

National Executive Committee Report, 24 November 2020

Joint Policy Committee, 17 November 2020

This was the first formal meeting I attended, as the returning chair of the national policy forum. The leader Keir Starmer stressed his commitment to democratic policy-making processes. The wealth of knowledge and experience among the membership would help us build a vision for the future of the country, based on values and principles. Coronavirus was exposing long-term structural flaws – inequality, the housing crisis, the climate crisis – and there could be no return to business as usual.

NEC and shadow cabinet co-convenors then presented their policy commission interim reports and workplans for the coming year. My understanding is that these reports will be published on the forum website for further comment between December 2020 and March 2021, with final versions going to conference 2021. Each commission has also identified topics for discussion during the year. So far, new NEC members have not been assigned to policy commissions, but I have put in a bid for justice and home affairs, which will be considering electoral reform, Brexit, immigration, violence against women and girls, and disproportionality in the criminal justice system.

Despite limited time for consultation in 2020, more than 4,000 submissions were received, and each commission held a round table event with shadow cabinet ministers. These were widely praised by the 400 members who attended, but more than 10,000 registered interest, and the sooner that all NPF members and CLP policy officers can be assisted in rolling these out to involve everyone, the better.

This was a thoroughly positive meeting. The level of frontbench engagement was refreshing, and shadow ministers spoke about Labour's achievements and aspirations in the face of a dominant Tory majority and a pandemic which swamps all other news. The whole session could have been livestreamed, and would have informed and enthused members and supporters

NEC Awayday, 24 November 2020

... however the first full NEC meeting, not so much.

Traditionally this is an opportunity to review the previous year, and plan for the challenges ahead. I was looking forward to the day as part of the most politically diverse constituency section since 2014, but proceedings went spectacularly off the rails.

Each year the chair and vice-chair are elected at the inaugural meeting of the new NEC, which normally takes place at the end of annual conference. With conference cancelled this was the first opportunity and it was therefore on the agenda. Some objected that the NEC officers, who seem to have acquired new powers of veto in recent years, had not approved an election, but legal advice was that the rulebook is clear: 4.II.3.A *"The NEC shall elect its own chair and vice-chair at its first meeting each year."*

On who should be elected, there were two informal principles in conflict: one, that the previous year's vice-chair moves up to chair; two, that the vice-chair and then chair is the longest-serving member of the NEC. This "Buggins turn" principle was followed through most of my time on the NEC, with the exception of Christine Shawcroft, who was persuaded not to stand. If she had, I would have supported her because of the convention. There were minor variations where a member did not wish to take the role, or two members mutually agreed to swap the order, but there was no precedent for a vice-chair leapfrogging ten other NEC members with longer service, and Margaret Beckett had a claim from 2018 onwards.

When Margaret was nominated as chair, some members announced that they were leaving because of Keir Starmer's factional approach. Their tirades went way beyond anything I ever heard NEC members direct towards Jeremy Corbyn or any previous leader, though some said this had been a pattern of increasingly discourteous behaviour since April.

I could gently point out that factionalism is not new. I was replaced as chair of the disputes panel the day after three new Momentum members were elected to the NEC, and Keith Birch was removed as chair of the equalities committee a few months before the end of his final NEC term. But that's democracy. I was neither surprised nor upset, and it certainly never occurred to me to walk out immediately after being elected on a platform of representing members.

Be that as it may, Margaret was then elected unanimously as chair, and Alice Perry as vice-chair, and the remainders moved on to discuss the NEC's terms of reference, child safeguarding, the annual report, national women's conference, how the NEC handles motions from CLPs, a code of conduct, elections 2021, engaging with members and effective governance, as well as reports from the leader and deputy leader. As one of four CLP representatives who stayed, I tried to reflect as wide a range of views as I could.

As a postscript to the fracas, the NEC agreed that custom and practice regarding the election of the vice-chair and chair should be explicitly included in NEC procedures, and also that seniority should be based on total years on the NEC rather than continuous years, which will be fairer to constituency representatives whose service is more often interrupted.

Moving On

The terms of reference were broadly supported, with inclusion of a clause guaranteeing support for disabled members in carrying out their role. I asked for the NEC women's committee to be included, and further details were requested on the extent and nature of delegated powers, and the accountability of the NEC officers' group. A final version will return to the next meeting. We also received the annual report, which would normally have been presented to conference. There were several questions about the reporting of disciplinary outcomes, and I asked where to enquire about stalled suspensions and complaints.

Safe Spaces

The safeguarding manager presented plans for consultation. There were benefits in involving children in party activities, but Labour had to minimise the risks through reviewing procedures, strengthening protection and practices, and helping and empowering victims. A thoughtful discussion followed, including links with safeguarding for vulnerable adults, learning from local government, guidance for party volunteers, protection for young members in disciplinary cases, and changing party culture.. As so often, behaviour on social media raises particular problems, and I've had some appalling accounts this year from young members.

Women's Conference Returns

The national women's officer presented plans for a virtual annual women's conference on 25/27 June 2021. Although less satisfactory than meeting in person, this conference had already been postponed twice, and has to elect the new national women's committee (six CLP members, six trade union members, one from the socialist societies, one from the women's PLP, one from the association of Labour councillors, one each from Scottish and Welsh women's committees, and the NEC vice-chair for women). It will also debate resolutions, four from CLPs and four from affiliates. A mailing should go out before Christmas, but for those who plan ahead, key dates are:

Closing date for CLP delegates and nominations for women's committee – Monday 10 May 2021

Deadline for motions – Friday 28 May 2021

Deadline for emergency motions – Thursday 20 June 2021

Deadline for priorities ballot – Friday 11 June 2021

Compositing – Thursday 24 June 2021

CLP delegates should be elected by women's branches where these exist as a formal part of the CLP structure, otherwise by CLPs. The fee will be £40 per delegate, though obviously there will be no travel or accommodation costs.

The NEC warmly welcomed the proposals. To strengthen commitment to accessibility, the disabled NEC representative Ellen Morrison and the disabled representative on the annual conference arrangements committee Katrina Murray will join the women's conference arrangements committee.

What Happens to Motions?

The NEC considered a process for handling motions from CLPs. These would go to the organisation committee together with a response from the party, and policy motions would be passed to the relevant policy commissions. There were concerns about raising expectations beyond the party's capacity to deliver, and increasing numbers meant that less committee time would be devoted to actually discussing them. It was suggested that priority be given to motions which included the number of members present, supporting, opposing and abstaining, to gauge the breadth of participation.

The Truth is Out There

A proposed code of conduct for NEC members was presented, stressing that NEC members are expected to exhibit the highest standards at all times or risk bringing the party into disrepute. Events earlier in the day showed why a code was necessary, but also raised questions about how it could be applied without making the current situation worse. Several amendments were proposed, and I believe it will return to the NEC at the next meeting.

Although the party does not normally comment on individual disputes panel hearings, general secretary David Evans summarised proceedings at the previous week's panel. I am hoping that he will issue a statement soon, as it refutes the claims made by some NEC members, and in the thousands of identical messages sent from the Momentum site. (I had forgotten the joys of being mobbed by Momentum, whose previous campaigns opposing IHRA and supporting open selections paralysed so many inboxes.) Interestingly some members are using the Momentum site to send their own thoughts – alongside all the

Dear Keir, I write in disappointment and anger about your decision to withdraw the whip from Jeremy Corbyn.

I received, for instance:

Dear Keir, I joined the Labour Party to vote for you because now more than ever we need a competent and electable opposition. I fully support your decision to remove the whip from Jeremy Corbyn and am relieved and encouraged to see you tackling anti-Semitism in the party head on. Many thanks and much strength to you.

and supportive messages for Keir claiming to be from Jon Lansman, John McDonnell, Laura Pidcock and Beatrice Webb.

David Evans also reported that the party has 540,000 members, described as a modest decline which is normal between general elections. This defines people up to six months in arrears as members. I prefer quoting paid-up members who are eligible to participate and vote, where the totals were 430,359 in November 2019, 552,835 in January 2020, and 495,961 in August 2020. I believe there have been further falls since then, and budget planning needs to take these into account.

Leader's Report

Keir Starmer welcomed new and returning NEC members. The Labour Together report showed that Labour had been losing support over many years, and needed to rebuild around a compelling vision for a Labour government, working as a team in a culture of respect. Unity did not mean everyone thinking the same thing, and ideas should be held up for challenge. Covid-19 still framed everything, and in seven months as leader, he had never been able to address a physical roomful of people.

I challenged the idea of voting with the Tories if Boris Johnson brought back a barebones Brexit deal. Supporting them would mean that Labour co-owned the deal and the massive damage and disruption that would follow, and alienate another section of Labour members and voters. He said the shadow cabinet had not reached a decision and there was no ideal option (which I agree with), but Labour had to consider an election platform for 2024, three years after leaving, which focused on making people's lives better.

Trade union members in the meeting urged Keir Starmer to take a strong line in defending employment rights, recognising funding constraints on local government, respecting shopworkers, opposing public sector pay freezes, and avoiding divisions within the public services or setting public against private.

He accepted all these points; we couldn't clap key workers on Thursdays and then cut their pay. He agreed that the report on Islamophobia was a source of concern and deserved an action plan, as with anti-semitism; there should be no hierarchy of discrimination. Asked about resources for Scottish Labour, he recognised the importance of Scottish and Welsh elections on the road to government. The Take Back Control slogan had resonated at many levels with people who felt they had too little influence over their lives, including those who considered Holyrood as well as Westminster remote. Decisions should be made as close to those affected as possible, and these constitutional matters needed mature discussion.

Work in Progress

The NEC then discussed a series of presentations. The first covered elections in May 2021, including everything postponed from 2020. Labour needed to rebuild its electoral coalition, with clear, persuasive messages. Campaigning activities were still restricted, and it was unlikely that polling day would operate as normal. Discussion focused on postal / early voting, new ways of contacting voters, involvement in community work during the pandemic, social media, and allocation of resources. Members stressed that party mails should reach voters before their postal votes arrive. National messaging needed to move on from "under new management", and examples of Labour successes should be contrasted with threats of renewed austerity from the Tories. Concrete demands, such as retaining the uplift to universal credit, and defending tenants against eviction, could give members and supporters ammunition for the campaign.

On engaging members, a new version of Dialogue is being rolled out, with a recognition and reward plan for callers. Phone banks can reach easily across boundaries and target efforts where they are needed. Other tools include Organise, the main mechanism for mailing members (well, most of them). Most local parties are meeting online, some replicating the features of physical GCs / all-member meetings, others using the opportunity to engage socially and share a glass of wine. Although some members are excluded because they don't have online access, others were joining for the first time, excluded from in-person meetings because of disability, work patterns, caring responsibilities or transport issues, and most NEC members wanted to keep the best features of each mode in future. The party should find out why members were joining, and how to satisfy their interests.

More Meetings

The third session, on governance, was preceded by discussion of how and where to finalise Labour's response to the EHRC report, due on 10 December. A special NEC meeting was scheduled for 7 December, but some members proposed that each subcommittee should meet separately as well, to discuss aspects within their remit. Angela Rayner urged us to focus on responding to the EHRC, and we settled on a compromise: the equalities committee would meet, as it is attended by relevant stakeholders outside the NEC, but the organisation committee and the disputes panel would not meet until the scheduled dates in January. All committees elect their own chairs at their first meeting after the awayday.

That led into discussion of what the NEC does well and less well. There was general support for time limits on verbal contributions, and papers circulated in advance to allow written comments. Whether the organisation committee and the disputes panel should include all NEC members was raised again, but no-one ever wants to come off, so that nettle may still not be graspable.

In conclusion Angela Rayner thanked the NEC and party staff. She hadn't asked members to vote for her as deputy leader of the opposition but as Labour's deputy in government, so we could put our socialist values into practice. I asked that all the work that Labour MPs and frontbenchers were doing should be better communicated to members, and I also intend to follow up the review of local party funding.

As usual please feel free to circulate and/or post online, and comments and questions are always welcome.

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