



UK: Corbyn's Labour Shadow Cabinet Reshuffle, Political Accommodation with « New Labour » Blairites

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Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn never misses an opportunity to strengthen the right wing of his party by his political cowardice and overarching desire for compromise at all costs. His first cabinet reshuffle has proved to be no exception.

Billed by his opponents as a “revenge reshuffle” and by his supporters as an occasion to deal with the most openly disloyal ministers—who have publicly opposed him on key policies such as bombing Syria and renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system—it fell far short.

For 30 hours, beginning Monday and ending early Wednesday morning, Corbyn negotiated—and sought to reach an accommodation with—those he was supposed to be intent on booting out of high office.

Reporters could not believe what was happening as they waited for history’s longest reshuffle to conclude. On Tuesday, Conservative prime minister David Cameron mocked Corbyn in parliament over its duration, and in the end, all that emerged was a rotten compromise.

Supposed number-one target for removal, Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, kept his post. In the December 2 House of Commons debate on Syria, Benn was allowed to speak after Corbyn in making the [closing speech](#) for the official opposition and supported bombing. Applauded and cheered on by the Tories, he then led 11 other shadow cabinet members (out of 28) and a total of 66 Labour MPs into the lobby with Cameron—securing him a higher-than-expected majority of 174.

All it took for Benn to keep his post was a worthless assurance that in future he would back Corbyn’s positions in his role as shadow foreign secretary. This is made more ludicrous still because it was Corbyn who gave him the ability to speak for the shadow cabinet in the first place.

Corbyn’s climb-down on Benn was probably viewed by his advisers as a necessary quid pro quo to allow for some more minor political tinkering, especially after 10 shadow cabinet members threatened to resign if he went. In any event, he finally moved Shadow Defence Secretary Maria Eagle to Culture, due to her support for Trident, and got rid of just two of his more vocal critics, Shadow Culture Secretary Michael Dugher, who made way for Eagle, and Shadow Europe Secretary Pat McFadden.

Dugher, a prominent Zionist, has occupied himself almost exclusively with attacking Corbyn and his supporters. McFadden made perhaps the most damaging attack when he asked Cameron in the House of Commons after the Paris terror attacks “to reject the view that sees terrorist acts as always being a response or a reaction to what we in the West do.” The remarks chimed with Tory attempts to cast their opponents as apologists for terrorism, culminating in Cameron’s description of all those who opposed bombing Syria as “terrorist sympathisers.”

Corbyn’s main ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, spent Wednesday morning justifying the reshuffle and its supposed merits.

McDonnell said Benn had agreed not to disagree with the leader from the front bench, to which Benn replied that he would be carrying on with his job “exactly as before”.

McDonnell said that Corbyn in fact agreed with McFadden that terrorists were responsible for what they did, whereas McFadden was implying that Corbyn believed there were excuses for terrorism.

Finally, Corbyn had conducted the reshuffle in a consensual way because he “is a very caring and considerate person and he wanted to listen to people’s views. He wanted to be as inclusive as possible in reviewing our performance over the last few months, so literally he’s been bringing people in, taking their advice, talking to them. ...”

It was, McDonnell added, “never going to be this hyped-up Night of the Long Knives.”

Indeed, it was not.

The Labour Party right, having emerged largely unscathed, immediately went back on the offensive—beginning with a torrent of statements in support of its freshly minted martyrs, Dugher, McFadden and Eagle, and ending with the resignation in protest by three junior shadow ministers.

Jonathan Reynolds, shadow minister for rail, and Stephen Doughty, shadow foreign office minister, resigned in defence of McFadden. Kevan Jones resigned as a shadow armed forces minister in opposition to the removal of his boss, Maria Eagle, and her replacement by the anti-Trident Emily Thornberry.

McDonnell described the three as members of a “narrow right-wing clique”—a barb that was less than effective given his earlier endorsement of Corbyn’s “caring and considerate” approach to the actual leaders of that clique.

Press commentary was, for the most part, scathing towards Corbyn. Here was yet another test of strength and will, and one that he had failed.

The most determined opponent of Corbyn and defender of the Labour right is the *Guardian*. In its pages, Michael White could barely contain his glee, describing Dugher as possibly “a formidable lieutenant to whoever it is that emerges as the standard bearer of the post-Corbyn generation of Labour politicians, ones who seek to win elections, not to lead a self-satisfied protest movement.”

For his part, Steve Richards sought to explain Corbyn’s “impotence” as the result of his being “elected on a distinct policy agenda that is opposed by most of his MPs. Does he cast

aside his MPs in order to adopt his agenda, or bring them on board and drop some of his deeply held convictions?”

Richards maintains that, to this question, “There are no obvious answers. Every twist and turn since he became leader arises from this bizarre context.”

In fact, the answers are there for all to see.

Corbyn’s supporters in the rank-and-file of the party want nothing more than to see Benn et al. kicked out of the party. Instead, whenever Corbyn has been posed with the choice of standing in defence of the political agenda on which he was popularly elected and coming into conflict with his cabinet or his MPs, he has behaved as a political invertebrate.

He is the archetypal representative of what little remains of the Labour “left”—someone who has spent decades registering his personal protest at Labour’s right-wing policies without this once having any real consequences or impact on his cosseted life in Westminster. Now, having been catapulted into a leadership position by popular demands for a left alternative, Corbyn can no longer hide the fact that his loyalties are first and foremost to the party apparatus he now leads.

Ultimately, this is not a personality question.

Corbyn’s perspective is a false one. He claims that Labour can be transformed, or rather gently persuaded by his “new politics” of consensus building, to function as a political vehicle to defend the interests of working people. It cannot. The political character of Labour as a defender of the interests of big business and British imperialism has been shaped over decades and cannot be altered by the election of a new leader advancing a few minor reforms and making pacifist noises, even when he is backed by an influx of new members.

Rather, the struggle against austerity, militarism and war demands the political mobilisation of the working class in opposition to the Labour Party and the trade unions, which act as the first-line defenders of capitalism and implacable opponents of socialism.

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