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## LABOUR LEADERSHIP CONTEST ENTERS FINAL HOURS

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BBC

Owen Smith and Jeremy Corbyn are making their final pitches for support as Labour's leadership contest draws to a close.

Voting ends at 12:00 BST on Wednesday, with the result announced at a special conference in Liverpool on Saturday.

Mr Smith said Labour was "at a crossroads" between pursuing power and "ongoing division and opposition".

Mr Corbyn thanked his supporters for their efforts, saying: "Together we are very, very strong."

The Islington North MP is the favourite to win the contest, which has exposed stark divisions between the leadership and most MPs.

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Both candidates have spoken of the need to bring the party together after the result is announced.

Rule changes

In an "open letter" to Labour supporters, Mr Smith said he had been "inspired" by the members he had encountered during the campaign and was "proud" of the policies he had put forward.

He said the Conservatives were following a "hard-right agenda, which could do untold damage to our country", adding that "unless we have a radical, credible opposition to the Tories then we won't be able to stop them - now or at the next election".

"That's the straight talking, honest truth. I regret the state we are in but I don't regret being the one to say it," he said.

Mr Corbyn visited volunteers who made 10,000 phone calls to party members on the final full day of campaigning, on what they called "Super Tuesday".

Mr Corbyn said his supporters had been "reaching out, involving people in politics that matters".

"When we're campaigning we're reaching out to people to say: "Austerity - doesn't have to be,

student fees don't have to be, homelessness doesn't have to be, inequality doesn't have to be, discrimination doesn't have to be'.

"Whatever the result is, we - all of us - have mounted the most incredible campaign, mobilised a lot of people, and we've actually changed the political discourse in this country."

Shadow chancellor John McDonnell, who also met supporters on Tuesday, was bullish about Mr Corbyn's chances, saying: "I think we're going to win."

Meanwhile, another battle - over the party's internal rules - took place at a meeting of Labour's ruling National Executive Committee.

Deputy leader Tom Watson wants to change the rules so the shadow cabinet is elected by MPs, while Mr Corbyn backs a wider review of party democracy which could include a stronger role for trade unions.

Members were unable to reach a compromise after eight hours of talks.

Mr Watson said the proposal could help Labour "put the band back together" for a possible early election.

A proposal to decide on the details of the plan ahead of Saturday's leadership election result was voted down, by 16 votes to 15.

Mr Corbyn was among those to vote against it, but did agree to further talks with Mr Watson and other senior figures before the next NEC meeting this weekend, at the party's conference in Liverpool.

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