

## **South East Regional Board, 15 June 2019**

The meeting welcomed Ellie Buck, acting regional director while Amy Fode is on maternity leave. Carol Hayton and Joyce Still, national policy forum representatives, encouraged members to engage with the current consultation process, while recognising that the deadline of 30 June gave little time. They offered to visit local parties to assist with discussion.

Rosie Duffield MP and Peter Kyle MP gave parliamentary updates. Rosie said that the local mood was positive and upbeat: Canterbury gained six council seats and now had a Labour group of ten, though the Euro-elections were difficult, including among our own members. Peter reported that after 2 May Labour led Brighton and Hove council with a majority of one and was implementing a transformative manifesto, including a housebuilding programme and electric charging points. In a heavily Remain area Labour now had to win back support after the European elections. He stressed that the south-east MPs worked closely together, for instance on changing the law so that perpetrators of domestic violence could not directly cross-examine their victims. Labour should be proud of our achievements on Brexit, with 203 Labour MPs supporting a confirmatory ballot, compared with 11 LibDems, the lone Green, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and a few Tories. No other party had the numbers to stop no deal or a bad Tory deal.

Members regretted that some Labour MPs, including party chair Ian Lavery, defied the whip, and asked how we could be more supportive. Peter responded that it was important to recognise the way that south-east MPs had voted, and to speak politely to others who took a different line. There was no easy way through this: the benefits of a second ballot were not evenly distributed and he was happy to visit and campaign in disaffected areas.

### **Round Three**

We then moved to elect a chair. To recap: the December meeting agreed, after several 12-12 tied votes, that Lisa Fricker and Vince Maple should be co-chairs. This arrangement was approved by the NEC, and in February a balanced working group reflecting all tendencies recommended its continuation. I believe that this sent a powerful message of unity, and brought the region together geographically and politically. However some were not satisfied, and in March the board voted 11-9 to scrap job-sharing. On the regional director's advice an election was deferred to this meeting. Lisa and Vince were nominated and, after clarifying who was entitled to vote, Vince was elected 13-11. I voted for Vince, but regret that this was necessary. However he reminded us that our common enemies are the people wearing blue rosettes. Sarah Cundy was elected as youth officer, and Arran Neathey to represent the Co-op, both unanimously.

### **Reaching Out**

Gordon Lean, the trade union representative, was seeking to build union participation within local parties. I suggested that he should write a note for CLP secretaries to pass on to their trade union liaison officers. However there is already a regional trade union liaison organisation which brings all affiliated unions together, and works directly with the regional party, so clearly this must be involved.

David Hide, the CLP representative, was away, heading for Snowdon and the Three Peaks Challenge, which filled the more sedentary among us with admiration. Gemma Bolton read his report. He hoped to facilitate sharing good practice, allaying fears about campaigning and standing as candidates, and building capacity. An easy-to-use handbook for members was suggested, and Ellie said that an information pack for new members is in preparation. CLPs would be asked what support would be useful to them.

On backup from the regional office, Ellie was seeking permission to recruit a deputy regional director while she is covering for Amy, and a replacement for one of our three organisers who is leaving. The vacancy for the administrator, who is also changing jobs, has been advertised. The board gave her whole-hearted support, pointing out, again, that the south-east region is the largest, but often has the fewest resources.

Nada al-Sanjari, the equalities officer, reported on issues raised with her regarding race and disability.

A number of people reported access problems with meeting rooms and constituency offices. Mid-Sussex CLP had obtained a grant from the NEC development fund to make improvements, and this fund had also supported a disability network in Oxford, which increased participation and representation of disabled members. Opportunities to apply for financial assistance should be better publicised.

I highlighted hearing difficulties, especially for older members and in rooms with poor acoustics. In discussion others raised the need for shortlisting and selection processes to be non-discriminatory, the occasional use of unacceptable language, deficiencies of the party's complaints procedure, the importance of training, support for members under attack, and the impact of the rise of the far right on politics and on society. The board agreed that a steering group would assist Nada, and Gemma Bolton, Michaela Collord, Sarah Cundy, Lisa Fricker and Naushabah Khan volunteered. On a specific issue, Ellie would find out how many south-east members had been accepted onto the Bernie Grant training programme.

## **Growing from the Grassroots**

Naushabah, representing councillors and socialist societies, was working on a package to promote women's representation, and learning lessons from the local elections. Members stressed the key role of town and parish councils: in parts of the south-east this was the only level with elected Labour representation, and a first step on the ladder to power. Labour now controlled town councils in Witney and Folkestone and gained four seats in Ringwood in the New Forest, and Tunbridge Wells had elected a Labour deputy mayor. The national party took little interest: town and parish councillors were not included in the ALC (association of Labour councillors) or covered by the rulebook, so the board agreed that the south-east should develop its own networks for mutual support and sharing experiences. Vince reported that these issues were raised with Andrew Gwynne MP, the local government minister, at the recent Effective Opposition conference.

In May the region bucked the national trend, with a net gain of 73 council seats plus 16 notional gains in councils with new boundaries, a total of nearly 500. Labour increased its representation in Medway, Milton Keynes and Slough, helped to oust UKIP from control of Thanet, and took power in Gravesham. In Oxfordshire, outside the city, candidates and activists worked hard and won seats in Banbury, Didcot and Chipping Norton. Other areas deserved better results, but here and elsewhere the Euro-elections were already influencing voters. Young members and students were prominent in key campaigns.

## **Europe and Brexit**

Ellie thanked panel members who, with NEC representatives, longlisted from more than 130 applicants, interviewed 18 candidates, and decided the order of the regional list. As with the snap election in 2017 there was no time for ordinary members to have a say, but I believe this was understood and accepted.

Arran Neathey, third on the list, thanked everyone who had voted Labour and helped with the campaign, and gave a personal account from the inside, followed by a wide-ranging discussion. One member felt that Labour's policy was clear: to leave the European Union with a soft Brexit including a customs union. A referendum was only required on a Tory deal. Others thought that Labour's message on bringing the country together was the right one, but the country had to want to be brought together for this to work. Despite reservations a second referendum, win or lose, might now be the only way through, and the time to adopt this would have been when talks with Theresa May broke down. There were different views on how far the European campaign would carry over to a general election, and whether the loss of Labour voters was temporary or longer-lasting: the pundit John Curtice had warned of the dangers for both Remain and Leave camps of reading too much into the results.

Most speakers would have liked more input into election literature, with local and regional content, pictures of our candidates rather than Nigel Farage, and messages about what Labour MEPs had achieved on workers' rights, tax avoidance, environmental and consumer protection, and health and safety. "Brussels red tape" and common building standards could help to prevent future Grenfells: the alternative was a race to the bottom, with the cheapest option always winning out. The NHS and bobbies on the beat were domestic matters, but most policies could have had a European angle: mentioning the European arrest warrant in connection with crime, and pensions in the context of British pensions being the lowest in Europe. I asked about targeting and the advice to concentrate on middle-class wards where turnout would be high and minds already made up, rather than more traditional Labour areas where getting out the vote could have made a positive difference.

In conclusion the board agreed to write to thank all the candidates, including John Howarth MEP who held the tenth place by the skin of his teeth. John's written report was noted.

## Future Selections

Ellie reported that Aldershot, Banbury and Basingstoke had selected their parliamentary candidates and Gravesham and Chatham & Aylesford would start shortly, followed by Rochester & Strood and Gillingham & Rainham. As at previous meetings CLP representatives asked urgently for permission to choose candidates in all seats, and I have continued to raise Buckingham, in a unique position as the Speaker's constituency. Unfortunately only the NEC can authorise selections, so all I can do is to recommend that members keep lobbying their elected NEC representatives. It should be easier and quicker if a light-touch selection procedure was devised for seats further down the target list, but there is no sign of this happening. We also do not know when the NEC will schedule trigger ballots in Labour-held seats.

For police and crime commissioner candidates only Thames Valley can proceed, as more applicants are needed for the other four areas. Last time individual members chose their candidates in OMOV ballots. This has been replaced by meetings within each CLP casting votes weighted by membership, cheaper for the national party but more costly and onerous for CLPs. Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire are both in the Thames Valley and I am just getting to grips with this as the procedure is somewhat sketchy.

## More Reports

As well as the Effective Opposition conference, Vince reported on initiatives regarding councillors and mental health. He and others also raised the difficulties faced by councillors on universal credit, where their full allowance is treated as income even though they have to pay a percentage to their Labour group. The levy should be exercised flexibly to take this into account. Former minister Eric Pickles had removed pension rights from councillors, and Andrew Gwynne MP was aware of this problem.

Tan Dhesi MP reported from Slough, the only constituency in the south-east where Labour topped the poll in the Euro-election, taking on the far right and winning. Party membership had doubled, though this brought its own difficulties. He said that debate in the parliamentary Labour party was not personal, but passionate because MPs cared so much, and it was deeply disappointing that the opportunity of seeing off a no-deal Brexit had been lost. The next moves were not clear.

## AOB

Four other matters were raised at the end of the agenda. First, members were concerned about local Labour clubs disaffiliating from national Labour Students, which could damage close working and campaigning relationships at constituency level. The board was told that this arose from dissatisfaction about recent elections within Labour Students and lack of accountability. Vince and Sarah Cundy, the youth representative, would write to seek more information.

Second, members asked about media reports of delay in negotiating a pay deal for party staff, due from the start of 2019. Members agreed that the party should be a "best in class" employer, including with respect to maternity and paternity leave. Backdating the eventual settlement would not help those who had left or were on low wages, and the board hoped for speedy resolution.

Third, Southampton Itchen was unable to meet the minimum quorum of 5% for its all-member meetings, which would require 36-37 members. They asked, and were granted, permission to use a quorum of 25 members. This may be useful to other CLPs who struggle to hold valid meetings. I took the opportunity to ask that the rulebook guideline of 5% should apply to wards in Oxford city as they select candidates for council elections in 2020, and I think this was agreed.

And fourth, members asked about the promised report on progress with complaints. The relevant department is experiencing high staff turnover, but Vince would follow this up as well. He has a lot of letters to write.

*NB this is a personal account and as with other individual or group reports should not be taken as an official record. It is written primarily for Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire CLPs, but I welcome comments and questions from all members in the region.*

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