend the great February 2003 anti-war demonstration and he rejected calls that demonstrations should be banned when Bush visited London. But opposition to America's war in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot, as some argue, be made the sole criterion of political support, otherwise it would lead to some very strange results.

There were (and are) many Liberal Democrats against the war. Douglas Hurd, foreign secretary under Margaret Thatcher, opposed the war, as did one of her chancellors Ken Clarke. The Chirac government in France opposed the war and its foreign minister (later Prime Minister) Dominique de Villepin made one of the most eloquent UN speeches against it. Vladimir Putin was against the war and still is. The same position, more or less, was taken by the Chinese regime in Beijing. The Iranian regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a regime guilty of countless anti-democratic crimes - is also a virulent critic of Bush and the war. In fact the opposition to the war has been widespread amongst a range of politicians and even included one of the two senators who got egg on their face attempting to grill George Galloway in a Congress subcommittee.

Of course no one is comparing Ken Livingstone to any of these figures, but it does demonstrate that the war cannot be the single or even the predominant criterion of judging political support. There has to be a wider judgement made on the basis of an all-round assessment of his policies and actions.

Livingstone has certainly done other things which we can support. His administration has worked on many progressive anti-racist initiatives. Livingstone warmly welcomed Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez to London, doing an "oil for expertise" deal with him. He has defended multi-culturalism extremely vigorously, he has welcomed migrants and defended asylum seekers. He defends Muslims against Islamophobia. Some of his actions on the environment have also been important. The Livingstone team did a lot to ensure the financing and success of the London European Social Forum in 2004. And of course there is his opposition to the war and fierce attacks on George Bush.

Against these positives, however, there are some completely unacceptable negatives. In particular Livingstone has systematically championed the police including over the Jean-Charles de Menezes shooting, where he has uncritically defended Met Commissioner Ian Blair. It is very difficult to argue that he has impeccable anti-racist credentials (as some do) when he supports the police over what was in the end a racist killing. He has acted vigorously on the wrong and reactionary idea that solving crime depends on recruiting a lot more police officers, something that has bumped up the "precept" (the proportion of the Council tax that is paid to the police).

He has collaborated with privatisation on the Tube and he and his staff in TfL have been responsible for one of the most expensive transport systems in the world. He and his staff have closely collaborated with property developers and Livingstone personally, along with his economics advisor John Ross, have become apostles and advocates of finance capital. It is not surprising therefore that

he failed to support the firefighters' pay demands. Livingstone was at the centre of the campaign to bring the Olympics to Britain, a decision that will markedly bump up London council tax mainly to the advantage of big business.. But it is not obvious that there are massive benefits for the poor and local workers generally.

Ideologically and politically, therefore, with the exception of the war, racism and Venezuela, there has been a complete collapse since the days of "Red Ken".

Ken Livingstone's role at the centre of London transport of course means he is in the position of an employer, so how has he dealt with the unions?

Appallingly badly, in fact. In June 2004 he attacked the RMT for striking over pay, he called the miserly offer "extremely generous" and said if he was an RMT member he would cross the picket line and break the strike. Even someone as non-militant as Dave Prentis, Unison general secretary, called these remarks "shameful". In 2003, when tube driver Chris Barrett was spied on while off sick and sacked for allegedly feigning his illness. Livingstone said "I don't know he got away with it for so long", but did not apologise when Barrett won his case at an industrial tribunal. In 2007, speaking at the annual London Government Dinner at Mansion House, Livingstone told his distinguished audience that he had not the slightest intention of giving in to the RMT.

### **Ken Livingstone and the police**

Ken Livingstone has systematically defended the police over the shooting of Jean-Charles de Menezes, arguing that they acted the way they thought appropriate at the time. When on November 2 2007 a court found the Met guilty of "corporate failings" over the shooting he immediately went on Radio 4 to denounce the findings as "disastrous" and say that it could make the fight against terrorism more difficult.

Let's remember exactly what happened to de Menezes. He was not challenged before being shot. He was shot seven times in the head, each bullet fired at three second intervals. The shooting was a part of the "shoot to kill" policy of the Met at the time and it happened to de Menezes because of his swarthy appearance i.e. his "profiling" by the squad concerned. Any socialist or indeed anyone who defends basic human rights should expect the police not to shoot anyone without a very good reason for doing so, and to find the police at least guilty of negligence if they do. But not Ken Livingstone. He insisted that "The police acted to do what they believed necessary to protect the lives of the public. This tragedy has added another victim to the toll of deaths for which the terrorists bear responsibility." Moreover he said, "At the end of the day, mistakes are always going to happen in wars or situations like this. The best you can do is try and make the potential for risk the minimum possible but there will be mistakes". This is nothing more or less than a cover-up for the shoot to kill policy.

Livingstone vigorously opposed all calls for Ian Blair to resign as Met Commissioner, arguing that such demands were mainly those of the right-wing media led by the Daily Mail. It was true, of course, that the Mail and other right-wing papers called for Blair to resign. But it was also absolutely clear from the stand point of the defence of basic human rights and anti-racist policing that he indeed should resign. This was rightly the position of the whole of left, as well as of liberal opinion. It was also the position of the de Menezes family campaign itself which spoke to great acclaim at the founding conference of Respect Renewal last November. It is absolutely astounding that anyone claiming the remotest degree of left credentials could take any other position. It is bizarre to ignore such an issue is assessing what support Livingstone should receive.

Nor is it just the de Menezes shooting which was involved. At the time of the police raid in Forest

Gate in June 2006, when a young Muslim man was shot and wounded by the police on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence, Livingstone also defended the police.

As part of his wider defence of Ian Blair Livingstone argued that there had been a reduction in the crime figure and that this was due to increased police numbers. He said in 2007 "One of my priorities on becoming mayor in 2000 was therefore to work with the government to increase police numbers again, in order to bear down on the rise in crime".

No one other than an anarchist, would argue for the immediate abolition of the police. But it has never been the position of socialists that the answer to crime is more police. Crime, especially among young people, is closely associated with poverty and the massive growing inequality. Policing is not just about crime it's about social control, and the class bias of the police is obvious. The most costly form of crime, the one that costs the public most by far, is corporate, white collar crime, especially tax evasion on a mammoth scale by the super-rich. Yet hardly any resources are devoted to it by the police, as compared with the policing of poor areas. All this is elementary from a socialist viewpoint, but outside the ambit of Livingstone's approach.

The truth is that on the police Ken Livingstone has fallen straight into the discourse of the reactionary right, especially after having visited former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani and having been impressed by his "zero tolerance" policing. Livingstone says, "Twenty-five years ago I was generally critical, but now I see a much transformed [police] force". So it's not Ken Livingstone but the police who have changed! If you believe that, you'll believe just about anything.

### **Ken Livingstone and Transport**

London has the second most expensive transport system of any city in the world, outdone only by Moscow where the system is in the hands of gangsters. It is 26% more expensive than New York, where incomes seem roughly the same as in London because of the decline of the dollar, but where real purchasing power is significantly higher and prices generally much lower.

Can the high price of transport in London be justified from a socialist point of view? It's true that free transport has been extended from school children to 16 and 17-year old students and this is a pro-working class reform. It's also true that over-60s go free and that Oyster cards users (more regular users) pay less than the nominal rate. But it's still very expensive a typical commuter in Zone 3, 4 or 5 coming into London would still pay £35 a week in fares. And this is very different from the days of "Fares Fair" when Livingstone in the 1980s as leader of the GLC massively reduced Tube prices.

It can be argued that Livingstone has not had any option but to work in this way and squeeze the public through high prices. Private contractors have to be paid. The capital interest payments to financial institutions are more than £100m. So if the buses were to be improved, the money had to come from somewhere. But all that says is that if you work within the system, then you obey the rules of the system and you end up managing it, despite some marginal reforms. The idea that there is no alternative within the system is an argument that could be applied at national level as well; once this is accepted all socialist aspiration is lost.

### **In praise of finance capital**

Ken Livingstone has been more and more open about his position of full support to finance capital, the driving force of neoliberal globalisation. The key to London is its success as a financial centre, he argues. In 2006 he warmly praised Margaret Thatcher's 1986 decision to deregulate the City of London which had become "a lazy, old boys' network", enabling it to become "dynamic and world

class" (and incidentally increasingly owned by Americans, which puts in question his claim that "London has overtaken New York" as a financial centre). In his April 2007 interview with Prospect magazine (with Tony Travers, Simon Parker and David Goodhart) Livingstone says that "I used to believe in a centralised state economy, but now I accept that there's no rival to the market in terms of production and distribution".

The theory that Livingstone and his financial advisor of 19 years John Ross have worked out is evidently this: making London a top centre of finance capital is the key to generating wealth in the city as a whole, and on the basis of this we can create employment and devise progressive and environment-friendly policies. This sounds a lot like the "trickle down" theory of wealth generation beloved of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Many of its assumptions will be sorely tested in the next period as the devastating financial crisis leads to thousands of sackings in the City, but it also has to be asked who exactly does benefit from the City being a key focus of world finance. Clearly the main beneficiaries are the City traders and fund managers themselves, the owners of luxury and service industries and of course property developers.

In 2000 the Livingstone team's enthusiasm for property developers astounded Green leader Darren Johnson. He told the Guardian about Livingstone: "I was surprised at how aggressively pro-developer he was. His economic adviser John Ross did a presentation talking about a coalition between the Greens and big business interests and the need to keep both on side. I thought it was a joke. Then I realised he was serious."

It is less evident how many workers benefit directly from London's role as a finance centre. For many millions the City's influence has been crucial in pushing house prices through the roof, tying down a huge part of their income. But in any case, the role of de-regulated finance and globalisation, turning everything into a commodity and trying to turn every service into a financial asset, is not about being "dynamic" at the expense of "old boys' networks", it's about pumping as much surplus income as possible out of the pockets of workers and the poor worldwide.

The role of the City and deregulated capitalism is part of the whole rotten operation worldwide that has also massively increased inequality within Britain and also drastically worsened the working conditions of millions. Even if you thought it was beneficial economically for a giant financial centre to be in London, it would surely be normal for a socialist to point out the nature of the beast. In his Prospect interview Livingstone does criticise multi-million pound City bonuses but when prompted only gives his assent to the most minimal of reforms, something like a tax of a tenth of one per cent on international trading, enough he thinks to "cure world poverty". And after all, whatever you think personally, when it comes to keeping City traders and property developers onside, you just don't go about criticising them and demanding they be taxed to the hilt.

In his Prospect interview Livingstone says: "There isn't a great ideological conflict any more. The business community, for example, has been almost depoliticised. One of the first people to lobby me when I became mayor was Judith Mayhew, from the City Corporation. She came and said, "We've all changed, it won't be like the last time, there's so much we can do together." I didn't believe a word of it, but it turned out to be true."

So there you have it: work with the most progressive forces in capitalism in a framework where business has been depoliticised! This is the world through a self-delusion of huge proportions. The idea that business has become depoliticised is as inane as thinking that City financiers represent "progressive forces in capitalism". Livingstone has changed on capitalism, just as he has changed on the police. Capitalism has also changed mainly for the worse.

## Who will benefit from the Olympics?

Who really knows the final cost of the London Olympics? Probably no one, but it's obvious there won't be much change from £20bn. This will come from London and nation-wide taxpayers, but Londoners will pay twice once through Council Tax and once through income tax. Who will benefit? Mainly big business. While some British businesses will benefit, others won't. Studies since 1980 have shown that the net benefits to tourism are minimal, as visits fall off in the couple of years before the events as people just postpone their visit to Olympic year. In reality the games are a massive marketing opportunity for transnational corporations like Nike, Omega, McDonalds and other major corporations. But it is not obvious that there are massive benefits for the poor and local workers generally.

According to a publication of Demos:

*"The indirect impacts of processes of gentrification and price inflation can be severe. In Barcelona, for instance, the 1992 Games was partly responsible for massive increases in costs of living in the city. Between 1986 and 1992 the market price of housing grew by an average of 260% and this expansion continued through the 1990s with significant increases in social inequality. Likewise, in Sydney, rates of evictions and homelessness increased markedly in the neighbourhoods alongside the Olympic development. The consequence is that although development takes place in such cities it does not always lead to the development of its poorer urban neighbourhoods and communities. In fact, it can make things worse by creating blight, congestion and [...] displacement."*

But isn't there a plan in place to regenerate Hackney Wick and Stratford, two areas that certainly need it? In fact the Olympics British organisers are incredibly modest in their projection for regeneration which, with a few add-ons, comes down to:

Over 4,000 new homes will be built for the Olympic Village; these will be converted post-Games to form newly created neighbourhoods with new local schools, community and health facilities, as well as appropriate utilities, roads, and transport infrastructure. Significant amounts of additional housing will also be developed on and around the Games site as a result of the positive impact of this investment in social and physical infrastructure.

The parklands will restore and enhance the recreational and ecological role of this important river valley. It will become part of London's famed network of green spaces connecting the 26km of the Lea Valley Regional Park in the north to the canal networks and river corridors that connect with the River Thames in the south.

That doesn't sound like very good value for £20bn or even £10bn. East London certainly needs redevelopment so redevelop it! That does not need the Olympics. The truth is the Olympics is a giant business machine that gets governments to sucker local people into paying their overhead costs. Socialists shouldn't support the Olympics coming to Britain or anywhere else. It's a pity Ken Livingstone did.

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\* From Socialist Resistance.