

National Executive Committee at Conference, Brighton, 24/29 September 2021

The run-up to conference was full of gossip about intense negotiations with trade unions, while the rest of us tried to keep up on Twitter. Keir Starmer apparently wanted to bring back the electoral college for choosing party leaders, where MPs, individual members and trade union levy-payers each hold one-third of the votes. One of my NEC colleagues tweeted that the howling from the Corbynite fringe showed why this was a good idea. As a soft-spoken centre-leftie I thought it was a really bad idea. First, one-member-one-vote is now embedded in party culture. Second, in 2010 only nine per cent of levy-payers voted, compared with 72% of individual members and 99% of MPs, but that nine per cent gave Ed Miliband victory when members and MPs preferred his brother, and he was never allowed to forget it. Members of several unions and socialist societies holding up multiple ballot papers also attracted ridicule.

NEC Meeting, 7 p.m. Friday 24 September 2021

When we gathered in Brighton the picture was still confused. The NEC agreed three further non-contentious amendments. Two followed consultation with disabled members and emphasised the party's duty to make reasonable adjustments for access to meetings. The third would allow Labour groups to vary their standing orders so that diversity within the group could be reflected in leadership positions, a proposal which originated from Oxford East CLP and was tightened up to ensure compliance with the Equality Act.

The meeting also agreed to group NEC amendments with a single vote for each batch. Some belonged together logically, others shared only the chapter heading. For instance "Party Meetings" changed the political education officer to political education and training officer; transferred power to amend a quorum from the regional executive to the regional director; and barred CLPs from affiliating to organisations without NEC permission. Most members were then sent away while the inner circle resumed discussions.

NEC Meeting, 11 a.m. Saturday 25 September 2021

LabourList broke the news on social media that the electoral college had been ditched, and headlined the proposals that would come to the NEC. The papers arrived somewhat later, and the usual lecture about leaking had a certain irony for those of us not trusted with information in the first place. While some union representatives said that six days was not enough for full consideration, I would have settled for six hours.

Keir Starmer said that the aim of the package was to make the party general election-ready and outward-facing. The 2019 election was lost badly, and instead of talking to voters, MPs had to spend the autumn persuading their own members to reselect them. He praised Anneliese Dodds for the Stronger Together policy review, Angela Rayner for the new deal for working people, and Lucy Powell for housing policy.

I agreed with changing the trigger ballot rules. Allowing two small party branches to over-ride four other branches is too low a threshold. Oxford East's trigger ballot took weeks of work for regional and CLP officers as well as the MP, who was reselected by 99% of members and 100% of affiliates. The knock-on effect was that Oxford West & Abingdon, next door, had their candidate imposed just before the deadline, and not the one they would have chosen. The revised trigger ballots retain a 50/50 electoral college, so that 26 branches of the same union cannot outvote four or five party branches.

Looking Forward

Other changes were about getting leadership election-ready, which could seem pessimistic. Raising the proportion of MPs required to nominate candidates is more sensible than the old electoral college, and Keir Starmer accepted a reduction from 25% to 20%. There were concerns that choice might be limited to a couple of white men, but members hoped that MPs would recognise the need for diversity, as they did in 2010 when nominating Diane Abbott. Some suggested formal ways of guaranteeing at least one woman, and maybe I should dig out my papers from the gender-balanced leadership working group in 2012. Candidates will also need 5% of CLPs or three affiliates (including two unions) comprising [sic] 5% of affiliated membership. CLP nomination meetings are expensive to run, but that's the price of democracy.

Registered supporters would go, and the ballot would be of individual members and affiliated supporters, who must all have six months' membership when the timetable is announced. Again we were told that "*this reflects discussions with trade unions*" as if other sections had nothing to contribute. Afterwards I checked my notes from July 2016 when the NEC set the rules for that election, a year after Jeremy Corbyn's first landslide. I had consulted members on who should be eligible to vote. They were overwhelmingly opposed to the £3 registered supporters, but generally content with affiliated supporters. Two-thirds said there should be a qualifying period with six months the most popular option, as for parliamentary or council candidates. People join to support Labour's aims and values and elect Labour representatives, and stick with the party through continuing commitment to principles rather than to any single individual.

So the changes may be OK with the party, but I also agreed with the NEC member who said that people care more about taxes, petrol prices and empty supermarket shelves than whether 10%, 20% or 25% of MPs can nominate the next leader. And we will forfeit windfall financial gains, like those from the Jeremy membership surges in 2015 and 2016 and the Keir surge in 2020. Income may be more predictable, but it will undoubtedly be lower.

The NEC also reduced the number of topics debated at conference from ten from CLPs plus ten from affiliates to six plus six, and agreed to increase trade union representation on the national policy forum (NPF) from 30 to 55 members, plus a few more from socialist societies and equalities structures. I only noticed afterwards that the 22 regionally-elected representatives have been abolished. According to an NEC insider this was the only way to make room for the extra union places. As regional elections were strongly union-influenced, and as the NPF never meets anyway, I doubt if it matters. As chair of the NPF I've seen further plans for the future of policy development which don't need rule changes. No idea when the NEC will discuss these, but I am keen to democratise the joint policy committee, where CLP representatives are only guaranteed five of the 36 places.

There were only two formal votes. One member proposed that leadership candidates could be nominated by 20% of MPs or 5% of CLPs or three affiliates, which was lost 22-7. I voted against. Unless a candidate can get support from 40 MPs she or he doesn't have a shadow cabinet. The package as a whole was carried by 22 votes to 12 with two abstentions. I abstained, mainly because there was no attempt at consultation. Keir Starmer thanked the NEC, and stressed that we had to be ready for a general election in May 2023 or sooner, campaigning on the cost of living, climate change and the rights of working people.

On the Conference Floor

No-one likes being bounced, and this also applies to delegates who had to speed-read reams of dense prose. Some will support the leader regardless, some will oppose regardless, so outcomes depend on the independent centre, who are willing to listen if they are respected. CLPs voted for several amendments against the NEC recommendations, including extending STV (single transferable voting) to other NEC sections (50.4%), making the general secretary an elected position (51.2%), and allowing at least seven days to apply for parliamentary vacancies (52.0%). These three were lost because the union vote went the other way, but the right for CLPs to control selections for snap elections or by-elections was carried (61.6% CLPs, 44.0% affiliates, overall 52.8%). This is payback for 2019, when the NEC failed to start selections soon enough and then prioritised trigger ballots. And with a possible election 18 months away we do not yet have a single candidate in place. After a personal appeal from David Evans, conference endorsed his appointment as general secretary with 52.8% of CLPs and 61.2% of affiliates (57.0% overall) in favour.

Mark Ferguson of UNISON ably chaired the debate on the independent complaints procedure agreed with the EHRC (equality and human rights commission). He managed to minimise heckling and kept the mood positive, with 73.6% voting in favour (64.7% CLPs, 82.5% affiliates). However "getting Labour election-ready" only attracted 47.1% of the CLP vote, but with backing from 60.2% of the affiliates the package was carried with 53.7%. An excellent summary of the votes on rule changes is at <https://labourlist.org/2021/10/every-rule-change-at-labour-conference-2021-what-it-means-and-how-it-passed/> and I've included links to the conference arrangements committee reports, containing all the motions, amendments, references back, NEC statements and card votes, at the end.

Order and Disorder

I've attended every conference since 1995, and this year was unusually fractious. Margaret Beckett, in her chair's address, affirmed the right to hold strong and differing opinions, but they must be expressed and heard with courtesy and civility. Conference was our opportunity to show Labour as a government in waiting. I wondered if the delegates who shouted and heckled behave the same way in their local party back home because if so, culture change has a long way to go. In previous years delegates who disliked the leader, whether it was Tony Blair or Jeremy Corbyn, would simply stay out of the hall. And self-styled Marxists did not attack fellow-members as Tory saboteurs from the stage.

There were many points of order. Delegates were unhappy about being unable to vote on the NEC's annual report and raised this repeatedly through the week, though unlike the national policy forum documents there is no provision to refer back sections of the NEC report,. Some delegates tried to dispute the NEC's recent decision to proscribe four small organisations. I had opposed making the ban retrospective, but the delegates who declared themselves as proud supporters of Socialist Appeal from the rostrum were clearly seeking martyrdom.

Like other NEC members I was concerned at reports of delegates being suspended or expelled in the few days before conference, with claims that dozens of CLPs and hundreds of individuals were affected. Conference was told that 20 delegates were barred. In 19 cases the CLP had other delegates and the 20th was able to send a substitute, so no CLP was disenfranchised. If anyone has evidence to the contrary I am happy to take it up. We were also assured that no MP voted on behalf of their CLP.

On the treasurer's report I was pleased that delegates again raised the very small share of membership income which is returned to CLPs. The treasurer Diana Holland confirmed that this was under review, but I'm conscious that I promised reform, and am already halfway through my term. Please keep pushing this.

The Members Speak

Conference debated more motions than at any time since 1997, and there were many passionate and interesting contributions. Another radical and wide-ranging motion on the green new deal was carried, and a commitment to a minimum wage of £15 an hour, against "at least £10 an hour" featured in Labour's new deal for working people. Though we are currently not in a position to deliver either.

For me the outstanding debate was on electoral reform, where more than 140 CLPs submitted motions, speeches were articulate and well-argued, and 80% of CLP delegates voted for a commitment to proportional representation despite the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy urging opposition. These figures are unprecedented. Although 95% of the unions voted the other way, and the motion was defeated by 57.8% to 42.2%, the leadership surely cannot ignore a mass movement which crosses all factional lines. I intend to pursue this through the policy commissions, the national policy forum and the NEC, as a test of whether our policy-making processes truly care about what members think. To those who believe it would be conceding that Labour cannot win the next election outright, I'd say that having a Plan B is always wise.

NEC Meeting, 6:30 p.m. Tuesday 28 September 2021

At the final conference meeting the NEC thanked Margaret Beckett for chairing and staff for keeping the show on the road through a challenging year, welcomed new members and said goodbye to retiring members. The brilliant Alice Perry was elected as chair, the first to come from local government since Jeremy Beecham in 2005, with CLP representative Johanna Baxter as vice-chair. They deserve loyalty and support. I don't know if it was a casualty of the pandemic, but there were no flowers, no certificates and no speechettes, a perfunctory handover with no sense of ceremony or celebration.

Closing Thoughts

By the end I was persuaded that the rule changes were necessary, but would have liked some punchy soundbites to distract attention from all the navel-gazing. There were good speeches, notably Angela Rayner riffing on "one rule for them, another for the rest of us", and Keir Starmer was warmly received by most delegates, but few memorable phrases. We should learn from successes elsewhere. Welsh Labour won the Senedd by focusing on what they had done and what they would do next, no leaking or briefing against each other, effective use of social media, and Mark Drakeford as a competent and trusted leader. I've also had feedback from social democrats in Germany, who won with a disciplined approach, simple messages on housing and wages repeated throughout the campaign, and a credible candidate for chancellor. I asked how they maintained party unity, and they said that as the polls improved, so did internal discipline, which in turn led to better polls. If Labour could develop a similar virtuous circle we might get somewhere.

Finally on Covid, there was no social distancing in the conference hall, nor at fringes or receptions, and through the week fewer and fewer masks were worn, leaving some delegates feeling unsafe and unprotected. Vaccine passes were checked, but even vaccinated people can catch and transmit the virus. The risk assessments required for CLP and branch meetings seem to go rather beyond what was enforced in Brighton. Having said that, I'm not aware of any reported Covid infections, which is encouraging.

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. Previous reports are at www.annblack.co.uk*

Conference Arrangements Committee Reports:

<http://www.annblack.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Conf21-CAC-1.pdf>

<http://www.annblack.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Conf21-CAC-1A.pdf>

<http://www.annblack.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Conf21-CAC-2.pdf>

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