

## **National Executive Committee, 25 May 2021**

The meeting opened with a moment's silence for comrades who had died recently, including Frank Judd, Maureen Colquhoun and Ian Gibson, former MP for Norwich North. Anneliese Dodds was welcomed as the new party chair, following Angela Rayner's move to a high-profile voter-facing role, and she and Shabana Mahmood, national campaign co-ordinator, join the NEC as frontbench appointees, replacing Jim McMahon and Jo Stevens. Angela Eagle had been elected to fill Shabana's place as a backbench representative.

The NEC moved on to the leader's report, and after more than three months there was plenty to say. A year on from the murder of George Floyd Keir Starmer repeated his commitment to laws addressing structural race inequalities. He thanked everyone for their efforts in a campaign where outcomes were decidedly mixed. Wales saw the best results since 2011 under Mark Drakeford's leadership, and in Scotland Anas Sarwar was beginning to set clear dividing lines against other parties, based on values and principles. In mayoral contests Joanne Anderson was elected in Liverpool as the first Black woman mayor, Tracy Brabin won West Yorkshire, Andy Burnham took every ward in Greater Manchester, Sadiq Khan and Marvin Rees retained London and Bristol, and Dan Norris and Nik Johnson gained the West of England and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough from the Tories, showing that Labour could succeed in rural areas. Elsewhere there were disappointing results and Hartlepool was a bitter loss, though without the Brexit Party's 10,000 votes it would have fallen in 2019, like its neighbours. Batley & Spen will be a sterner test.

### **Looking Forward**

Further analysis was in progress but Keir Starmer stressed the need for change: from an economic model which bakes in the inequalities brutally exposed by the pandemic to a long-term high-wage high-skill future. On public services prevention was key, with early intervention reducing pressures on the criminal justice system, more opportunities for those leaving school aged 16 and 18, and sustainable health and social care services. Decision-making should move out of Westminster to regions and communities, and the politics of division should be replaced with unity, empathy and solidarity. The party must look outward, developing dynamic campaigning structures and a transformational vision for the 2020s and beyond.

Rather than stick to the 20-minute slot on the agenda, the chair Margaret Beckett wisely called everyone who wished to speak. There were some pointed remarks. I asked Keir Starmer to take advice from people who could win elections in the 2020s, not throwbacks from the 1990s, and others raised concerns about past shadow team statements that Labour was "not the party for people on benefits". Labour was founded by and for working people, but must also defend the welfare state and welcome those with disabilities or unable to work for whatever reason. However while there have been discontented mutterings about other leaders, particularly during Jeremy Corbyn's time, I can't recall any previous formal meeting where an NEC member directly asked the leader to consider stepping aside. Perhaps Zoom has a disinhibiting effect.

Success in Wales was attributed to establishing a proud, patriotic Welsh Labour identity over many years. North-east results continued an existing trend, and Labour had never countered the Tory / LibDem lie that public spending caused the global financial crisis, something which NEC members raised with Ed Miliband at every meeting for five years. Labour should learn from the model of community wealth-building in Preston, where our vote held up. Some members reported activists as demoralised and thin on the ground, others that more people were involved than ever, despite pandemic conditions.

Other issues included the Australian trade deal and its impact on farmers; anger on behalf of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community about a local leaflet referring to "Traveller incursions"; long Covid; mental health in public services; the aspiration for children to do better than their parents; attracting support from older people; devastation in Gaza; and a 15% pay rise for NHS staff. There was a request for Labour to commit to a full-scale campaign in the Chesham & Amersham by-election as well as in Batley & Spen. Some said that the most important issues for members were the long-delayed Forde inquiry into last year's leaked report, restoring the whip to Jeremy Corbyn, and ditching the 2017 and 2019 manifestos.

### **Right of Reply**

Keir Starmer dealt calmly and authoritatively with all contributions, and agreed with many of them. On NHS pay, Labour would begin by honouring the increases already promised. A two-state solution was essential for the Middle East, and all nations must comply with international law. Lisa Nandy had issued a statement.

Martin Forde was not willing to publish his report until all related inquiries by the ICO (information commissioner's office) were concluded. No-one wanted it finished more than he did, but the inquiry was independent. The next manifesto would focus on the future, starting from the same basic values but taking changed circumstances – Brexit, the pandemic – into account and translating into clear, simple messages. No election was ever fought on the previous manifesto, and few could recall any Labour slogans from the past ten years.

## **Deputy Leader's Report**

Angela Rayner stressed the need to speak in a language and with a passion that connects with our former supporters. She was working with trade unions on a post-Covid new deal for working people, with fair wages, security, dignity, proper sick and holiday pay, a decent work-life balance, and ending "fire-and-rehire" tactics. Outsourcing wasted taxpayers' money, and Labour should emphasise the benefits of in-house services, for instance in Wales where test-and-trace is run by the public sector and actually delivers. Tory sleaze would eventually stick. Like Keir she was committed to tackling structural racism.

NEC members thanked Angela for her work on increasing diversity among candidates, noted the report on Islamophobia in the Conservative party, and asked about the Williams report on rail reorganisation, which only tinkers at the edges while still lining shareholders' pockets. Some again said that all the answers were in the 2017 and 2019 manifestos, and asked for the whip to be restored to Jeremy Corbyn. Angela responded that this was solely a matter for the chief whip. (Though with Alan Campbell replacing Nick Brown, perhaps there is scope for a new conversation?) She said Labour remained committed to publicly-funded rail services, and to sectoral collective bargaining. She was also looking for ways to maintain positive action, including all-women shortlists, now that more than 50% of Labour MPs are women.

## **What Matters is What Works**

The NEC was presented with a summary of election results and a paper listing organisational support – leaflets, phone-banks, training, events, social media and communications. I asked for evaluation of their relative effectiveness. How many of the millions of print items changed voters' minds, rather than going straight into the recycling? Some of the details emerge from the individual reports from nations and regions, and I hope these will be discussed further in regional executive committees. Several regions identified the need for further change to continue rebuilding trust, but it must be evidence-based change, and avoid playing off groups of potential Labour voters against each other.

NEC members argued for stronger connections between members, local parties, councillors, MPs and staff. The quality of conversations with voters was as important as the number of contacts, and Labour needed to enhance digital campaigning to counter the mainstream media. The Tories may not be seen knocking doors but they are active on Facebook and have the money to send lots more direct mail. They also managed to present themselves as the party of change, despite 11 years in power at Westminster, and to some extent got away with blaming Labour councils for cuts imposed by national government.

My feedback included issues with the party's IT systems, delays in selecting candidates, and the need for clear, memorable messages. Members also felt that in the immediate aftermath Labour should have highlighted positive results, in Wales and the mayoral elections, rather than turning inward. Shabana Mahmood agreed that all activities should be evaluated, and she hoped to have a longer discussion on campaign strategy, learning from areas where we gained or held seats as well as those we lost. The NEC thanked all the staff, candidates and volunteers who had gone above and beyond.

## **General Secretary's Report**

David Evans added that fighting elections was our core business. Direct engagement was essential, and a root-and-branch review of digital provision was under way. He reported on a new unconscious bias programme, an equalities language guide and disability awareness training for staff. The Gypsy, Roma and Travellers working group was understandably fraught, and he was taking up the issues with the chair of the equalities committee. He was keen for the Forde report to be published as soon as possible. He also said that the party had found a way of allowing constituency representatives to contact CLP secretaries without breaching data protection laws, something I have been seeking since November.

I and other members raised continuing suspensions, with some people promised replies within ten working days and hearing nothing for months. Complaints, including those of bullying and harassment, were also delayed. On the other hand someone openly seeking to destroy the party from within had merely received a reminder of values, to local anger, and a couple of Brexit party members apparently managed to join just weeks after standing against us. David said that at least 80% of suspensions following the EHRC report had been dealt with, and there were reasons why some of the rest were still held up.

Members asked for Karon Monaghan's recommendations on dealing with sexual harassment to be published. This will be done, together with information about how the party is implementing them. They also enquired about the long-awaited scheme of delegated powers which (I think) will explain who makes which decisions and under what authority. David promised a full update on Organise to Win at the next meeting, aiming to provide the best services to the party and inform and empower volunteers.

Membership stood at nearly 490,000, including 10% in arrears. The decline of 30,000 was partly due to people paying a one-off annual fee to vote in the 2020 leadership election and not renewing, not untypical of previous fluctuations, but a retention strategy was being developed.

### **On or Off?**

The NEC agreed that all party meetings should continue online till 31 July 2021, with recommendations for returning to normal operation brought forward over coming months, with potential rule changes arising from online experience. Two amendments to the paper were accepted. The first recommended that Labour groups should where possible allow councillors, including those on parental leave or with caring responsibilities, to join meetings remotely. The second noted that online meetings were generally a positive step forward for disabled members, and proposals should include a commitment to continuing remote participation in some form, and a plan for the introduction of accessible meetings.

Meeting online has undoubtedly enabled members with disabilities, caring commitments or transport issues to attend more easily, but excludes those without the technical skills or equipment. However a fully hybrid set-up, with equal access remotely and in the room, would be challenging. MPs reported that it does not entirely work even for parliamentary committees using sophisticated technology not available in cheap local venues, let alone managing 100 members in person and another 100 dialling in, with voting a mix of Zoom polls, shows of hands, Anonymvoter ballots and voting papers. For physical meetings local parties will have to pay for larger rooms till all social distancing ends, and some of us are nervous about crowded spaces even when they become legal. I suggested that a chunk of the NEC funds, which hold the surplus from membership subscriptions, should be allocated to CLPs to meet extra costs during transition.

### **Making Policy**

As co-ordinator of the policy review Anneliese Dodds was keen to include everyone in the process of developing policies towards a general election in 2023 or 2024, based on our values of equality, security and ambition. The pandemic had shown solidarity in action, and also the value of trade unions and public services. This work would run alongside the national policy forum (NPF), focusing on a smaller number of areas and taking a strategic approach to Labour's vision through to 2030. She would be engaging with members across the country and aimed to produce an interim report by summer 2022, concluding in 2023.

The party's head of policy development said that many members were still unclear about how the NPF works and how it engages with annual conference, and she hoped to provide better support for delegates and for CLP policy officers. A further consultation on Labour's policy-making systems (the policy development review, as opposed to the policy review) would close on 24 June 2021, and discussion papers from the policy commissions would be circulated at the end of May with the deadline now set at 19 July 2021. There will be a meeting of the full NPF at 4 p.m. on Tuesday 6 July 2021.

As chair of the NPF I am not sure if we'll be in a position to put a full set of rule changes to conference this September. The NPF was developed in the 1990s as *Partnership in Power*, to maintain links between Labour in government and in the country, but has never really adapted to partnership in opposition. As well as discussing what Labour should do when in government, I believe it should be part of the campaign to elect that government. The policy commissions represent all parts of the movement and could act as sounding-boards for front-bench ideas, and provide feedback from the grassroots. I also suggested that each commission should come up with one key pledge summed up in three words.

## **Sisters Doing it for Themselves**

Plans for the online national women's conference on 26/27 June 2021 were well advanced, and the NEC agreed standing orders and a code of conduct. Party staff have been working incredibly hard, alongside the NEC women's committee and the women's conference arrangements committee, to put together the programme and the technology for debates, workshops and ballots, and we hope that it all runs smoothly. From Monday 21 to Thursday 24 June there will be virtual fringe and party events, including a session on setting up women's branches at 6 p.m. on Tuesday 22 June.

## **More on Selections**

Four more mayoral elections are scheduled for 2022 and another five for 2023, and the NEC agreed selection procedures. Candidates will be endorsed by the NEC, but that endorsement can be rescinded, if urgent, by the general secretary. I supported an amendment by Mish Rahman which would require the chair of the organisation committee to agree to withdrawing endorsement, but lost the vote 14-16. However I opposed another amendment which would allow one-third of party branches or affiliates to trigger a full selection, rather than a simple majority in either section, and that was lost 11-20. I agree this is inconsistent with the trigger rules for parliamentary selections, but I believe that these need revisiting, to avoid spending three months on deciding whether or not an incumbent can stand again, leaving our opponents free to dominate the campaign. Doubtless the NEC will return to this.

The NEC approved an ambitious programme for future parliamentary candidates, aiming to expand diversity, to be launched at the end of May. There will be 360 places, with applications open from July to mid-August for a ten-month blended learning course running through to 2022. This will complement the Jo Cox and Bernie Grant programmes for women and BAME members respectively, as well as training run by trade unions and the Co-operative party.

I welcomed the initiative, but was concerned that the paper referred to parliamentary selections only starting in 2022, less than a year from a 2023 general election. Our procedures are now so lengthy and resource-intensive that regions can only support a few at a time, which is why the NEC ended up having to impose dozens of candidates in 2019, having promised in 2017 never to do it again. I firmly believe it is possible to have a democratic process which gives control to members, but is less costly and time-consuming for CLPs, candidates and staff, and hope that such procedures are in the pipeline. The boundary review adds more uncertainty, as its decisions will not be final until 2023 which means (I think) that a 2023 election would be fought on current boundaries, but a 2024 election on the new boundaries.

## **And Finally ...**

Nadia Jama proposed a motion calling for all members in Sheffield to elect the city Labour group leader at the next opportunity in 2022. The rulebook includes provision for the NEC to pilot direct election, but does not list criteria. Some members suggested that it could be useful where members and councillors agreed, as a way of raising the leader's profile. I was not convinced that it would resolve the admittedly serious issues in Sheffield, and by next May the current leader would have been established in post for a year. I also wanted to ask who would pay for the ballot – CLPs? the national party? – as OMOV elections are not cheap, but after six hours NEC members were tiring, and agreed 15-12 to move to the vote without further debate. The motion was lost with 11 votes in favour, 20 against.

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

*Ann Black, 07956-637958, [annblack50@btinternet.com](mailto:annblack50@btinternet.com). Previous reports are at [www.annblack.co.uk](http://www.annblack.co.uk)*