

National Executive Committee, 29 November 2022

The first NEC meeting after conference was held in Newcastle and concentrated on preparing for a general election which could come at any time. Aims and objectives included clear, optimistic and persuasive messages about what a Labour government would offer, strong campaigning in key seats, fundraising, effective use of digital technology, a diverse and inclusive organisation, and discipline and focus at every level. I added the need for fully functioning membership systems.

A few formal items were agreed. The NEC approved the terms of reference, with the complaints and disciplinary sub-committee to be defined as a committee in its own right, and the chair of the national women's committee to be invited to meetings of the equalities committee. The list of NEC officers, an inner decision-making group, was amended to include a former chair of the national policy forum (NPF) as an alternative to the current NPF chair, with 16 votes in favour, six against and three abstentions. So after standing down as NPF chair in October, I am now again an NEC officer and on the business board. I also joined the bursary panel, which considers applications for financial help for parliamentary candidates from working-class or low-income backgrounds or with additional disability-related costs.

Setting the Scene

The national campaign co-ordinator Shabana Mahmood said that it now looked possible for Labour to return to government after its worst-ever general election defeat, but there was no room for complacency. Results in local elections and by-elections were encouraging, but the national swing would have to exceed the swing in 1997 to give a bare majority, and polls would undoubtedly tighten. Staff in the leader's office and party headquarters were working as a single united team, and all decisions were judged according to whether they would help us win. Keir Starmer as leader was setting three tasks:

- to lay blame for the current economic chaos on the 12 years of Tory government
- to establish our own economic credibility, including relations with business
- to promote positive policies, explaining what Labour would do today and will do in government.

Detailed presentations by senior staff followed. Labour needed messages for the whole country which resonated in "red wall" seats, Leave areas, Scotland and everywhere in between. Voters want to know that Labour understands their lives, has credible plans to improve them, and is strong enough and committed enough to see them through. This requires promoting Keir Starmer as prime minister-in-waiting; focusing on the economy; a solid manifesto and accompanying pledge cards; closing the funding gap with the Tories; and efficient and disciplined organisation. We had to attract voters to Labour rather than rely on the government falling apart.

Speakers also covered recruitment of new trainee organisers and digital trainees in every region and nation; the impact of boundary changes; general election taskforce structures and streamlined decision-making; learning from sister parties; directing resources to where they would be most useful; appealing to all demographic groups; the importance of trade unions; and digital transformation which balanced attacking the Tory record with Labour's positive vision. A digital workshop was offered for NEC members.

A Programme for Government

Anneliese Dodds, chair of the NPF, hoped that all outstanding policy differences would be resolved at the final-stage meeting in July 2023, before conference and the Clause V meeting which signs off the manifesto. Members felt that no-one now reads lengthy manifestos, and Labour had to present its offer in easily digestible form. The first general election which I remember was in 1964 and I still recall Labour campaigning on "thirteen wasted years" of Tory government. That's the sign of a good slogan.

I and others raised the new requirement for photo-ID at polling stations, where concerns included disenfranchising young and ethnic minority voters, and the safety of council staff having to turn voters away. This will be particularly confusing in Wales, where people can vote at the age of 16 without photo-ID in local and Senedd elections, while for Westminster and police and crime commissioner elections they must be 18 with photo-ID. Strategies are needed before the May 2023 elections where we hope to make further gains, and could include a renewed drive for postal votes. On parliamentary candidates 80 should be in place by the end of 2022, but many less winnable constituencies are also keen to choose their candidates as soon as possible and I hope we can streamline procedures for these seats.

We ended this session with a brainstorm of things we needed more of, and things that we should drop. I asked for councillors, ward organisers and CLPs to have access to members' telephone numbers instead of having to ask regional officers, and for literature to consider quality as well as quantity.

I was impressed by the level of analysis, co-ordination and commitment at the top. But that common purpose will not simply trickle down, and needs to be reinforced through better communication with grassroots activists. Local parties can provide valuable feedback and will respond positively if treated with respect.

The policy development team are setting an example in providing timely information: CLP secretaries and policy officers will be sent the NPF timetable in the next few days, with consultation documents to be published on 30 January and a closing date of 17 March 2023, so they can plan discussions for early 2023. In contrast the NEC agreed the schedule for next year's conference on 8 November 2022, but CLPs will not be officially told until 13 January 2023. Up to 2019 a pre-Christmas mailing always gave us early notice, so that meetings could be planned and deadlines met.

Forde Report: the Saga Continues

The NEC's aims included removing obstacles to winning the next election, so I was pleased that back in September the NEC agreed to reach final decisions on Forde's recommendations at this November meeting. I know these are still live issues for some, and hoped to report conclusions which would enable the party to draw a line and move on. However the working group had not yet been formed. Its composition was agreed as 12 members of the NEC and three additional nominees, with Carol Sewell as chair and Johanna Baxter as deputy chair. It will decide which actions relating to tackling discrimination, culture change, and codes of conduct should be taken forward, monitor implementation, and report to the NEC in March, April, July and November 2023 with a final account in December 2023. The NEC will only vote on issues if the group is unable to reach consensus. Regular updates will be published on the party website.

The main focus for the group is on developing a healthy culture, including party-wide consultation and sharing positive working practices across CLPs. The paper suggested that this might be delegated to existing party units in the interests of speedy progress. I don't know what that means, but local parties must surely now be involved. The leader, party chair and general secretary have held several meetings with equalities groups but there is a lot in Forde besides disturbing racist and sexist behaviour. So far CLPs have not been considered as stakeholders, yet two years ago it was CLP chairs and secretaries who were suspended for allowing the wrong kind of motion onto the agenda, and who still sometimes struggle to maintain a comradely atmosphere. So I have asked how we can all feed into the working group through the year ahead. I also stressed that compassion is essential for those administering disciplinary procedures.

A second obstacle to focusing on the general election is continuing delays in resolving complaints, with some members still waiting well over a year. I do not suggest that the party should lower its standards, but I agree with Forde that only exceptional cases should extend beyond nine months, and I believe that administrative suspensions should be used more sparingly. Local parties generally know who is damaging or assisting their campaigning, and should not be distracted by perceived injustices.

Equalities at the Crossroads

The final paper stressed Labour's commitment to equalities across all groups, in line with our core values and the need to represent all of Britain's diverse communities. It was controversial in questioning whether the complex structures for BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and disabled members outlined in the 2018 Democracy Review and added to the rulebook in 2021 were the best ways of achieving this. Instead separate internal BAME and disabled structures would be deferred while other measures were implemented, with a review of their effectiveness in increasing voice and representation after the general election. These included engagement events for BAME and women members, dedicating the next cohort of the Bernie Grant leadership programme to Black members, and providing accessibility training for regions and CLP roleholders to better support inclusion of disabled members.

BAME Labour had not been functioning effectively as a socialist society, and the party would provide support in conducting democratic elections for its committee. All members identifying as BAME would be invited to join, free of charge for the moment, and stand for positions. Similarly all members identifying as disabled would be invited to join Disability Labour, also free of charge. LGBT+ members had not sought to set up separate structures within the party, and would continue to work through LGBT+ Labour, their affiliated organisation.

A proposal to elect the BAME Labour committee in the same way as the BAME NEC representative was rejected with five in favour, 22 against and one abstention. I opposed it because of complaints about the electoral college for the NEC place, where individual members feel dominated by trade union block votes.

Women on the Edge

The women's organisation is further advanced, but whether because of under-resourcing or because of design flaws the national women's committee and the women's conference arrangements committee have not really integrated into party structures. Four out of six CLP places on the women's committee are currently vacant.

The main bone of contention was the proposal to return the national women's conference to the Saturday immediately before annual conference, so 7 October 2023 in Liverpool, and a similar arrangement for 2024 if the general election had not happened. As well as cost savings, women politicians were thought to be more likely to attend than at a separate event. Also, any motions agreed by a conference in spring could be over-ridden by the final NPF meeting in July and never make it to annual conference. I conveyed the majority view of the women's committee which favoured a two-day standalone conference on the model of Telford in 2019, but realistically it was now too late to organise anything for March.

The trade unions proposed starting on Friday to allow a full day's business on Saturday, and I am happy with informal sessions for all the delegates who have to arrive on Friday anyway. I still have questions about the basis of delegation, whether fees will be reduced for women who are also delegates to annual conference, whether women delegates to annual conference can attend as visitors, and the timetable for CLPs to elect delegates and submit motions. Hopefully all this will become clear soon.

The fundamental question is whether increased participation by and representation of women, BAME and disabled members is best achieved by conferences which are expensive for CLPs as well as for the national party and attended by a relatively small minority, or by direct outreach to members. The next two years should provide evidence to guide future decisions. The overall package was carried with 21 in favour, including me, three against and four abstentions.

Always Read the Small Print

Along with everyone else I accepted a batch of trade union amendments without seeing them. This was a mistake. Most are sensible, but I do not know why they reduced Disability Labour's entitlement from two further NPF representatives to one, chosen to represent disabled trade union members. And I disagree with looking at how to use the NEC democracy and diversity fund to support disabled candidates. That is what the bursary fund is for. The NEC fund is the share of subscription income that used to be returned to CLPs. The NEC is committed to reviewing this fund, and other eyes are being cast on its sizeable underspend. Next time I shall insist on reading before voting. But 4 p.m. was approaching, and there were trains to catch and long dark journeys home.

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