

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

The first meeting after conference is an opportunity to take stock, and plan for the year ahead. After months of disembodied shouting over Zoom it was worth the early start and jam-packed trains to be able to meet in London and chat over coffee, lunch and an unexpected fire drill. Informal contact helps to dissolve polarisation, and I hope this was shared by members who dialled in. Alice Perry chaired the meeting warmly and skilfully, keeping to time while allowing everyone to be heard. She promised that a motion on proscribed organisations would be debated at the January meeting, together with an update on the position of the MP for Islington North, and she hoped that we would hear from the Forde inquiry before then.

The NEC wished general secretary David Evans a speedy recovery from Covid and continued with a series of presentations. I was encouraged that the party has moved on from internal arguments about structures towards concrete plans for a possible general election in 2023. But that is only half of what is needed. It is not just how many voters we talk to; it is what we say to them. On the doorstep people do not ask “Where is the Forde report?” They say “We don’t know what Labour stands for” and our activists still have no snappy responses. The Tories claim, falsely, to be fixing social care, but when asked what Labour would do instead, we are silent. Robust policy-making strategies are long overdue.

### **Organising to Win**

The staffing reorganisation was almost complete. NEC members were concerned about pressures on staff, and asked that as and when funds became available they should be used to build capacity within regions, close to members on the ground. The party should also assess the impact of the severance scheme and restructuring on women and BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) employees.

To achieve a Westminster majority Labour has to gain 124 seats and hold the 202 won in 2019. Trigger ballots for sitting MPs would start soon, followed by candidate selections in target seats. The future candidates programme was up and running, with an organising academy planned for volunteers to work alongside regional staff for elections in 2022. Some stressed that new national and regional conferences and committees placed extra demands on staff, and we must be honest about what the party could deliver.

Next year the lease on the Southside headquarters runs out. Some suggested buying our own property to avoid constant relocation, but we’ve been here before. Labour purchased Old Queen Street in 2002, paid for extensive renovations, and then sold it four years later without, as I recall, making any profit.

Local parties have now been unable to access membership data for a month. I asked for secretaries to be contacted regularly even if there is no firm date for resolution and, until then, advised on how to run trigger ballots, council and parliamentary candidate selections, AGMs and other meetings without knowing who is entitled to participate. We are all open to challenge at any time if anything goes wrong.

### **Lessons from Abroad**

We had a fascinating presentation on the German elections, with the SPD’s Olaf Scholz about to become chancellor at the head of a three-party coalition. The SPD began planning in 2017, and attributed success to a clear narrative throughout, based around the themes of the Future, Respect and Europe. “Future” included climate change, mobility, digital and health. “Respect” covered mutual dependence, no discrimination, decent schools, pay and pensions, and transcended culture wars. “Respect for all” was a better response to right-wing populists than labelling them, as Hillary Clinton did, a “basket of deplorables”. Billboards and other materials were standardised with black-and-white photos on a red background. With Angela Merkel standing down, Olaf Scholz was presented as the best candidate for chancellor, offering both change and reassurance. No new policies were announced during the last phase because they were already embedded and everyone knew what the SDP stood for. Though benefiting from opponents’ missteps, their preparation and message discipline meant they were well placed to capitalise on these.

I wish we had adopted the SPD strategy back in 2020, and others asked when we would start talking about what we believed. Clear stripped-down taglines scored over lengthy manifestos which no-one reads, and despite Boris Johnson’s bizarre behaviour and gross errors of judgment his popularity has hitherto remained surprisingly high. And while billboards play less of a part in UK elections, garden stakes could be used to highlight key messages in addition to simply saying “Vote Labour”.

Within the UK Wales is Labour’s success story, still in power after 22 years. Welsh Labour has retained a strong Welsh national identity, defined against the English Tory identity. I suspect that Mark Drakeford has also benefited from visible leadership through the pandemic, as has Nicola Sturgeon in Scotland.

A final point on the impact of different electoral systems. Taking only seats elected by first past the post the German election would have made the CDU / CSU the largest group, just short of an overall majority, and Armin Laschet would likely be chancellor, heading a minority government or with support from the far-right AfD. Food for thought after 80% of constituencies supported proportional representation at conference.

## **A Kinder, Gentler Politics**

We moved on to changing our culture. Party chair Anneliese Dodds said that everyone wants Labour to be the party of equality and a safe space for all. The new rules should provide independent procedures for dealing with issues around protected characteristics, but they only come into effect after the offensive behaviour. Prevention is essential, and following training on anti-semitism, training on Islamophobia is being rolled out and work against transphobia is in progress. We should all be more confident in Labour's achievements in power at every level, and supportive of each other. Within our own party and staffing structures we must promote diversity and inclusion to expand the pool of talent on which we can draw.

Several speakers stressed that NEC members should lead by example and treat each other with courtesy. However there were continuing concerns about delays and inconsistencies in disciplinary processes. Just one flimsy charge, or another suspension reversed as an administrative error, feeds the perception that all cases are unsound. I have been promised a reply to my dossier, submitted to the Disputes Panel. Others called for Labour to look outward and respond to the drowning of 27 migrants in the Channel according to humanitarian principles, as shadow home secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds is doing. But the NEC can only do so much from the top, and factional divides within local parties have to be resolved on the ground.

## **Mountains to Climb**

After lunch we ran through the forthcoming 2022 elections, with 6,470 seats up for election including London boroughs and Scottish and Welsh councils. When last contested in 2018 Labour and the Tories were tied on 35% of the national equivalent vote share, so there is everything to play for. The presentation again focused on mechanics. Members raised the need for better political messaging than in 2021, highlighting Tory-driven financial pressures on councils and rises in national insurance and council tax.

This led on to preparations for the general election, including strategy development, empowering activists, building trust in candidates, mobilising members, producing materials, setting targets for contact rates, and communicating compelling messages. Keir Starmer praised the high quality of participants in the future candidates' programme. However most voters decide based on what they see of the national party, mainly filtered through the media. We had some brilliant candidates in 2015 who campaigned for months and years at huge personal and financial cost, and most did not succeed through no fault of their own.

NEC members proposed twinning with marginal seats, and picked up my plea for simple, clear messages. Competence was key, an argument that could be used against Boris Johnson in London and the SNP in Scotland. The importance of the trade unions was emphasised, as well as the need to ensure diverse representation, especially as we cannot currently use all-women shortlists for Westminster.

## **Labour Listens**

The final presentation was on what the voters were telling us. Many are anxious, worried about falling living standards, economic insecurity, and public services. Top national concerns centre on the economy, climate change, health and the cost of living. Labour has never won an election without being trusted on the economy and Keir Starmer's speech was well-received by the CBI, though Boris Johnson's spectacular car crash dominated media coverage. Labour needed consistent messaging, with positive stories about the kind of Britain that we would build; owning the future rather than harking back to the past; and providing reassurance around the economy, Brexit and immigration. These themes should be decided now.

Members generally agreed. On social care we must recognise that this includes people of all ages, not just the retired and elderly, and there are problems with the system beyond lack of funds. But I am worried about splitting voters into ever finer segments. Trying to please both those who are economically insecure but socially conservative, and those who are financially better-off and socially liberal, risks failing to convince either. Authenticity matters. Keir Starmer is genuinely outraged at Tory corruption, and Ed Miliband, standing in at prime minister's questions, challenged Boris Johnson on COP26 with knowledge and passion. Labour spokespeople should never appear to be struggling to remember the line of the day.

## Farewell

The formal session opened with a tribute to Andy Howell, who died at the age of 64 after a short illness. Andy was a former Birmingham councillor and deputy leader and a founding member of the soft-left group Labour Reform, which brokered the formation of the original centre-left grassroots alliance in the late 1990s. Without Andy I would never have been elected to the NEC, and my life would have been rather different. I think that I am grateful ...

## Small Print

The terms of reference were endorsed with a few changes. A schedule of what powers are delegated to whom, including the lines of accountability, was promised a year ago but has not yet materialised, and members still find out about “NEC decisions” through the media rather than official channels, though it was ever thus. We did however agree that all committee papers should be circulated seven days in advance where possible, and no later than five days before the meeting.

The Disputes Panel was renamed as the Complaints and Disciplinary Sub-Committee, and its remit was enhanced by adding oversight and scrutiny of all disciplinary and complaints processes. As it includes all NEC members I am not sure it is a sub-committee, and it needs a vice-chair as well as a chair, as agreed for the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee, but what is more important is what it does. All committees will elect their chairs and vice-chairs at their next meetings.

The future composition and role of the Joint Policy Committee will be included, together with the National Policy Forum, in a review of policy-making to be discussed at the NEC meeting on 25 January 2022. The policy commissions are likely to change, and I am keen to ensure that the JPC has more than five out of 36 places for CLP representatives. As the NPF chair I apologise for the slow progress in re-engaging with all stakeholders, and I hope to be consulted in the next phases of development.

## Is it Me or is it Hot in Here?

I rather lost it on the next item. Every October / November since 2000 the NEC has agreed a timetable running through to the next annual conference, including

- national committee positions to be elected
- deadlines for nominating to these positions, and for registering delegates. The eligibility of delegates to stand is determined by this date
- deadlines for constitutional amendments, motions and emergency motions

These dates were then publicly available. In December this information has been mailed directly to CLP chairs and secretaries who were advised to *“use this early notice of the Conference timetable to plan your CLP meetings over the coming months so that you don't miss any of the key deadlines.”* Delegate entitlement and application forms followed in January / February.

So I had hoped to list the national positions here, including CLP places on the NEC and the NPF, plus deadlines for registrations, nominations and motions. However the timetable, postponed by the organisation committee on 9 November, was deferred again to 18 January 2022 so that trade union general secretaries could be consulted. CLPs will hear sometime after that. It's the first time I've been in a minority of one, and perhaps lockdown fever led me to get so cross over something so trivial, but it is unusual for papers to be circulated twice and pulled twice with no warning and no explanation. Still, I remember that the unions supported one-member-one-vote for electing CLP NPF representatives at conference back in 2009, against an NEC recommendation, and I am happy to engage.

## Rallying the Troops

Returning to what matters in the real world, the NEC approved aims and objectives for 2022. Much of the contents had already been covered by earlier presentations, and this closing section reinforced the need to look outwards, and to ramp up planning for a general election held on current boundaries in 2023, or on new boundaries if in 2024. Top of the list was “A clear political strategy and policy offer based on our core values, led by the leader of the opposition and informed by top quality insight and robust data”, with first-class communications underpinning everything we do, and a strong narrative as a government in waiting. Bring it on!

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