

National Executive Committee Meeting, 24 May 2022

The NEC met in the Labour borough of Westminster, the first time anyone has been able to say that. The election results featured throughout, and we are trying to re-learn habits of optimism and common purpose after years of strife and depression.

Deputy leader Angela Rayner thanked everyone for solidarity against the misogynistic Daily Mail and attacks on both her and Keir Starmer. The contrast between the parties could not be more stark. While the Tories had dropped a long-promised employment bill from the Queen's speech, Labour's new deal for working people would transform their lives, tackling the gig economy, repealing the anti-trade union law and banning zero-hours contracts. She and Rachel Reeves had made it clear that Labour was firmly pro-business and pro-good employers who invested in their staff. She had joined the picket lines at Oldham college, and was working closely with trade unions. On other fronts she won the right to see security advice regarding Evgeny Lebedev's peerage, still withheld in defiance of parliament, and exposed government waste, including the £310 paid by every family for dodgy PPE. Meanwhile Boris Johnson partied while law-abiding citizens suffered alone.

NEC members compared the principled stand taken by Keir and Angela over lockdown rules with Tory shamelessness. They raised agency work; rights for staff working at home including freedom from electronic surveillance; better statutory sick pay; widespread problems with online and offline abuse; and support for disabled candidates through reopening the fund for access to elected office. On the Downing Street parties there was sympathy for the cleaners and security staff exposed to unacceptable working conditions. Others stressed that the personal attacks were designed in the Tory whips' office and a foretaste of the general election to come. Hearing directly from our leadership is always inspirational, but Labour can only change the political landscape if we get clear, simple messages across to our activists, who are crying out for them, and to the wider electorate. When a regional director writes that cost of living comes up on the doorstep, but voters do not blame the government or think that Labour has the answers, there are deficiencies in policy, or communication, or both.

Moving Forward

General secretary David Evans reported that Labour's vote share was up by 6%, the best in a decade, but there was no complacency. Voter contacts were at record levels, but he agreed that members need politics as well as organisation, so they can respond to the question "what does Labour stand for?" He was confident that the party was now more inclusive and outward-looking, and basic structures were right. Now more investment was needed to expand capacity, and fundraising was already higher than last year. The Wakefield by-election is a must-win, and Simon Lightwood is an excellent candidate. The Tiverton & Honiton by-election is on the same day, with Liz Pole chosen to stand for Labour. The NEC decision to over-ride the 2021 rule for selecting by-election candidates was again raised, and I have written more about this at <https://labourlist.org/2022/05/ann-black-why-im-standing-to-represent-local-parties-on-labours-governing-body/>

Membership was around 420,000, including about 30,000 in arrears, though exact figures are still not available because of last October's cyber-incident. David repeated his apologies to local party officers, and thanked them for coping with delays in processing renewals, joiners, leavers and movers, and problems in assigning members to correct wards and branches after local boundary changes. The new system should be in place by "the end of summer". This alarmed me, because anyone with experience of implementing IT projects knows that many glitches only appear following full roll-out. I said again that CLP secretaries would be willing to act as guinea-pigs during the test phase.

The new independent complaints process was up and running, and feedback was positive. NEC decisions were reviewed within seven days, and so far one out of 31 had been referred back. Alas, Martin Forde wrote to say that his report was still undergoing legal checks and he hoped to deliver it "shortly". Dismay was, as usual, expressed, as the party clearly has not got what it paid for. However it is unfair to blame David as he wasn't in post when the Forde review was established, and if he attempted to interfere it would compromise the panel's independence. It was NEC members in April 2020 who made the decisions. To those who believe that David and Keir Starmer have the report and are frantically trying to water it down, I can only point out, again, that all "confidential" material anywhere within the party is in the public domain within minutes. If David had it, LabourList would have it. Meanwhile, is anyone taking bets on whether Forde or the new membership system is the first to arrive?

Onward to Liverpool

David confirmed that annual conference would be held from Sunday 25 to Wednesday 28 September 2022. This is a day shorter than last year, and I am concerned about insufficient time to present Labour as ready for government, and the shadow team as the people who should be running the country, as well as allowing full debate on motions. On trigger ballots 58 MPs had been endorsed by their CLPs, 35 further ballots were under way and he hoped that the rest would be completed in June.

The Labour Muslim Network have applied to affiliate to the party, and I hope this can be speedily accepted. There are continuing concerns about Islamophobia, and we have to address them together. On diversity in general, David reported that the diversity and inclusion board, with representatives from nations and regions, had met 19 times. He was not waiting for Forde to make necessary changes to culture. More clarity on due diligence checks, and what information should be available to those affected, would be discussed further, and David promised to take up concerns about individual councils and campaigns, including Tower Hamlets.

Leader's Report

Keir Starmer thanked everyone involved in the May campaigns. Labour made progress where we needed to, from Cumberland to Southampton and Worthing, as well as Wandsworth and Westminster. He was particularly pleased for Barnet, where Labour won control for the first time ever, and with continued progress in Wales and moving up to second place in Scotland. After all the polls and the commentators we now had hard evidence. But there was much more to do, and the next two years would be even harder.

The cost of living crisis was hurting, with people skipping meals and unable to heat their homes. It was 132 days since Labour called for a windfall tax on the excess profits of energy companies and he expected a government U-turn imminently. Not out of principle, sadly, but to distract attention from Sue Gray's report, and from a Queen's speech devoid of content. Labour would continue to focus on fixing the economy while the Tories pursued culture wars, from conversion "therapy" to trans rights. He thanked the FBU and ASLEF for staying with the Labour party.

NEC members spoke about monkeypox and long covid; the governor of the Bank of England lecturing everyone else on wage restraint; the continued fall in local government pay; the need for Labour to listen to trade union members; and lessons from Labor's success in Australia. Keir was thanked for his statement on the killing of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akieh and the disruption of her funeral. Some were uneasy with constant repetition of Labour as "the party of working people", felt to exclude disabled people who face higher costs and are often on lower benefits. Keir said he understood the concerns, as he grew up with a disabled mother and the associated difficulties, for instance in accessing public transport. However the challenge is finding a phrase which makes voters think "this is about me" and I suppose it's better than "hard-working families".

Asked about public ownership of the utilities he said that people needed immediate help now. Hence the windfall tax and £600 off bills, supported by 83% of Tory voters, while longer-term solutions could be explored in due course. On possible industrial action on the railways he said it was wrong for the government to restrict the right to strike. He promised to put the possibility of US nuclear weapons coming to Lakenheath on the shadow cabinet agenda. Finally on Durham he said it was normal and lawful for party activists to work as a team and eat as a team, and we could not let our enemies drag us into the gutter with them.

As usual Keir listened carefully and responded courteously to every contribution. These sessions are far more useful than the baying and the insults at prime minister's questions, and it's sad that only NEC members get to appreciate them.

Glasses Half Full

This was followed by a detailed presentation of results. Labour made 2,406,108 contacts since January and fielded more candidates than any other party, increasing vote share across the country and among all electoral groups, including Leave voters. Meanwhile Tory candidates were running as "Local Conservatives" and distancing themselves from their own leader. If the results translated into a general election Labour would be the largest party, but without an overall majority.

Dozens of members sent me feedback and I listed ways in which Labour could do even better next time, including a clear policy offer and dividing lines; a website where searching on “housing policy” displays current housing policy; functioning IT and membership systems; and earlier selection of candidates. I do not understand why areas with all-out elections did not have most candidates in place last autumn. There are also differences between members who want more ammunition against LibDems and Greens and members who want to do deals with them. I passed on comments from Scotland, where the proportional voting system is designed to produce coalitions and opposing them in principle does not make sense.

Others asked for more flexible templates to help local parties design their own materials, more organisers in every region and nation, and the need to acknowledge local distress about disciplinary action. Wales did particularly well, combining council and Welsh national messages effectively, and highlighting Mark Drakeford as a trusted leader.

Parliamentary Selections

The NEC authorised the start of selections in Bassetlaw, Birmingham Northfield, Bishop Auckland, Chingford & Woodford Green, London & Westminster, Dover, Erewash, Exeter, Hartlepool, Hastings & Rye, Hendon, Ipswich, Norwich North, Penistone & Stocksbridge, Peterborough, Plymouth Moor View, Shipley, South Swindon, Southampton Itchen, Stoke Central and Watford. A plea from Scarborough & Whitby would be considered.

Informally I understand that most of these are not expected to start before summer. The NEC also agreed to review the new procedures following the first tranche of 16 selections. So it appears that candidates for the second tranche will be campaigning for months before the formal process opens, and that the NEC may change procedures in July, neither of which is helpful. The NEC were told that the party hopes to complete all selections by the end of 2022 except where boundary changes may have major impacts. I don't know if this includes every seat or just priority seats, but even the latter would be extremely challenging.

How Not To Do Stuff

Last week brought headlines about sending hit squads into underperforming Labour councils and allowing the NEC to sack council leaders. Unfortunately no-one bothered to consult councillors about the proposed campaign improvement boards. They saw all this first in Huffpost and were incandescent. Crisis talks resulted in a rather different paper beginning with “Right across Britain it is Labour councillors who are showing voters that Labour is on their side”. But it is the original which is firmly lodged in the public domain. Failure to engage key stakeholders in advance, and to recognise that all NEC papers are immediately leaked, stokes perceptions of infighting and shows crass incompetence or worse.

There are undoubtedly a few problematic councils, but underperformance is not just a problem within Labour groups. Local parties trying to get candidates in place have reported little help from regional or national offices, exacerbated by staffing reductions. Some have repeatedly requested equal opportunities training for panel interviewers. There are too many reports of political and personal vendettas during application, selection and appeal processes. Council leaders have extensive powers of patronage, and whistle-blowers may be afraid to report developing problems. And I also asked whether the NEC should be endorsing a mayor who has admitted multiple breaches of covid rules.

The revised paper was carried with 20 votes in favour, eight against and two abstentions. I voted for it, after consulting my primary contact who started out “absolutely fuming” but, on balance, recommended support. There is one loose end: Labour groups will be identified as needing intervention by the NEC local government panel, defined as the chair of the organisation committee and both NEC local government representatives. Several of us wanted to add a CLP representative and a trade union representative, but were told that the panel was enshrined in the NEC terms of reference and we could only change it at the November awayday. Curiously the terms of reference do not include an NEC local government panel.

Towards the Manifesto

In January the NEC agreed a work plan for the national policy forum. The new policy commissions are meeting, and consultation papers will go out to stakeholders on 27 May, with a closing date of 8 July 2022. The January meeting also agreed that the NEC should decide in May whether to plan a final-stage NPF in autumn 2022, in anticipation of a 2023 general election, or hold it in summer 2023 before a 2024 election.

There were indications that the Tories are not organising for 2023 but waiting for boundary changes to kick in, better poll ratings, and income tax cuts which cause voters to forget 14 years of misrule. A change in leadership could upset all calculations, but it is already impossible to prepare for the final stage, consult members across the entire policy agenda, and organise a three-day gathering for 300 people in November. Some trade union representatives proposed deferring any decision to the July NEC, which would leave just four months with summer and conference in between. That was rejected, with ten in favour, 12 (including me) against, and two abstentions. Holding the final NPF in summer 2023 was then accepted without dissent. We should all now actively consider how to involve every part of the movement if the manifesto again has to be written at short notice.

Equalities Overview

Finally the director of external relations gave a presentation on creating a more diverse party, engaging relevant stakeholders, and developing policy to support equalities. The latter includes tackling inequality in the criminal justice system, hate crime, Black maternal mortality, employment rights for women and mothers, diversity in the school curriculum, updating the gender recognition act and a race equality act.

Members asked for more direct references to the national women's committee and welcomed the BAME conference planned for November while regretting that this year it would not yet be able to send resolutions to annual conference. Concerns among young members were also raised, though it was not clear if these sit within the equalities remit, or belong with general party organisation. Either way, young members should and must be welcomed, as they are our future leaders.

There are some structural questions around the developing equalities framework. Minutes of the NEC equalities committee are, or should be, circulated to the full NEC along with those of other subcommittees. Unless minutes of the women's committee also come to the NEC, this committee, and the women they represent, may be detached from NEC decision-making, which cannot be helpful. This was not best explored in the sixth hour of Tuesday's meeting, but the women's committee meets on 7 June and perhaps it can be considered there.

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