

## Tony Blair's nightmare comes to life in London mayor race

by Mark Burdman

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is facing the most significant challenge to his grip on power since he was elected on May 1, 1997. On March 6, maverick Labour Party figure Ken Livingston, a leading figure of the "Old Labour" traditional wing of the party, announced that he would run as an independent for Mayor of London, a powerful position in the United Kingdom. Livingston is challenging official Blair/"New Labour" candidate Frank Dobson, as well as candidates for the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties, in elections to be held on May 4. Numerous British commentators assert that, with this Livingston announcement, Blair's "nightmare" has come to life.

Overnight, Livingston has become the figure around whom the increasingly widespread anti-Blair ferment, not only in London but also across Britain, has rallied. The more Blair and friends have attacked Livingston in the days following March 6, the more his support has grown, nationally.

A senior City of London source told *EIR* on March 7 that the challenge represented by Livingston "probably is the beginning of the end" for Blair, especially should Livingston be voted in as Mayor on May 4. He stressed that Blair has maneuvered himself into a very problematic situation, by having drawn "a line in the sand," to stop Livingston, ever since Livingston challenged former Blair Cabinet Minister Frank Dobson in late February, in the fight to become Labour's candidate. The fact is, "protest against Blair is growing by the day," this source said, adding that Livingston is gaining support, because he is a "symbol of the anti-Blair feeling" spreading throughout Britain. "There are cracks in Blair's control" of the political situation in the U.K., he affirmed.

Also significant, in terms of the broader European political temperature, is that the European press—in Germany, Austria, and other countries—has clearly been sympathizing with Livingston, against Blair.

### Against rail privatization and brutal vote rigging

Admittedly, Livingston himself is far from being a saint. Those who know him well, even some who sympathize with what he is doing now, stress that he has always been a difficult person to get along with. He has a monumental ego, and tends to "shoot from the hip" with his political pronouncements, most recently with his support for proto-terrorist agitators opposed to the World Trade Organization. In earlier decades, when he headed the Greater London Council (the governing body for London which then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher disbanded in 1986), he was known as "Red Ken" because of his ties to radical elements, often referred to in Britain as the "loony left," in the ambiance of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party.

But at the same time, Livingston has remained faithful to the idea of Labour being a trade union- and constituency-based party, and to the state's role in promoting health care, infrastructure, and other vital necessities. He has been a key spokesman for "Old Labour" interests, against Blair's "Third Way"-oriented "New Labour," which aims to appeal to the yuppie-centered elements made rich by the Internet, "information economy" "boom" of recent years.

The main issue that Livingston has put forward, and for which he has garnered mass support, is his opposition to the privatization of London's Underground rail system, or Tube. This has been a hallmark of the policy of Blair, who has followed in the footsteps of former Prime Minister Thatcher. The issue has become a highly emotional one among Londoners and other Britons, especially following the horrifying Oct. 5, 1999 crash at the Paddington Station in London, which killed approximately 30 people (see "Blair's 'Third Way' Crashes, as Reality Intervenes," *EIR*, Oct. 22, 1999).

In a statement given to the London *Evening Standard* after his announcement for office, Livingston stressed that one “principle” he wants restored, is that “the break-up and privatization of the Underground is overwhelmingly rejected by Londoners.” Livingston said that he is determined to “keep the Underground together in the public sector, and raise the billions needed to modernize it.” Noting that Blair’s office circulated a letter to every Labour member “putting [forth] the alternative view,” Livingston affirmed that last month’s mayoral selection process “was a referendum on the government’s proposal.” While voter preference clearly indicated that Blair’s policies respecting rail privatization have been “roundly rejected,” the government “has since announced its intention to impose them nevertheless.”

Livingston is also rallying support with his accusation that last month’s selection process was brutally rigged against him, in favor of Dobson, by the Blair apparatus. It was clear that Livingston had massive support among traditional Labour constituencies, such as trade unions. But, thanks to a contorted selection procedure, and tremendous Blair arm-twisting, the victory went to Dobson. Livingston told the March 6 *Evening Standard* that London voters are not “so stupid that they would not notice blatant ballot rigging. As many Londoners have put it to me, ‘If we let them get away with this, they’ll think they can get away with anything.’” Livingston stressed that he did not intend “to take any lectures from those who have set new standards in ballot rigging.”

Writing in the Labour-linked London *Guardian* on March 7, senior commentator Hugo Young, hardly a fan of Livingston, charged that the Labour machine was “crazy,” when it “brutally rigged” the recent contest for the nomination between Dobson and Livingston. This was as “corrupt as it was grotesque,” he said, adding that within the Labour structure, there are many with “filthy hands,” but those of “the great leader,” i.e., Blair, “are the dirtiest.”

## Humiliations for Blair

The fact that Livingston is getting such a surge of support since announcing his independent candidacy, reflects not only positive support for him, but also the growing disgust, including within Labour ranks, with Blair. Blair and his government have increasingly become the focus of discontent since the beginning of this year, when the underfunded, state-run National Health Service (NHS) could not handle a health emergency caused by the flu virus (see *EIR*, Jan. 21, 2000, p. 7). For many in Britain, this symptom of infrastructure collapse was contrasted with the extravagant \$1 billion-plus spent by the government on the macabre “Millennium Dome,” a Blair pet project. There is also growing disgust at the Blair machine’s spin-doctoring and media manipulation, conducted by the all-powerful Press Secretary Alastair Campbell, and at attempts to assert control over everything going on in Britain, the which practice is known as “control freakery” in the U.K.

On March 7, the *Guardian* conducted a poll among 1,000 backers of Labour in London. The result was that 68% expressed support for Livingston, while only 13% supported Dobson. The same day’s *Evening Standard* reported that 78% of Labourites queried backed Livingston, and only 22% backed Dobson. The paper also reported substantial support for Livingston among members of the opposition Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties living in London. Making matters even worse for Blair and Dobson, the London *Daily Telegraph* on March 8 reported significant support for Livingston, much higher than that for Dobson, among businesses operating in and around London. Trade-union leaders, especially among railway workers, are enthusiastically backing Livingston.

This is all the more ironic (and devastating for Blair), as the position of elected Mayor of London was created by Blair, as part of his so-called “democratization” reforms for his “New Britain.” For centuries there had been an appointed “Lord Mayor of London,” but that position covered solely the old City of London, the financial/banking area, not the rest of Britain’s capital.

On March 7, the Blair machine suffered a huge embarrassment, at a debate among the four Mayoral candidates—Livingston, Dobson, Liberal Democrat Susan Kramer, and a representative of Conservative Steven Norris—at the London School of Economics (LSE). The LSE is a key “intellectual” bastion of “Blairism.” Its Dean, Anthony Giddens, is Blair’s guru, and the leading propagandist, internationally, for the “Third Way” ideology, i.e., austerity with a liberal face, that Blair has promoted. Dobson himself is an LSE graduate, as is Blair’s wife, Cherie.

But at the March 7 debate, Dobson was greeted with boos, when he was introduced as “the preferred choice of Tony Blair.” One student denounced Dobson as a “stooge,” while another barked like a dog, a reference to the charge that Dobson is Blair’s “poodle.” By contrast, the reception for Livingston was ecstatic, with students cheering from the rafters, and later following him around the campus enthusiastically.

It is not surprising, that as the week of March 6 progressed, Labour insiders were reporting a mood of “panic” at party headquarters in London, and the Blair machine was trying to crush Livingston. Moving with what the March 7 London *Times* characterized as “brutal speed,” the Blairite hierarchy invoked “special powers” to suspend Livingston from the Labour Party. Blair himself declared that Livingston would be “a disaster,” were he to be elected as Mayor.

But all these moves against Livingston are backfiring against Blair, at least for the moment. Between mid-March and May 4, it can be expected that the Blair apparatus will massively escalate the attacks on Livingston. In his March 7 column, the *Guardian*’s Hugo Young warned that what will now ensue, is “two months of hate politics. . . . Labour people who are not sitting on their hands will have them wrapped around each other’s throats.”