

National Executive Committee, 29 March 2022

This meeting was in hybrid mode, so I went to London and enjoyed face-to-face conversation and Wendy Nichols' excellent home-made cakes. Members paid tribute to Margaret Beckett who has announced that she will not stand at the next election, though she crisply pointed out that she has not yet died, and indeed she may continue on the NEC for several more years.

General secretary David Evans said that our common priority was winning elections, starting in May. Local government was the first line of defence in protecting the most vulnerable. Labour was at a high point when these seats were last contested in 2018, so May would be challenging, but the party was in better shape than last year and making progress. He highlighted cutting-edge digital development, marginal seat strategies and staff training, within careful financial management to keep the party debt- and deficit-free. Labour was determined to maintain diversity among our elected representatives, and to improve the proportions of BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) staff and women in senior positions. David also acknowledged concerns raised by the Labour Muslim Network. The party was taking a number of steps to address these, and he and his team had participated in training on Islamophobia.

Membership stood at around 430,000, of whom about 30,000 were in arrears. David invoked an iron law according to which numbers always fall after general and leadership elections, but the rate of decline seemed to be slowing, and new people were joining. Detailed analyses would again come to the NEC when the new system was in place, hopefully by late summer (2022). He thanked volunteers for continuing to cope with the consequences of the cyber-incident, and promised CLP secretaries another update soon.

Missing in Action

Encouraging signals had been received from the Forde inquiry into the infamous 2020 leaked report, and its findings might come to the NEC in May. I assure members, again, that these are not in possession of the general secretary, the leader, or anyone else. If they were they would immediately have been leaked, same as every other "confidential" document.

David thanked staff for delivering another successful online women's conference, though some felt that opportunities for outward-facing communication had been missed. I agree, and notice that other parties use their spring gatherings to showcase their people and policies. He was committed to a national BAME conference as soon as practicable. Annual national disabled and Young Labour conferences are also now written into rule, but all are costly and resource-intensive.

Finally he said that the East Midlands advertisement for volunteers to help run the regional office had been approved by the staff joint trade union committee and the regional trade union liaison organisation.

Future Candidates

The NEC agreed that two more seats, Bolsover and Derby North, should start selecting parliamentary candidates, though I wondered if many applicants would wait for Derby South rather than go for North which needs a 5.4% swing to Labour. For council elections we always select in order of winnability.

Leader's Report

Keir Starmer spoke first about Ukraine. He had met the Ukrainian ambassador and the opposition leader from Belarus, and visited British NATO troops in Estonia, which shares a land border with Russia. Labour supported the NATO strategy, stronger sanctions, and energy policies which ensure continuing supplies. The government approach to refugees was slow, mean and narrow-minded. On P&O the summary sacking and replacement of the workforce was scandalous, with the company openly admitting that it chose to break the law because the penalties were no deterrent. Labour's Karl Turner highlighted legal loopholes two years ago, but the government had failed to act. And chancellor Rishi Sunak had delivered a deeply cynical spring statement, with inflation, prices and taxes rising, wages declining in real terms, and the biggest fall in living standards for more than 70 years. Labour's proposed windfall tax on the energy companies, plus scrapping VAT on fuel, would reduce average household bills by £600, compared with the Tories giving a £200 loan to be repaid on the implausible assumption that energy prices have peaked.

I asked about Labour's renewed enthusiasm for nuclear power, which will certainly not pay this year's bills. Colleagues reminded me that nuclear is part of our policy for reaching net zero, but Keir Starmer agreed that there were issues of cost and timing, which is why wind, solar and tidal sources, a strong hydrogen strategy and retrofitting homes with energy-saving measures were so important. He did not explain how Labour would deal with the 600,000 double-decker busloads of toxic radioactive waste or pay the £131 billion decommissioning bills already accumulated. Another problem for our grandchildren. However I agreed with him that Ukraine has forced a debate which should have started years ago, and running from one unsavoury dictator to another, begging for oil, is no solution.

Other members called for renationalising the energy companies, broader policies on agency work and better regulation of labour markets, and repealing the Tory trade union act. Full employment rights from Day 1 would only be useful if they could be enforced. Labour needed a position on public sector pay going into the elections, with Scottish local government workers preparing for industrial action, and strikes likely in both private and public sectors in the autumn as inflation hit home. Where these followed legitimate ballots union members expected Labour support. While there was currently overwhelming sympathy for the plight of fleeing Ukrainians, the Tories were capable of exploiting community tensions if these developed later.

Keir Starmer agreed, and pointed out that many Afghan refugees were still stranded in hotels, desperately worried about friends and families back home and largely forgotten by the media. DP World, the owners of P&O, had received millions of pounds in government funding and, unforgivably, was set to get millions more for establishing freeports. Labour had radical policies on the windfall tax and investing £28 billion every year in tackling climate change. The local election campaign would focus on the cost of living, and dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour. He believed that free Covid tests should continue to be available and agreed that the pandemic was far from over, with hospital numbers ticking up again.

Members also asked Keir to speak as passionately on the cruelties imposed by this government as he did on "partygate", and urged him not to forget disabled people. Constant repetition of "hardworking families" and "the party of working people" excluded those who were sick, retired or otherwise unable to work, many facing higher costs related to illness or disability, and with dwindling welfare support. He replied that Labour was the party for everyone, not just working people, but the next day's prime minister's questions session was not reassuring on this. (Watching PMQs also made me wonder, again, why any normal person wants to be an MP, part of a baying, shouting mob where insults and lies trump facts and reason.)

Spreading the Word

The NEC then heard plans for the coming elections in every part of the country and every type of council. Labour had been learning from previous campaigns and sister parties abroad, with tactics honed in recent by-elections. Success required a laser-like focus on voters, persuading and mobilising in a time when tribal loyalties no longer dominate. These would be cost-of-living elections, sending a message to a government which was not on the side of working people, while Labour councils continue to put people first.

Members stressed that messaging around crime had to resonate with all communities, and should include positive policies for rebuilding youth services and activities for young people, as well as better streetlighting and CCTV coverage and more police hubs. We also had to deal with a government which largely controls funding and which has devolved blame but not power, making crystal clear that any cuts to local services flow from national Tory decisions, imposed on Labour councils without consultation or consent.

Digital campaigning would bring state-of-the-art techniques, with informed targeting, measurable objectives, and new approaches to online organisation. As well as promoting Labour's offer members asked for help in countering disinformation locally and nationally. Powerful national content would be translated into local material, tailored to individual areas.

I asked for the powerful national content to be published, and raised my usual question, echoed by members everywhere I go: what does Labour stand for? Not an hour-long speech to the Fabians, or an 8,000-word essay, or a few abstract nouns, but short snappy slogans like Take Back Control or Get Brexit Done or for that matter Tony Blair's 1997 pledges, which can be uttered in 15 seconds on the doorstep and which lodge in the minds of activists and voters. The strapline has been reduced from two wordy sentences to "On Your Side" but there is some way to go. I also suggested that the party website should steer searchers towards current Labour policies, but typing "housing" into the box on <https://labour.org.uk/> brings up nothing more recent than September 2021.

These elections are a staging-post to the next general election, where Labour needs to gain 125 seats to form a majority, and must reawaken and empower party members. As I was writing, this message dropped into my inbox:

“As we approach local and general elections, it is even more important that members are enabled to feel some sense of ownership and participation in the Labour party ... We ask once again that communications between Labour central office and members be reformed, so that lines of dialogue are prompt and genuine, and we revive a sense of solidarity and purpose.”

I couldn't agree more.

Urgent Business?

After an update from the business board the NEC went on to consider adding three more groupuscules to the list of proscribed organisations. I failed to see why this was a priority, or that the party was at mortal risk from a few dozen dissidents, and I continue to be concerned about the flimsy definition of support and retrospective application of the rules. Anecdotally a small number of mainly young members who liked or shared a few silly things, some many years ago, have been summarily expelled, to the bewilderment of mainstream local parties and the creation of unnecessary “Labour splits” headlines. Some offenders were not even born in the 1980s when the fore-runners of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL) were active.

With no other means of expressing dissatisfaction I voted against proscribing AWL (carried 20-11) and the Socialist Labour Network (carried 19-11). I voted for proscribing Labour Left Alliance (carried 20-11) because of their call to boycott the party's anti-semitism training. Apparently AWL expects its members to contribute an average of more than £2,000 a year, surely beyond the means of most working-class supporters, so I did learn something new.

The NEC approved procedural rules for the new independent complaints board, and I was assured that witnesses would in future be protected from personal attacks.

Odds and Ends

The NEC noted a number of papers, including an update on selection of council candidates selected and a report of activities from nations and regions, in which several areas found that “partygate” was no longer at the top of voters' minds. Terms of reference were tabled for the British Irish Labour Forum, established to promote co-operation and provide formal liaison between the Labour and Co-operative movements across the island of Ireland. This includes UK Labour, the Labour Party (Ireland), the Labour Party in Northern Ireland, the Co-operative Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and is completely separate from the NEC review into standing candidates and participation of party members in Northern Ireland.

Nearly 700 individuals had responded to a survey on remote participation, including 122 branch officers, 281 CLP officers and 279 members. The overwhelming majority paid for Zoom despite the party offering free Teams. Feedback was mixed. Online meetings were cheaper and more convenient for disabled and older members, families with children and those who had to travel long distances, but they lacked social interaction and excluded people without access to technology. Going forward around half of the respondents wanted hybrid meetings, with the rest split equally between online and in-person.

Though hybrid sounds like the best of both worlds, a word of caution. This NEC meeting was attended by 50 people, half online and half in the room. The first part suffered from echoes which meant that those online could not speak and had to type contributions in the chat. It took the lunch break and the party's IT staff to resolve the problem so they could join the rest of us. Larger meetings in diverse venues without built-in equipment or professional support, and including secret ballots, would be hard to manage, and I suspect that my local party will alternate online with face-to-face. However the NEC development fund has supported a number of CLPs piloting hybrid meetings, and I would be interested in your experiences.

Any Other Business

This is where the national policy forum (NPF) now sits on NEC agendas. There have been changes and reductions in the staff policy team, but the new policy commissions should now be in a position to meet.

I am still hoping that draft papers will be published by June, for discussion by CLPs and other stakeholders in the summer. The NPF was designed to review all policy areas over a three-year cycle, working towards the manifesto for the next general election. However if this is in 2023 we are already in Year 3 without having completed Years 1 and 2. Arguably this year's consultation should cover everything, tied into the Stronger Together shadow cabinet review and linking with Gordon Brown's constitutional review, David Blunkett's skills taskforce, Angela Rayner's future of work report, and any other initiatives which I don't know about. However that would mean long papers with little time to write, read and discuss them, so the commissions may focus on key themes with members commenting on other subjects through the website.

Members have also commented that while the former policy commissions clearly shadowed groups of government departments the new names are opaque. Below is a provisional list of what goes where.

A green and digital future – co-convenors Ed Miliband MP and Margaret Beckett
Economy (depending on the issue); Climate and Net Zero; Energy; Environment, food and rural affairs; Science, digital and technology policy; Transport (depending on the issue)

Better jobs and better work – co-convenors Rachel Reeves MP and Andy Kerr
Economy (depending on the issue); Employment rights; Future of work; Business; Skills / vocational education; Industrial strategy; Procurement, insourcing and reshoring

Safe and secure communities – co-convenors Yvette Cooper MP and James Asser
Transport (depending on the issue); Police and crime; Criminal justice, prisons, courts and probation; Online safety/fraud; Planning; Local government; Retail/high streets; Constitution; Civil rights

Public services that work from the start – co-convenors Wes Streeting MP and Mark Ferguson
Public health; NHS; Mental health; Social care; Education (schools, colleges and universities); Youth services

A future where families come first – co-convenors Bridget Phillipson MP and Diana Holland
Social security; Pensions; Childcare; Early years; Housing and homelessness; Women and equalities; Culture

Britain in the world – co-convenors David Lammy MP and Michael Wheeler
Foreign affairs; International development; Trade (including post Brexit); Illicit finance

Members' Money

The panel which allocates money from the NEC development funds met on 25 March 2022 and agreed a number of grants to individual CLPs as well as two broader projects. The first continues funding to support delegates who need carers or enablers to attend annual, women's or other party conferences. This is mentioned on the annual conference information sheet sent to CLP secretaries, and I urge CLPs to apply if their delegates could benefit.

The second, agreed by five votes to three, was support for a national trainee organiser scheme. This will train 20 new organisers and deploy them in key seats which Labour must win, but where the local party cannot afford to match national funding.

I voted in favour, but added that in 2018 conference agreed to review CLP funding, and we have not yet started. This matters because the NEC funds are what is left after paying fixed costs – election insurance, contact creator and a conference delegate pass – for every CLP, and returning about £2.80 per member. If membership falls much below 300,000 the fixed costs plus the per capita refund exceeds subscription income and the funds go negative. In round figures we had 550,000 paid-up members in January 2020, and we have 400,000 now. There is no time to lose.

Finally if any CLP nominated a member for a merit award, and have not heard, please get in touch and I will follow up.

As usual please feel free to circulate and/or post online, and contact me at annblack50@btinternet.com / 07956-637958. Previous reports are at www.annblack.co.uk