

Reflections at Half-Time

I've just been reading Alice Perry's report at <https://aliceperry.wordpress.com/2020/09/30/labour-nec-report-29-september-2020/> of the last meeting of the current NEC. Alice speaks for Labour councillors, and I fervently hope that she will be re-elected. Her accounts have kept many of us informed, against the lies, leaks and spin from both mainstream and social media. I hope to join her on the NEC in November, able to provide the same service from the constituency section. From 2000 to 2018 I reported after every meeting – see www.annblack.com – and I always valued most those members who said: “I don't always agree with you, but at least you tell us what's going on”.

So far the signs are good. To my surprise after two years away from the frontline I have been nominated by 302 CLPs, two-thirds of those who made nominations, and I am moved by many warm and supportive messages. The challenge now is to turn nominations into votes, and reach the majority of members for whom family, health, work and life understandably matter more than meetings. The main slates have big money and big data, and can afford paid organisers and phonebanks. I rely on personal networks and a handful of volunteers.

Turnout in NEC elections runs at about 30% unless there is a leadership election at the same time. However this year may be different. More than 80 members put their names forward as constituency representatives, with 42 reaching the five nominations needed for the ballot, and more than 40 for the new disabled members' seat, from an exceptionally diverse range of backgrounds and all with something to contribute.

Nomination meetings also attracted more interest than usual, partly because local parties haven't been allowed to do much else during lockdown. No motions, no AGMs, no canvassing, no leafleting, no street stalls, so all the pent-up energy was channelled into what is, after all, only the preliminary stage. And moving online meant that I could attend hustings in Scotland, Chesterfield, Cornwall, and around the world with Labour International.

Looking Back ...

The last time I remember so much excitement was in 1998. In the first elections where MPs could not stand in the constituency section, at the height of Tony Blair's power, four out of six places went to the original centre-left grassroots alliance, headed by Mark Seddon, editor of Tribune. Sympathetic media, including a Guardian editorial on the day that ballots dropped, helped to outmanoeuvre the Millbank machine and their glossy mailshots.

The CLGA was brokered by a small but influential “soft left” group called Labour Reform, loyal to the leadership but committed to reflecting the full range of party opinion and to one-member-one-vote. I was a founding member of Labour Reform and elected to the national policy forum from 1998 and the NEC from 2000 under the CLGA banner. Through to 2018 it continued as a broad centre-left coalition, with candidates allowed freedom of judgment on specific issues, but regrettably it no longer exists in that form.

Through 18 years on the NEC I consistently voted against austerity and privatisation, and for public services, decent pensions and benefits, employment rights and social housing. In 2010 I worked with Harriet Harman and Tony Lloyd, then chair of the parliamentary Labour party, to include Diane Abbott in the leadership election. In 2016 I voted for Jeremy Corbyn to be on the ballot, and against the six-month cutoff date which prevented many members from voting. In 2018 I steered the women's conference to independence.

... and Looking Ahead

Fast-forward 22 years and a small but influential “soft left” group, Open Labour, has been changing the terms of engagement. First, OL advocated single transferable vote rather than first-past-the-post for all internal elections and, when adopted by the NEC, that makes it possible to break the winner-takes-all monopoly. In 2018 one slate took 100% of the seats on 60% of the vote. This time the big slates are each promoting only six candidates, and even during nominations that has opened up space for independents and others.

Second, Open Labour is actively supporting Jermain Jackman and myself for the constituency places, George Lindars-Hammond for the disabled members' seat, and Alice for local government. Their candidates, and their platform, at <https://openlabour.org/open-labour-rebuilding-labour-together/> offer an independent and principled alternative to the old polarising factions.

If elected I will respect the mandate given to Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner, and support Labour's hardworking councillors, coping with a crisis not of their making. I will look for ways to let members choose their parliamentary candidates in good time, after the NEC imposed candidates on dozens of CLPs twice in three years. I will remind the NEC of its promise to review membership rates, and argue for local parties to keep a fair share of the income. I will support changes to policy-making processes to give every member a voice, and aim to improve complaints procedures. I will work to return full democratic powers, including AGMs, to branches and CLPs, while keeping online participation for members with disabilities, caring responsibilities or transport issues. And I will always listen to and respect your views.

I hope that members will take this opportunity, talk to friends and comrades, and give me their first preference when they vote. The ballot opens on 19 October and closes on 12 November – please contact me, or invite me to meet your members, if there's anything you'd like to discuss.

Ann Black

@AnnBlackLabour

Facebook: [facebook.com/AnnBlackLabour](https://www.facebook.com/AnnBlackLabour)

annblack50@btinternet.com