

Open Labour, 21 September 2020, Connected

Hello, happy to be with you tonight, and hope that next year we can be together again in Brighton.

So, how can the NEC help Labour win again?

Now I've been away [from the NEC] for two years. I know the media are only interested in reporting splits, and I know from Alice Perry's brilliant local government reports that good work is being done behind the scenes, but the NEC has to look outwards and focus relentlessly on winning, in 2021 and every year through to the next general election.

I don't mean winning for the sake of winning, I mean winning for a purpose.

Take one example: some members worry about whether Labour might ditch the target of net zero carbon by 2030. Now there is no more important issue than the future of the planet, but unless Labour gets a share of power at the next general election, it will be 2030 before we can do anything about it. And winning the argument is not enough.

The next few months will see millions of people lose their jobs, mass evictions of private tenants, waiting lists going up for everything except Covid-19, new outbreaks in care homes, women, BAME and working-class people hit hardest. And I have no doubt that the Tories will blame the effects of Brexit on the virus as well, rather than their gift for making enemies around the world, and reneging on international laws which they themselves signed.

In opposition Labour can expose Boris Johnson's incompetence and heartlessness – and our MPs are doing that every day – but can't do much for those who need us. Labour councils and public services are doing heroic work, but are starved of cash. So we also have to use the time to develop post-Covid policies for health, social care, housing, jobs, schools, local government, trade union rights, the environment, the economy, through to the next election, and convince voters to trust us again.

The NEC has members from every part of the movement and every nation and region, and can give the leadership the intelligence that they need. Loyalty to the leader is not negotiable. It was wrong for members, including MPs, to undermine Jeremy Corbyn, and it is wrong to undermine Keir Starmer now. That does not mean sycophantic acquiescence. It does mean not tweeting "Resign!" every time I happen to disagree with him.

But CLP representatives have a particular responsibility to connect half a million members with the party's ruling body. I'm not suggesting another democracy review – I'm in favour of more democracy, as long as it doesn't just mean more meetings – but the relationship needs rebuilding.

Members want to influence policy. The 2017 and 2019 manifestos were written centrally and in haste, and there are no policy votes at this conference. The national policy forum is still a mystery to most, and the promised review seems to have been long-grassed, again. Most members don't have a Labour MP, many don't have Labour councillors, and they feel they have no voice. There is little good about coronavirus, but moving online, Labour MPs and NEC members can visit every CLP in the country, and we should. Recently I've been to Scotland, Cornwall, Chesterfield and round the world with Labour International, and listened to people that a year ago I would never have met.

Members cannot sell policies where there is no sense of ownership or engagement. During lockdown many have been involved as street champions, in foodbanks, in their communities, but local party activity has often been in spite of, not because of, the national party. The NEC should start telling members what they can do, not what they can't do. Until it's safe to knock on doors again, we have to campaign by phone, by social media, reaching out any way we can. And if councils, socialist societies and trade unions can meet and do business, why can't branches and CLPs elect officers and make decisions?

The NEC must also

- let local parties choose their candidates. When the 2019 election was called – not unexpectedly - dozens had candidates imposed by the NEC for the second time in three years. This is not OK. Selection processes need to be democratic but manageable, and while no Labour MP has a God-given right to a seat, removing Tory MPs should come first.
- the NEC must give local parties a bigger share of membership subscriptions. The current system is ten years old and not fit for purpose when membership has trebled. The NEC promised a review in 2018. It's time to deliver, so we can afford to organise and campaign on the ground.
- the NEC must deal effectively with complaints, including independent processes for sexual harassment and maybe some other areas. Members are still prevented from standing as candidates because their cases are taking years to resolve. Justice delayed is justice denied.

But some complaints involve personal or factional antagonisms, and no rules can make people be nice to each other. How do we tackle a toxic and polarised culture, where active members stay away because they find meetings so unpleasant? So my final suggestion is that the NEC should

- set an example. Start from the position that everyone has the right to be heard with respect, listen to what they say, and decide on the basis of facts and arguments, not on prepared lines and pre-meeting caucuses. As Jermain said just now, we need to be able to disagree agreeably. If the NEC itself can model good behaviour, perhaps that will help to bring in the kinder, gentler politics which Jeremy promised us all five years ago.

Thank you.