

The Times, 20th November 2016: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/benn-at-risk-as-vengeful-hard-left-seizes-seat-zcf6hv0fg>

Benn at risk as vengeful hard left seizes seat

Andrew Gilligan

HILARY BENN, who led the summer's failed "coup" against Jeremy Corbyn, is facing deselection after hardleft activists seized control of his local Labour party and demanded his head.

Benn, the former shadow foreign secretary and now chairman of the Commons Brexit committee, has been a hate figure for the left since arguing against Corbyn for military action in Syria.

He was then sacked from the shadow cabinet after allegedly canvassing support for a coup against Corbyn, triggering mass resignations by colleagues and a leadership contest.

At the recent annual general meeting (AGM) of his Leeds Central constituency party, Benn looked on as his allies were "replaced with Corbyn supporters to a man or woman", according to a Facebook post, now removed, by one of the successful candidates, Stewart Dunbar. All 13 of the constituency officers are Corbynites. "Hilary Benn's face was a picture," he added.

The takeover was organised over "three to four months' hard work" in informal caucus meetings, Dunbar said.

The leader of the campaign, Patrick Hall, said he was among "quite a few" people who would vote to oust Benn. "When the selection process comes round, which might be very soon, people will have a chance to decide," he said.

"What he did in the summer, trying to undermine Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, that went down very badly."

Hall, who was elected vicechairman for membership, stressed he was speaking as an individual. However, he is one of three key Leeds Central officers to openly call for Benn's sacking. The new constituency secretary, Caroline Isle, signed a petition on the www.change.org website to "deselect Hilary Benn as Leeds Central MP".

The new constituency chairman, Simon Hewitt, wrote in the hard-left journal Labour Briefing last year that it was "essential that leftwingers organise to trigger reselection" of anti-Corbyn MPs.

Hall is, and Hewitt was, a national executive member of the Labour representation committee, a hard-left group chaired by the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, and closely linked to the Momentum organisation.

Benn is the highest-profile MP to face a constituency takeover as officers come up for re-election in the AGM season.

But elsewhere the hard left has suffered setbacks. Rachel Reeves, in neighbouring Leeds West, lost only one officer to Corbyn supporters.

In Walthamstow, northeast London, supporters of Stella Creasy, the seat's moderate MP, kept control in a meeting on Thursday night, while Harriet Harman and Wes Streeting, two other anti-Corbyn MPs, also saw off takeover attempts.

Moderates won a clean sweep at Labour's national policy forum yesterday.

Wallasey, in Merseyside, Angela Eagle's constituency party, which was taken over by the hard left in the summer, remains suspended after Eagle's office was attacked and homophobic abuse directed against her at a party meeting.

It is understood disciplinary action will begin shortly against those allegedly responsible, potentially removing them from their posts.

Richard Angell, director of Progress, the centre-right grouping in Labour, said it was "disgraceful" that the hard left was targeting a "brilliant MP" such as Benn. "Jeremy Corbyn has put us on a general election footing - and that means campaigning against Tory, not Labour MPs," he said.

Friends of Benn insisted he was "relaxed" about events in Leeds, saying he had a "good relationship" with local members, but admitted: "At a time when Hilary is one of our last defences against a hard Brexit, it's been a slight distraction."

Benn's supporters were also taking comfort from the news last night that Hewitt had resigned as chairman on health grounds, leaving the possibility that at least one supportive officer could be elected.