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Ken Livingstone: the Thorn in (New) Labour's Side

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The UK's Political Landscape in the 21st Century: Players, Strategies, Achievements

Panorama du paysage politique britannique au XXIe siècle : acteurs, stratégies, réalisations

Sous la direction de **David Haigron**

Informations sur cette image

This *LISA e-journal* issue intends to map the British political landscape in the early 21st century, i.e. to present the players (major, minority, national parties, trade unions, pressure groups, militants, etc.) who, on the electoral and media centre-stage, on its fringe or in the Westminster lobbies, try to impose their agendas and influence the public debate in a way that serves their own purposes. The field of research therefore stretches from the far-left to the extreme-right and includes both registered parties and organisations whose action is more

broadly political (influencing the elected representatives, mobilising the citizens, taking an active part in public life outside officially constituted groups, etc.).

Ce numéro de la Revue LISA dresse une cartographie du paysage politique britannique en ce début de XXIe siècle en présentant les acteurs (partis « à vocation majoritaire », partis minoritaires, régionaux et nationalistes, syndicats, groupes de pression, militants, etc.) qui, sur le devant de la scène médiatique et électorale, à sa marge ou dans les coulisses de Westminster, cherchent à imposer leurs priorités (agenda) et à influencer le débat public dans un sens qui serve leurs propres intérêts. Le champ couvert s'étend donc de l'extrême gauche à l'extrême droite et inclut à la fois les partis institutionnels et des organisations dont l'action est majoritairement politique (influencer les élus, mobiliser les citoyens, participer activement à la vie de la Cité en dehors de formations institutionnelles classiques, etc.).

David Haigron

Ken Livingstone : the thorn in New Labour's side

Abstract

Ever since Ken Livingstone became leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1981, he was a constant threat for the political integrity of the Labour Party until Mrs Thatcher decided to do away with this tier of local government in 1986. The antagonism between the outspoken Livingstone and the Labour Party came to a head during the period leading up to the first mayoral elections in London in May 2000. After a rigged primary election Livingstone had been forced into becoming an independent candidate but despite being excluded from the Labour Party, he managed to become the first directly elected mayor of the capital city. From his new vantage point at the head of the Greater London Authority (GLA), the “third man” of England continued to defy New Labour when he considered that central government policies did not tally with what Londoners needed. The success of the congestion charge considerably reinforced his popularity and New Labour reluctantly reintegrated him within its ranks to fight the 2004 mayoral election under its colours. Despite this move, Livingstone continued to defend the GLA's right to develop policies in keeping with the decentralisation of power even if signs of greater cooperation with central government were obvious, especially when London was given the 2012 Olympic Games in July 2005. This new stance did not prevent him from losing the 2008 election when the Conservative candidate, Boris Johnson, became mayor of London.

This article will examine the antagonism between Ken Livingstone and the Labour Party in its “old” and “new” versions. New Labour created the GLA hoping that it would be the ideal relay for its political project in the capital. Had they realised that the post of executive mayor was almost tailor made for “red” Kenneth Livingstone, they would most certainly have had second thoughts.

Résumé

À partir du moment où en 1981 Ken Livingstone occupe le poste de dirigeant du *Greater London Council*, il devient une menace permanente pour l'intégrité politique du Parti travailliste, jusqu'à ce que Mme Thatcher décide, en 1986, de supprimer cette couche de gouvernance territoriale. L'antagonisme entre Livingstone, l'homme politique qui ne mâche pas ses mots, et le Parti travailliste atteint son paroxysme pendant la période qui précède les premières élections à la mairie de Londres de 2000. À l'issue de primaires truquées, Livingstone est acculé à présenter une candidature indépendante mais malgré son exclusion du Parti travailliste il parvient à devenir le premier maire élu de la capitale. Depuis son siège à la tête de la mairie de Londres, le « troisième homme » de l'Angleterre continue de défier le *New Labour* lorsqu'il considère que les choix politiques du gouvernement ne correspondent pas aux intérêts des Londoniens. Le succès de sa taxe anti-embouteillages renforce sa popularité et le *New Labour* le réintègre, quoiqu'à contrecœur pour faire campagne en son nom lors des élections à la mairie de 2004. En dépit de cette manœuvre, Livingstone continue de défendre le droit de la GLA de développer des stratégies politiques en adéquation avec la décentralisation du pouvoir même si les signes de coopération avec le gouvernement se multiplient surtout lorsqu'en juillet 2005, Londres se voit attribuer les Jeux Olympiques de 2012. Cette nouvelle approche de la cohabitation ne l'empêche toutefois pas de perdre les élections de 2008 lorsque Boris Johnson, le candidat du Parti conservateur est élu maire de Londres.

Cet article étudiera l'antagonisme entre Ken Livingstone et le Parti travailliste dans sa version ancienne et plus moderne. Le *New Labour* créa la mairie de Londres dans l'espoir d'en faire le relais idéal, dans la capitale, de son projet politique. S'il avait su à quel point ce poste était fait sur mesure pour Ken le « rouge », il y aurait sans doute réfléchi à deux fois.

Ken Livingstone: The Thorn in (New) Labour's Side

Ken Livingstone is one of those politicians whom it is difficult to ignore: whether you love or despise him, admire or feel contempt for his political action, he stands out as one of the most intriguing politicians of the recent political landscape in Great Britain. Yet “Livingstonites”—like Bevannites or Bennites—just do not exist because Livingstone’s sense of independence has always set him apart from the rest. Few people owe him personal loyalty, only support. He belongs to a rare breed of public figures, those who from one day to the next can enjoy immense popularity only to fall into a trough of opprobrium. Livingstone has done just this on many occasions and during the campaign to choose the next mayor of London in 2012, he is more than likely to play a front stage role once again.

During the 1980s, Livingstone symbolised the “loony left”, the extreme wing of the Labour Party that was slowly but surely bringing about its downfall and which along with Militant Tendency, the modernisers had to mercilessly weed out of the party’s ranks if they wanted Labour to have the slightest chance of returning to government. But Livingstone has always been at his best in the face of adversity and by and large resisted his party’s attempts to prevent him from enacting his particular brand of municipal socialism. Likewise, Mrs Thatcher had to resort to major surgery on the organisation of local government in order to rid it of the sort of approach to politics that she abhorred but what the Metropolitan Councils seemed to excel in.¹

It was after the third successive defeat of Labour in 1992 that interest flared up once again for a new central authority in London, the only European capital city not to boast one. Labour doubtlessly believed that if they controlled the capital city, this would give them a strong foothold on the way back to the front stage of national politics. The voice of London had somehow been extinguished and the 32 boroughs were frequently finding themselves at loggerheads over pan-London strategy. In particular, major cultural projects for the capital were clearly suffering from the lack of some form of central coordination. Yet Labour was still striving to prove that it was a party of government and although it began to support the idea of creating a new authority, any reference to the heyday of the GLC when public money

¹ There were six other Metropolitan Councils: Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands and West Yorkshire.

was liberally thrown at all sorts of colourful associations was quickly quashed.² The creation of a new authority had to fit into New Labour's modern vision of government which is why they wanted one of their apparatchiks to become mayor rather than a dyed-in-the-wool Londoner more prone to defend the interests of the capital city than the party.

Livingstone resisted and having won the election as an independent candidate almost immediately entered into fierce ideological opposition with central government over use of a public-private partnership (PPP) in order to renovate the London underground. Despite failing to prevent implementation of the PPP, the success of the congestion charge left him standing unchallenged over London and New Labour came to terms with the fact that he was their best chance of retaining the helm of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in the 2004 election. His second mandate was thus inevitably marked by far greater cooperation between London and central government especially in view of the Olympic bid while in the aftermath of 7/7, Livingstone raised himself to a new height of popularity becoming the symbol of how "his" multicultural London would not be shaken by the terrorists' cowardice. But this obsessive possessiveness was giving the impression that London was Livingstone's city to do with as he pleased including the enormous budget that was at his disposal.³

A year before the 2008 election, it was generally thought that Livingstone would once again romp to victory mainly because there was apparently no other candidate capable of taking him on. Everyone took Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson's candidacy with a pinch of salt but as it turned out "Boris'" victory based on the slogan "Time for a Change" was to foreshadow his party's success in the 2010 General Election.

This article will look at how Ken Livingstone has been one of the most prominent politicians in recent British history and just how his personal brand of politics has left its mark not only on the capital but also on the relationship between London and central government. It will be argued that decentralising power is meaningless if the ultimate goal is merely to create obedient relays for central government policy. This would possibly have been achieved if Ken Livingstone had refrained from standing up first and foremost for the interests of the capital rather than those of the party he has always belonged to. To this end, he has most certainly constantly been the thorn in the Labour Party's side acting as a permanent reminder of its not too distant "old" Labour past.

² One of the most famous was the group of mothers who opposed nuclear missiles being positioned on British soil and they would take their infants along to demonstrations in an attempt to attract more media attention and protect themselves against the police. The group was known as "Babes against the Bomb".

³ The London Assembly which is essentially consultative can block the mayor's budget if two thirds of the 25 members disagree with it. The GLA's budget comes from central government finance, a "precept" added on to local taxes and income from other sources such as the congestion charge.

Early days: caucus voting

Ken Livingstone was not destined to become leader of the GLC following the elections in 1981 since the Labour Party's campaign had been run under the assumption that in the event of victory, the moderate Andrew McIntosh would be chosen. This strategy had been designed to ensure that the London electorate would not be put off voting Labour for fear of the GLC being run by someone from the far left of the party. Yet, despite campaign claims, the day following the elections Livingstone hurriedly organised a meeting during which he managed to wrest power from the Labour councillors' champion. McIntosh was certainly popular but Livingstone had the sort of charisma that many councillors felt had enabled them to be elected. It was no secret that Livingstone had devoted himself tirelessly to the campaign and in the immediate aftermath of victory—albeit less resounding than expected—he was able to drum up sufficient support to pull the carpet from underneath the feet of the “natural” leader, McIntosh. What is more, the meeting was attended by a majority of the Labour councillors and from a wide spectrum of the party's different internal factions which meant that Livingstone could claim that his election was legitimate. The press had a field day accusing the Labour Party of betraying its electorate and nicknaming Livingstone “red Ken”, a sobriquet that he has never really shed.⁴ Speaking from abroad, Mrs Thatcher rose to the challenge and stated that “the GLC will impose upon this nation a tyranny that the peoples of Eastern Europe yearn to cast aside”.⁵

Having refused to attend the “wedding of the century” between Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles,⁶ stating that he hadn't been elected to attend such events, Livingstone quickly hit the headlines again by embarking on a campaign to bring down fares in the London transport system. His *Fares Fair* crusade would certainly have been a lot more popular had he refrained from showing compassion for the IRA's cause in the wake of its bomb attacks in October. “Red Ken” suddenly became “the most odious man in Britain”⁷ and when his price reductions were declared unlawful a month later by the Law Lords, the GLC stood on the brink of bankruptcy, a severe blow to the reputation of the party Livingstone was supposed to

⁴ *The Sun*, May 9th, 1981. The *Daily Mail* also hounded what it considered to be the “hard” left.

⁵ Speech given by Mrs Thatcher to the *Scottish Conservative Conference*, 8 May 1981 at Perth City Hall.

⁶ On the wedding day, Livingstone let off a batch of black balloons in London.

⁷ *The Sun* (editorial), 13 October 1981. See also James Curran, *et al.*, *Culture Wars: The Media and the British Left*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 45.

represent. The only way out was to accept a severe hike in prices which gave the press ample opportunity to underline the irresponsible attitude of Livingstone and the debilitating effects of the “loony left” on the Labour Party. Meanwhile, the Thatcher juggernaut was gathering steam and in January 1982 when the first gigantic bill boards were erected on the roof of County Hall⁸ indicating the unemployment rate in London, the feeling that the GLC’s particular brand of municipal socialism would not be tolerated for long by central government was rife.

It must be said that the GLC was particularly active in pushing back the limits of its provocation. Some councillors were at times dumbfounded at the fact that they would spend more time debating issues that had very little to do with the mandate for which they had been elected than GLC matters; the IRA, nuclear disarmament, the Palestinian question, the Falklands war and the miners’ strike would constantly crop up in the debating chamber.⁹ The media loved it all and “rent-a-quote” Livingstone was permanently available to criticise central government’s policies.¹⁰ His outspoken colourful approach to politics was a guaranteed crowd puller, but by dint of defending minority causes and commenting openly on a range of major international issues, he was also inevitably bringing the Labour Party into disrepute. However, given the disarray that reigned at the heart of the party, they could do very little to stop him.

On the other hand, Mrs Thatcher’s second election victory in June 1983 was the ideal opportunity for her party to make it clear that the Metropolitan Councils—above all the GLC—were no longer necessary and the White Paper *Streamlining the Cities* published in October compounded the electoral promise by stating that the next step would indeed entail the abolition of this stratum of local government. The Conservatives believed that the London boroughs would be far more capable of governing London and above all, accountable to their electorate. Five months later, Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Commerce and Industry and chairman of the Conservative Party, publicly gave the debate a clear ideological stance by stating that the Metropolitan Councils’ municipal socialism was evil and a threat to the values of democracy defended by British institutions.¹¹ According to him, it was the government’s

⁸ County Hall was the home for London government for much of the 20th century. It was designed by the architect Ralph Knott, took just over a decade to build and was inaugurated by George V in 1922.

⁹ Life at County Hall fascinated people to such an extent that as from May 1983, it was periodically narrated in *The Times* by Ann Sofer, a Labour councillor.

¹⁰ At this time, some journalists were employed full-time to monitor Livingstone’s activities.

¹¹ Norman Tebbit, speech at Caxton Hall to the London Conservative Party, 14 March 1984.

duty to stamp out this divisive force and ridding the country of the GLC would be one way of achieving this.¹²

Unfortunately for the Conservatives, however, there was little evidence to show that public opinion felt so hostile towards the councils and very quickly the facades and roof of County Hall, just opposite the Houses of Parliament, were draped with banners stating the GLC's case.¹³ On March 30th 1984 the Local Government Bill was put to MPs in the House of Commons but it took a full seven months for the final Bill to be submitted. The Lords played a vital role in slowing down the whole legislative process claiming that the proposed legislation was undemocratic insofar as it meant replacing the elected councillors with appointed officials for the last year of the GLC's life.¹⁴ Their contribution proved vital in prolonging the life of the GLC for one year and their efforts were duly rewarded with new banners on the front of County Hall thanking them for their help. Public opinion was definitely on the GLC's side and Livingstone bathed in the glory of being the champion of democracy constantly available for the media who faithfully relayed his message to Londoners. The GLC was anxious to prove that it was a democratic institution serving a vital purpose in the everyday life of Londoners and that getting rid of it was quite simply a political ploy by Mrs Thatcher to reduce the influence of Labour in local government.

But the GLC was fighting a losing battle and the legislation designed to abolish the Metropolitan Councils was given Royal Assent on July 15th 1985 after a long and protracted passage before the two Houses where opposition gradually subsided. The Conservatives' considerable overall majority in the lower chamber was decisive but the creation of the London Residuary Board clearly showed that this decision had been above all politically motivated. This government quango's mission was to sift through the colossal number of ongoing issues that the GLC had been dealing with and wind them up. Nevertheless, following the decision to abolish the councils, the GLC had a year to empty its coffers, and this it did, giving an obvious priority to Labour-led boroughs as well as a whole plethora of projects associated in any way with left-wing politics. On March 31st 1985 at midnight, the GLC flag was ceremoniously lowered on the roof of County Hall and Livingstone and his acolytes disappeared off into the night only to reappear again in the limelight some fourteen years later.

¹² *Idem.*

¹³ *Say No To No Say* was the slogan used to denounce the government's intention to abolish the Metropolitan Councils.

¹⁴ The Conservative government had opted for this strategy in the hope of restraining GLC spending during its final year of existence.

Turn again Livingstone¹⁵

Following abolition, Livingstone was unemployed but during the first year took advantage of his status as former GLC leader to travel extensively often being invited to attend various conferences around the world devoted to issues that he had championed. A contract for an autobiography¹⁶ together with a weekly column in *The Sun* meant that he was financially safe and with his bid to become the MP for Brent East, he set about trying to influence the direction in which Labour could go following the 1987 elections that were looming. He endorsed a left-wing manifesto but soon after the party's third defeat in June, the psephologists underlined the damage that had been wreaked by the "loony-left" reputation bequeathed by a handful of politicians and factions within the Labour Party.¹⁷ This was the perception the party leadership had in any case for they believed that the Conservatives had garnered maximum propaganda impact from the antics of the few in the party whose behaviour was so detrimental to the many.

To this end, Neil Kinnock was to use his political skills to take the party down the road of modernisation somewhat further than surely many of his followers would have been prepared to go at the outset. Needless to say, Livingstone was not one of them and could not be herded into the fold of the modernisers despite the fact that he won a seat on the party's National Executive Committee in the September elections and held it for two years.¹⁸ In order to harness his collaboration, Neil Kinnock could have given Livingstone a high-powered job within the Labour opposition but the former GLC leader could just not be trusted to be entirely faithful to the party's cause, especially when he took to the national stage and perorated, once again, about issues that were a far cry from his duties as MP. It was no secret either that Livingstone harboured a strong ambition to lead the party one day, though his commitment to its left wing meant that the modernisers preferred ostracism and vilification to cajoling. It was nonetheless thanks to a New Labour electoral promise made in 1992 that Livingstone was to return to the battleground of London politics despite the fact that he did not support the idea of an elected mayor at all in the first place.

¹⁵ This is the title of John Carvel's first biography of Ken Livingstone. Carvel was local government correspondent for *The Guardian* from 1981 to 1985 and covered most aspects of what he calls "Ken Livingstone's GLC". John Carvel, *Turn Again Livingstone*, London: Profile Books, 1999.

¹⁶ Ken Livingstone, *If Voting Changed Anything They'd Abolish It*, London: Harper Collins, 1987.

¹⁷ Such as Militant Tendency for example.

¹⁸ Livingstone was re-elected to the NEC in 1987 under the very nose of Peter Mandelson.

Indeed, during the 1992 electoral campaign, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats pointed to the lack of a central authority in London and promised that in the event of victory, they would look seriously into the possibility of creating some sort of organisation capable of taking decisions for the whole of the capital city beyond the boundaries of each borough. Housing and culture were mentioned as being the areas where London had suffered the most from a lack of central coordination. Even so, New Labour took great pains to explain that there was no question of returning to the labyrinthine model of the GLC and that something small and “strategic” would bring back the sort of dynamics that London needed in order to maintain its authority as a world capital. Several policy documents¹⁹ were published by Labour following the fourth successive electoral defeat in 1992 and the idea of organising a referendum to ask Londoners to endorse central government’s choice was put forward. The 1997 election manifesto made it clear that should Labour be elected, there would be a referendum in London to see indeed if people agreed with the government’s plans to create an assembly and a directly elected mayor for the capital. But had New Labour been able to foresee such a landslide victory, not only would it have dispensed with the referendum but its whole strategy to elect the new mayor would have been quite different.

Following New Labour’s victory, members of the Conservative Party now sitting on the benches of Her Majesty’s Opposition were surprised at the fits of “manifestoitis” that the government seemed to be going through. Apparently, in order to prove that it was a party of government that meant business, New Labour felt compelled to carry out everything in its manifesto, right down to the finest details. The referendum is a case in point because given New Labour’s absolute majority which included 57 out of the 74 seats in London itself, the government could have revised its ambitions for the capital. Even Ken Livingstone himself expressed his surprise at the party’s desire to give London a directly elected mayor, an idea which he put to the House of Commons in his usual forthright style:

If we are honest, my party knows that there is no overwhelming support for a separately elected mayor in the London Labour Party, among London Labour borough council leaders, or among Labour members. We know that the Prime Minister is enthusiastic about the idea and that he genuinely believes in it. Massive pressure was brought to bear on Labour borough leaders to go along with the idea and not to rock the boat or appear disloyal. So we all went along with it; we did not make a fuss; it was what the leader wanted. But we must get it right: the leader may be wrong. After real thought and real consultation with Londoners, we may decide not to proceed with it.²⁰

¹⁹ *Working Together for London* (1994), *A Choice for England* (1996), *A Voice for London* (1996).

²⁰ *Hansard*, 6 June 1997, col. 717.

A year later, the referendum was over and done with and, albeit on a low turnout (34.6%), Londoners had voted for the chance to elect a mayor and an assembly for London. Despite earlier questioning of his party's choice, Ken Livingstone had realised that this job would be perfectly suited to his talents but little did he know at this early date that New Labour was going to do everything possible to force him to stand down. Until now, Livingstone had been no more than an outspoken troublesome element, but when the time came to select Labour's official candidate, conflict between the two was to reach a peak and last for a good five years in full view of the international media.

Nomination and abomination

Livingstone says he took the decision to seek the Labour Party's nomination when he began to realise to what extent Millbank had an iron grip on the whole process and that Londoners might be excluded from choosing their candidate.²¹ This was a convenient way for him to justify his U-turn on the issue having explained at length that the concentration of so much power in the hands of one person was, according to him, a mistake.²² It would inevitably lead to American style politics with the executive mayor "wheeling and dealing" at the top. The truth of the matter was that being mayor of an international city such as London meant that Livingstone would once again have the responsibilities and power that corresponded to his personal and political ambitions.

New Labour, on the other hand, saw things otherwise and was very keen to place one of its own on the highest step of the London podium. Tony Blair and his political advisors knew only too well that the creation of a power base in London would be the ideal relay for their political project and enable them to carry it far beyond the frontiers of the capital and even the country. This is why they put so much energy into excluding Livingstone from the nomination process and, if this were to fail, the party machinery would be used to block his selection. Trevor Phillips was the first candidate to declare only to withdraw a short time later, followed by Glenda Jackson, while Nick Raynsford, the Minister for London, felt that he was the party's "natural" candidate having steered legislation to create the Greater London Authority through Parliament in the first place. Despite Raynsford's track record, New Labour preferred

²¹ The Labour Party had its headquarters in Millbank Tower in London. The Millbank Tendency, a pun on Militant Tendency, is used to underline New Labour's so called taste for spin.

²² *Hansard*, 6 June 1997, *op. cit.*

to back Frank Dobson, Secretary of State for Health, faithful to the party's cause but also outspoken enough to at least give Londoners the impression that he would not be just a puppet mayor for the government. Even so, the whole process was overshadowed by the prospect of Livingstone entering the fray for his opponents feared the groundswell of support that he would certainly be able to muster.

The main bone of contention between Livingstone and New Labour was the commitment by the latter to use a public-private partnership (PPP) to renovate the London underground. This had been written into the manifesto and as a Labour MP, Livingstone had signed up to it. But he had other ideas for the underground believing that Londoners should be in command and not central government whose choices dictated by ideology did not always tally with local demand. Livingstone wanted to create an extensive public bond system whereby Londoners would be able to invest in their own public transport and reap the benefits both financial and social of a modernised underground. He dutifully attacked the PPP as being the partial privatisation of transport given that it meant handing management of the system over to private companies for at least thirty years.²³ In view of this, New Labour and Livingstone could only come to a very muddled agreement over the party's manifesto for London governance and it was only after these difficult negotiations that he was publicly allowed to be part of the selection process. Dobson, however, was being portrayed as New Labour's official candidate and when the results of the selection process were made public on February 20th 2000, he had won by a slim margin, Livingstone coming in a close second. But given the method of selection used,²⁴ an electoral college which gave full advantage to block votes and very little to individual members, Livingstone openly questioned the result and stated that he was toying with the idea of running as an independent candidate. This he duly did two weeks later choosing *The Evening Standard* to state his case and put the responsibility for his decision squarely on the outrageous behaviour of New Labour's spin doctors and their desire to maintain power within the Prime Minister's closest circle:

²³ One of the main fears of Livingstone and his transport specialist Robert Kiley, was that security would be neglected by the private companies and the accidents at Paddington, Southall and, a year later, at Hatfield had made public opinion aware of this particular point.

²⁴ The electoral college was divided into three parts, each one counting for 33% of the vote. These categories were i) individual members of the Labour Party, ii) London MPs, MEPs and Assembly candidates and iii) organisations affiliated to the Labour Party such as the unions and co-operative societies. Party members in London were balloted individually whereas the affiliated organisations could choose to use individual votes or the block vote according to their own internal procedures. The share of each individual organisation was calculated according to its affiliation fee to the London party. MPs, MEPS and Assembly candidates were balloted individually which gave this small group considerable weight compared to ordinary party members. For further details see Timothy Whitton, *Ken "le rouge" et la Mairie de Londres : Du Greater London Council à la Greater London Authority*, Paris: l'Harmattan, 2010, 67-68.

I have been forced to choose between the party I love and upholding the democratic rights of Londoners. I have concluded that defence of the principle of London's right to govern itself requires that I stand as an independent candidate for London mayor on 4 May.²⁵

New Labour had no option but to exclude Ken Livingstone which they did on April 30th for a period of five years. In the 1980s, Livingstone had taken on the Thatcher governments and won quite a number of small victories. He was now going to confront not only the Conservatives but also the party he had devoted his entire political life to.

First election and congestion charge mandate

Livingstone's strategy was as simple as they come: given that the turnout for local elections is traditionally low in Great Britain, he opted for a very personal campaign characterised by the deliberately provocative slogans *Vote4Ken* and *Ken4London*. Having set up a subscription to collect funds, his campaign team purchased a London bus, painted it purple and drove around London asking car drivers via another slogan to *Hoot4Ken*. The contrast between his campaign and his rivals' was particularly striking: given that he was a celebrity, "our Ken" as Londoners would fondly refer to him, could get away with deliberately exacerbating the personalisation of this election which would be to his own advantage. On the one hand, Livingstone would use a megaphone on the upper deck of the purple bus to promise people better weather if he was elected while on the other, engage in serious political discussion on the television and radio. Livingstone specialised in being ostensibly self-deprecating and once again considerably increased audience ratings for the various chat shows to which he was invited. The upshot of this was that while his rivals got bogged down in the petty details of London governance, Livingstone rode high on his reputation for being a "cheeky chappy" declaring that his main aim would be to let Londoners govern their great capital rather than central government. This struck a chord especially given New Labour's attitude to the selection process and indeed to politics in general. In the first lines of his manifesto which, just like the other candidates, set out his main policies for London, Livingstone made his ambitions for the GLA crystal clear:

²⁵ Charles Reiss, "Livingstone: I will run for mayor", *The Evening Standard*, 6 March 2000.

The direct election of a Mayor and Assembly for London will give Londoners back the right to govern their own affairs and decide upon their own priorities. I am standing as an independent candidate because I believe the job of the Mayor will be to stand up for London. If candidates and policies can be imposed centrally then devolution will mean nothing.²⁶

The general feeling was that Livingstone would romp to victory quite simply because there was no one to stop him. It must be said that generally speaking, the candidates' manifestos were similar enough to make it difficult for the electorate to make their choice. By and large they underlined the role that the mayor should play to improve policing, public transport, air quality and housing while defending the place of London as an international capital. Even so, Livingstone once again managed to stand out from the rest by pledging to bring in a congestion charge in the event of becoming London's first executive mayor.

It is difficult to assess the impact of this flagship proposal on Londoners but despite the May Day riots which scarred London,²⁷ Ken Livingstone was elected Mayor of London three days later, New Labour's official candidate, Frank Dobson, only coming in a sorry third behind the Conservative candidate, Steven Norris.²⁸ Turnout was disappointingly low – some 33,5% - given the political climate in which the election had taken place and despite predictions, Livingstone failed to obtain the 50% required to be elected outright during this first round.²⁹ He had undoubtedly benefitted from the electorate's desire to punish New Labour for its management not only of the selection process but also for its overall political arrogance. But above all, it was his maverick style, rhetoric and political independence which had appealed to everyday Londoners only too willing to use the ballot box to express their positive perception of these qualities and their negative reaction to "Blair's mayor". By electing "citizen Ken", Londoners had sent Millbank a clear message about how they considered their capital should be governed with the advantage of not handing over any power to the Conservatives.³⁰

²⁶ Ken4London, "Ken Livingstone's Manifesto for London", document prepared by Simon Fletcher, member of the "Livingstone for London" team.

²⁷ On May 1st London hosts an anti-capitalist demonstration. In 2000, a handful of violent protesters marred the otherwise peaceful event and the ensuing riots left the statue of Winston Churchill and the Cenotaph soiled by graffiti which considerably shocked public opinion. *The Sun* quite openly associated Livingstone with the rioters and with a photo of them on the front page their headline ran: "A vote for Ken is a vote for them", *The Sun*, 3 May 2000.

²⁸ At the same time, the Labour Party gained 9 seats on the London assembly as did the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats 4 and the Green Party 3. In 2004 the figures were 7, 9, 5 and 2 while UKIP obtained 2 seats. In the 2008 elections the figures stand at 8, 11, 3 and 2, with UKIP not winning a single seat whereas the British National Party obtained one. For full details see Timothy WHITTON, *Ken "le rouge" et la Mairie de Londres : Du Greater London Council à la Greater London Authority*, *op. cit.*, annexes I, II & III, 195-198.

²⁹ For full results see *ibid*, 81-82 & annexe V.

³⁰ This attitude was confirmed time and again by the popular support that ordinary Londoners would give the mayor. See for example '[...] A small gaggle of supporters cheered him as he entered court Number 3 to hear the minute detail of Transport for London's claim that the Government's procurement of private firms was unlawful',

The Mayor of London and central government were very quickly to cross swords about the PPP for the London underground and their relationship was to be dogged by this conflict for the next two years. As if to reaffirm his independence and show that policies for London would not be dictated by New Labour, Livingstone also swiftly announced his intention to set up the congestion charge which was to be the greatest success of his first mandate: drivers entering the centre of London would have to pay a daily charge or risk being fined. This corresponded both to his election pledges and to the legislation creating the GLA which clearly stipulates that the mayor is fully entitled to charge people for using roads within the area under his authority on condition that any profit made should be reinvested in public transport.³¹ Livingstone made his case for the congestion charge in precisely this way stating that his aim was to reduce traffic and therefore air pollution while improving public transport at the same time. This sort of project tallied perfectly with New Labour's thirst for the sort of innovation that would enable them to become a beacon for political renewal beyond the boundaries of the United Kingdom. Given the potential success of such a project and the political credibility likely to be gained by its instigator, questions were quickly raised about the reintegration of Livingstone into the ranks of the Labour Party. It was quite clear that both sides stood to reap greater benefit from working together than as opposing forces and Livingstone was quite aware that he would be able to sell his collaboration with central government at a high price. CrossRail³² was one major project he was particularly interested in as well as a new bridge across the Thames, both being the ideal way to leave a lasting legacy of his work as mayor of London.

As both sides made their cases for and against PPP, resorting to the expertise of numerous accountants and other forms of assessment, all paid for out of public funds it must be said, New Labour prepared and won the General Election in 2001. This meant that they could apply increasing pressure to their PPP project in London and gradually the resistance organised by the mayor began to dwindle. It must be added that one of the keys to the success of his congestion charge was the improvement of public transport given that it would have to absorb a substantial increase in the number of passengers. To this end, slowing down the renovation of the underground meant jeopardising the capacity of public transport to accompany the desired switch from private cars to buses, trains and the tube. This probably

in Paul Waugh, "Livingstone vents his fury as his bid to rejoin Labour fails; mayoral election: former GLC leader ends a hectic day still an independent after NEC blocks his aim of standing for the party in 2004", *The Independent*, 24 July 2002.

³¹ *The Greater London Authority Act*, 1999, section 295, "Road User Charging".

³² CrossRail is a rail line that will link up Shenfield in the east of London to Maidenhead in the west.

accounted for Livingstone's choice to abandon legal proceedings against the government in July 2002 concerning the PPP for the underground³³ while at the same time the private company Capita was busy installing the necessary equipment to make the centre of London ready for the congestion charge.³⁴ Nevertheless, when on July 24th, City Hall was inaugurated by the Queen, Livingstone was informed that the Labour Party's NEC had voted 17 to 13 against reducing his five year exclusion from the party. The decision was painful, but Blair, Brown, Clarke and Prescott had been particularly efficient in twisting the arms of the reticent, those who believed that Livingstone would be far more useful inside the party than waging trench warfare from outside. Surprisingly enough it was the "left-wing troublemaker of the committee", Dennis Skinner, who led calls to maintain the exclusion explaining that Livingstone would never be a team player and that "principles cost in life".³⁵ It was not so much a call to the arms of New Labour, as a criticism of Livingstone's tendency to use personality rather than politics to obtain satisfaction. This was enough to sway the NEC and the mayor's political future now depended more than ever on the success of the congestion charge.³⁶

The charge was to come into force on February 17th 2003 at the beginning of the school holidays so as to take advantage of a foreseeable drop in traffic. Despite an underground accident which had seriously disrupted transport in the centre of the city at the end of January, Livingstone decided to go ahead with his plans and with the whole world looking on, the system came to life as planned at 7am on the 17th. None of the chaos that the media had foreseen actually occurred and apart from a few minor incidents largely caused by anti-congestion charge demonstrations, the system seemed to run quite smoothly. Government ministers begrudgingly acknowledged the success of the charge and during his monthly press conference in April, Tony Blair praised the mayor for his audacity in bringing it in. But Blair was looking beyond the limits of the congestion charge to the Olympic agenda knowing full well that Livingstone, mayor of London, would play a vital role in any attempt to bring the Games to Britain.

³³ Only to resume in January 2003 by appealing against the European Court of Justice's decision to approve the PPP. His appeal was subsequently rejected.

³⁴ This meant erecting signposts, painting large "C"s on the roads to indicate the congestion charge zone and setting up the sophisticated camera system designed to take photos of car number plates.

³⁵ Patrick Wintour, "Ken's Friend: rejected by the new establishment but welcomed by the old – all in one day", *The Independent*, 24 July 2002.

³⁶ The congestion charge was initially established at £5. On July 4th 2005 it was increased to £8 and on January 4th 2011, to £10.

Reintegration, re-election and “Olympic” Ken

In November 2003, there was no doubt that the congestion charge had been a success and despite the statistics that were less optimistic than the official forecast, London was the first major city in the world to boast a sophisticated charging system capable of monitoring traffic in the centre of the city. The congestion charge had become part of life in London and was undeniably one of the jewels in Ken Livingstone’s crown, a true symbol of what he had to offer as mayor. New Labour therefore had a difficult task given that it would lose significant face if it decided to reintegrate him at this point in time solely for the purposes of the 2004 mayoral election. On the other hand, there was no getting round the fact that despite his frequent outbursts about questions that had little to do with his mandate as mayor of London,³⁷ he was popular and would inevitably play a vital role in London’s bid to host the Olympic Games. John Prescott and Gordon Brown loathed him and Blair brushed the issue off by saying that the NEC would be responsible for the decision. Behind the scenes, however, the Prime Minister politely ordered his lieutenants to make sure that Livingstone was brought back into the party well before the elections in May so that Labour could retain London.³⁸ Blair knew only too well that the local elections were going to be the ideal opportunity for the British electorate to give his party a bloody nose and that London had to be held at all costs.³⁹ The party’s prospective candidate, Nicky Gavron, was not versed in the murky turmoil of local politics and stood little chance of winning, especially if Livingstone were to stand once again as an independent.

So Mayor Livingstone just sat back and watched as New Labour sweated in trying to find a dignified way of bringing him back into the fold without being seen as giving in to the lure of electoral opportunism. They twisted and turned and in December, having informed Nicky Gavron that she would probably have to stand aside, they came up with the idea of inviting Livingstone to fulfil an electoral mission for the party which, if accepted, would automatically put an end to his exclusion. The press had another field day as did New Labour’s political opponents and in January, when the NEC finally voted the motion defining Livingstone’s mission and effectively terminating his exclusion, he candidly stated: “There

³⁷ The day before George Bush’s visit to London, Livingstone declared that the American president was the “greatest threat to life on this planet that we’ve most probably ever seen”, quoted in Nigel Morris, “The Bush State Visit: Livingstone says ‘Bush is greatest threat to life on planet’”, *The Independent*, 18 November 2003.

³⁸ On November 6th 2003, Blair and Livingstone opened a factory together in Dagenham and during the next few days a part of the press triumphantly claimed that “Blair wants Livingstone back!”. See for example *The Guardian*, 10 November 2003.

³⁹ There was a general feeling of disappointment with New Labour compounded by the very negative perception public opinion had of the—illegal—war in Iraq.

have been two dominant political figures of the last two decades: Blair and Thatcher. Both have tried to crush me—and both have failed.”⁴⁰ But it soon became clear that Livingstone’s readmission into the party had been a calculated decision when Gordon Brown declared officially that the government would finance a new bridge across the Thames.⁴¹ Two days later, Blair and Livingstone shook hands in front of the media to seal London’s bid for the 2012 Olympic Games and to all present, it seemed as if a new era of collaboration had dawned between the mayor of London and central government.

Yet it was not quite that simple given that the opinion polls had shown that Livingstone was likely to win the next election *whichever* capacity he chose to stand in.⁴² If he chose to defend the colours of the Labour Party it was because he stood to harness a great deal of personal gain from this decision while knowing full well that all GLA demands for financial help from central government would be made by the party’s official candidate rather than a renegade who, for the last four years, had been shunned. Even so, despite this new feeling of cooperation, reinforced by the tragic events of the bomb attacks in Madrid which highlighted just how vulnerable major cities were to terrorist attack,⁴³ Livingstone continued to play the maverick and, as if to underline his independence vis-à-vis central government, kept on voicing his opinions about income tax on the rich, Ariel Sharon, the Saudi Arabian Royal Family, George Bush, the corruption between the White House and the major oil companies and the Middle-East peace process to name but a few. Livingstone’s strategy was obvious: if he wanted to triumph once again in 2004 he needed the electorate to reconnect with “red” Ken, the candidate who would speak his mind and defend the interests of the capital without kowtowing to central government, especially a very unpopular one. And he knew he could do this within the safety of the electoral mission that he had been entrusted with by the NEC.

Livingstone’s strategy paid dividends because on June 10th, he held his head high once again while New Labour suffered in the local elections, undoubtedly paying heavily for its political record and above all its involvement in Iraq. Livingstone had taken a calculated risk by conniving once again with the Labour Party, winning with a slimmer margin than in 2000, but he was fully aware that future collaboration would be a question of give and take, especially concerning the respective roles that each would play in the plans to host the

⁴⁰ Quoted in Hugh Muir, “Blair and Thatcher tried to crush me. Both failed”, *The Guardian*, 31 May 2004.

⁴¹ The idea was to create a toll bridge between Beckton and Thamesmead.

⁴² The polls showed that he would win even if he were the Conservative Party’s candidate.

⁴³ On March 11th, 191 people were killed in a series of bomb attacks.

Olympic Games. Livingstone was not particularly interested in sport⁴⁴ but knew that Olympic funds would enable the regeneration of a 750-acre area⁴⁵ to the east of the capital that had been earmarked to accommodate the Games if given to London.⁴⁶ The problem was that Livingstone just could not hold his tongue and shortly after London's candidature had been made official, his altercation with a journalist from *The Evening Standard* was to cast serious doubts on his ability to manage the GLA's contribution to the Olympic effort.⁴⁷ New Labour cringed even more when shortly after the Olympic Evaluation Commission had left London, having spent a week reviewing the city's bid, not only did the mayor refuse to apologise for insulting the journalist but he took advantage of the press conference to once again vent his anger on various foreign leaders. The spokesman for the Commission informed the British government that the mayor of London would do better to keep a firm grip on his behaviour which in the tight contest looming between Paris and London for the Olympic Games could be a clinching factor. Meanwhile, New Labour was busy preparing for the next General Election to be held in May and it goes without saying that the Olympic bid was at the heart of their political message. Any embarrassment caused by the antics of "Blair's mayor" would most certainly have a negative impact on the outcome for New Labour.

The results of the 2005 General Election gave New Labour a third consecutive victory even so, but showed a clear reduction in the popular support for their political project. Once this hurdle had been crossed, all eyes quickly focused on Singapore where the result of the 2012 Olympic contest was to be announced. On July 6th 2005 there was a moment of sheer joy when Jacques Rogge announced that the Games had been awarded to London but it was short-lived. Within a few hours, London had been the target of the worst terrorist attacks in its history that claimed the lives of fifty-two people and injured hundreds of others. Speaking from his hotel in Singapore, Livingstone condemned the cowardice of the terrorists by stating

⁴⁴ Livingstone told the British Olympic Association's chief executive Simon Clegg: "I've got absolutely no interest in sport whatsoever; in fact the closest I got to sport was a snooker table at university 25 years ago. But if you run [a] London for the Olympics [campaign], you will have my complete and unequivocal support, and that of the Greater London Authority." Quoted in Dennis Campbell, "The day Coe won gold", *The Observer*, 10 July 2005.

⁴⁵ This area is called the Thames Gateway and is situated in the Lower Lea Valley.

⁴⁶ Contrary to popular belief, the Olympic Games are given to cities and not countries. This was made quite clear at the beginning of the campaign for the 2012 Games.

⁴⁷ Late in the evening on February 8th 2005, Livingstone emerged from City Hall having taken part in a celebration of the twentieth anniversary of former cabinet Chris Smith's "coming out". He was approached by *Evening Standard* journalist Oliver Finegold who, tape recorder in hand, asked the mayor to comment on the evening. Probably unaware that he was being taped, Livingstone insulted the journalist asking him if he was a German war criminal and whether he had been a concentration camp guard which, given that the man was Jewish, was seen as another sign of the mayor's anti-Semitism. Livingstone had a very difficult relationship with *The Evening Standard* and following this particular event had to strive hard in order not to alienate the Jewish vote in London.

that these attacks had killed ordinary everyday Londoners⁴⁸ and a week later he gave one of his most moving speeches in Trafalgar Square when he underlined how multicultural London would brace itself and withstand these tragic events.⁴⁹ New Labour could only admire “statesman” Livingstone and for some time he symbolised the massive rejection of everything the terrorists stood for. This was not only to take him to new heights of popularity but it also meant that public opinion did not vent its anger so much on New Labour and gave them some breathing space for a short while. However, as was his wont, Livingstone managed yet again to reverse the tendency comprising his chances to win London for the third consecutive time.

The 2008 election: a downhill struggle

A week after 7/7 London was once again targeted by the terrorists but the blasts were small and no one was injured. In this climate of suspicion, Jean-Charles de Menezes, suspected by the police of being on the point of setting off a bomb carried in his back pack, was shot dead. In the aftermath of this tragic accident, Livingstone, while giving his full support to the police, publicly stated that in certain circumstances, in some parts of the world, oppressed people were driven to commit acts of terrorism. The Churchillian tone of his reaction to 7/7 suddenly sounded false and the press reminded the public of Livingstone’s connivance, a year earlier, with Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a controversial Muslim preacher. When questioned about this, Livingstone sparked off an uproar in the Catholic community by suggesting that al-Qaradawi was like the Pope insofar as he was a major reformer within his religious community. As the summer wore on, Livingstone’s popularity ratings fell and Londoners began to pin the blame on him for a variety of tribulations that their city was having to deal with: there were fewer shoppers in the city centre which was obviously bad for business, the beloved “Imperial” buses or Routemasters were gradually being phased out and replaced by the hated “bendy buses” and the congestion charge had been increased. But it was the erection of the statue of a naked, handicapped and pregnant woman in Trafalgar Square that really made Londoners wonder about their mayor’s governance of their city.⁵⁰ Just as he

⁴⁸ Less than half of those killed had Anglo-Saxon first names.

⁴⁹ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BSIBPsL9c>>, retrieved on 23 June 2011. The rally was called “London United”.

⁵⁰ The statue was called “Alison Lapper Pregnant” and was placed on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square normally reserved for pieces of contemporary art which are changed on a regular basis. The statue is 3.6 meters high and was sculpted by artist Marc Quinn. Alison Lapper is a British artist born in 1965 who suffered from a rare medical condition called phocomelia. For further details, see: <<http://www.alisonlapper.com/>>.

had brought the Labour Party into disrepute with his antics during the 1980s, Livingstone was having precisely the same effect on New Labour twenty years later. As if this was not enough to tarnish his reputation, Livingstone also lost his court case concerning his verbal abuse of a Jewish journalist and in February 2006, was suspended for one month from his job of mayor of London.⁵¹ Although he won his appeal, the relationship between the GLA and the Jewish community of London had become strained especially when the mayor publicly insulted the Reuben brothers, two of the main partners of the consortium responsible for building the Olympic village.⁵² The American ambassador was his next target⁵³ for not paying the congestion charge and in April, when Livingstone went to Beijing to tour the Olympic infrastructure, he cheerfully told the press that Britain should take a long hard look at herself as far as human rights were concerned given the way in which members of the IRA had been tortured. He also reminded journalists of the way in which the Australian aborigines had been dealt with by the British authorities and declared that the events on Tiananmen Square and the Poll Tax were comparable.⁵⁴

The result of this attitude was that Livingstone was portrayed in the press as lording over London and *The Evening Standard* upped its relentless campaign to point out the weaknesses in his governance. The Olympic budget which quickly spiralled out of control to reach figures that nobody could really relate to was a case in point and when in May 2006, the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, visited Britain but refused to meet Blair preferring to spend time with the Mayor of London, the idea that Livingstone was creating a “Kenocracy” began to circulate in the media. The “brooms for oil” deal that the two brokered, whereby Venezuela promised to sell London cheap oil in exchange for expertise on urban and traffic management, was portrayed as being the way in which Livingstone had come to view London as being “his” city, not in the sense that he had embodied in his post 7/7 speech but that he was surrounding himself with his cronies in order to run the capital. The extension of the congestion charge was another example of how Livingstone was somehow losing his “citizen Ken” touch with his electorate for despite consultation that showed an overwhelming hostility

⁵¹ In December 2005, Livingstone the “citizen” had been cleared but this second hearing dealt with Livingstone the public servant.

⁵² See for example Jill Sherman, “Gaffe lands Livingstone back in trouble”, *The Times*, 22 March 2006.

⁵³ Livingstone referred to him publicly as a “chiselling little crook”, Helen McCormack, “‘A little crook’: Ken’s undiplomatic name for US ambassador”, *The Independent*, 28 March 2006. The ambassador considered the congestion charge as a tax and therefore maintained that embassy vehicles should not pay it. Needless to say that the GLA thought otherwise.

⁵⁴ Frank Kane, “Dispatch—Citizen Ken takes the Chinese by charm: It all started with that Tiananmen gaffe but, as Frank Kane reports from Beijing, the longer the Mayor’s trip went on, the more we saw a different side to the ‘old anarchist’ as he won over the new Chinese breed of totalitarian capitalist with some straight-from-the-shoulder salesmanship”, *The Observer*, 16 April 2006.

to the project, he had decided to go ahead believing that it was the GLA's role to continue improving air quality while convincing car drivers to switch to public transport. The downside of this was that Livingstone was becoming associated with the government's extremely unpopular plans to introduce road charges on a national scale and Downing Street was only too pleased to share the responsibility for this with the GLA.

Despite Livingstone's waning popularity, he still seemed to have no serious opponent able to take the job of London mayor away from him in the forthcoming 2008 elections. In an effort to renew New Labour's appeal, Tony Blair had been replaced by Gordon Brown but this did not stop Livingstone from yet again confronting his party about the PPP for the underground when one of the major companies involved, Metronet, declared itself bankrupt. This was exactly the sort of incident that Livingstone had dreaded, quite apart from his ideological desire to see the underground run by Londoners through their democratically elected council. Any major financial incident concerning the thirty-year contracts signed within the framework of the PPP meant employing an army of lawyers to determine the responsibilities of the parties involved. Gordon Brown on the other hand, stuck to his guns, out of his distaste for Livingstone but also because of the economic orthodoxy that had given him the reputation of being the "Iron" Chancellor and which he intended to pursue as Prime Minister. Although the GLA would be heavily involved in the renovation of the underground, Metronet would be replaced by another private company to guarantee the continuity of the PPP. To sugar the pill however, Brown also gave the final go-ahead for the construction of CrossRail and above all for the £16-billion costs that this would involve.

But all in all, Livingstone had lowered his guard and was boosted by another popular success when the first stage of the *Tour de France* was organised in London in July 2007; nothing seemed to be in his way to win a third mandate. The press quite openly declared that Livingstone would be elected without any challenger not because opposing him would be futile but through a lack of any credible rival. And this was exactly where the Conservative candidate, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson knew he had a serious card to play because he could tackle Livingstone on his own turf by personalising his campaign as much as possible so that the electorate would relate to him rather than his policies. The issue for any opponent was that Livingstone could now be judged on what he had accomplished and whatever their feelings were towards their mayor, Londoners easily associated him very positively with the Oyster card, the congestion charge and the Olympic Games. It had to be acknowledged that Livingstone had given London back the voice that had been missing for fourteen long years after the abolition of the GLC in 1986. This is why the Conservative candidate very quickly

dropped his full name and was referred to solely as “Boris” just as the incumbent mayor had relied on “Ken” to make himself a more familiar face in London households.

Yet when it came to the election campaign that really took off in January 2008, perhaps the Conservative candidate’s masterstroke was his slogan which read quite simply “Time for a Change”⁵⁵ as opposed to Livingstone’s “Vote for London—Ken”. The *Evening Standard* was mercilessly underlining the weak points in Livingstone’s two mandates and when the mayor’s right-hand man, Lee Jasper, was forced to leave office after several financial scandals had been unearthed, the mayor’s slightly amateurish approach to the management of London’s finances was emphasised with the ever increasing costs of the Olympic Games providing his enemies with a constant source of ammunition. Meanwhile, “Ken’s friends” were the focus of a great deal of media attention and just as public opinion had fallen out of love with New Labour, the tide turned sufficiently away from Livingstone for Johnson to become the second mayor of London on May 1st 2008.

Livingstone’s defeat can be put down to a multitude of factors but a handful stands out as having sealed his fate. Firstly, the sleaze that had begun to surround the mayor at City Hall, especially given that it went hand in hand with his penchant for cronyism. Secondly, the sort of financial management that did not tally with the requirements of the city’s colossal budget. Thirdly, his multicultural approach to “all things London” which had begun to leave the majority bewildered and resenting the attention constantly paid to the minorities. But above all, after two mandates, Londoners felt that they could no longer relate to their mayor as “our” Ken; he was no longer one of theirs and had colluded with New Labour to the extent that he really had become “Blair’s mayor”.

Conclusion

Ken Livingstone’s political ideology certainly matured during his time in office at the GLA and even though his penchant for provocation and controversy remained intact, he did manage to take on board some of the more general economic principles espoused by New Labour. Yet in doing so, he resisted the dogmatism of modernisation which seemed to be the leitmotiv dictating so many of New Labour’s policy choices. Livingstone was successful in

⁵⁵ This was invented by the Australian political strategist Lynton Crosby who had been drafted in to run Johnson’s election campaign. Crosby had managed to win four successive victories for the Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

that he constantly managed to defend his decisions as being the best “deal” for London. This personal brand of politics enabled him to keep abreast of contemporary politics without excluding him from choices that were reminiscent of “old” Labour and which Londoners could relate to with some affection especially at times when national politics were so lacklustre.

Had Livingstone managed to remain faithful to the brand name that he had established rather than to his obsessive possessiveness of the capital city, then chances are 2008 would have been a different story. This would have enabled him to maintain a distinct political profile and keep him above the murky turmoil of everyday municipal politics. As it happened, he had become too embroiled in the everyday running of the capital to the extent that whilst campaigning, Londoners would question him about the nitty-gritty of running such a huge city leaving his opponent a better opportunity to expound on a more glamorous agenda for the capital. Boris Johnson became the star whilst the relationship between the incumbent mayor and his political party was ambiguous enough for their political trajectories to cross at some points thus leaving the electorate in doubt about whom they would actually be voting for.

Livingstone made no secret about wanting to be candidate for the 2012 mayoral elections and in September 2010 won the Labour Party’s nomination yet again. His relationship with Labour has indeed been tumultuous over the years especially when he has symbolised the “old” Labour that the modernisers have striven so hard to relegate to the forgotten past. But neither has Labour always been fair to one of the most maverick politicians that the party has ever fostered to the extent that on many occasions between them, it has been difficult to distinguish between the rose and the thorn. If Livingstone fails to become mayor again in 2012 and retires, he will most certainly devote a substantial part of his memoirs to the way in which he stood up to some of the most powerful political leaders and parties in recent British history. For all his failings, this is certainly how he will be remembered and admired for the most.

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