

National Executive Committee, 23 May 2023

The NEC met in cheerful mood after the most successful local elections in England since 2002. Labour is the largest group in local government for the first time since 2014 and congratulations were expressed to Shaun Davies on his election as chair of the local government association, to Nesil Caliskan who becomes the new chair of the LGA Labour group, and to Yasmine Dar, lord mayor of Manchester for 2023/24.

Musical Chairs

New Westminster boundaries come into effect in July, and all English Labour MPs have been allocated to a new constituency except in Birkenhead where two MPs have a territorial interest. The NEC agreed procedures for the run-off. With only 200-odd Labour MPs they are more sparsely distributed than last time, so there are fewer clashes. Concerns were expressed about a contest in Wales for the new seat of Merthyr Tydfil and Upper Cynon, but this is devolved to Welsh Labour. The NEC were assured that support would be provided to MPs in notionally Tory seats, though all are judged eminently winnable.

Allocation of selected candidates will follow, and except for seven currently in the pipeline all further selections will be made on new boundaries. Several of us raised the disenfranchisement of Workington members who will not be able to vote in either their existing constituency or their new constituency. They were promised an explanation, though it may not meet their demands.

Watch This Space

As previously announced, English and Welsh CLPs will be reorganised on new boundaries immediately after conference, on 12 October 2023. This will need significant advance planning, so I asked when local parties would be able to access new as well as current membership data. General secretary David Evans agreed to find out. I also supported the trade unions on the need to transfer their affiliations smoothly to the new CLPs.

More information had been provided at a roleholders' briefing on 22 May. A mailing would go out to CLPs soon, outlining the next steps, followed by a handbook in the next few weeks. Where a CLP retains at least 85% of its current membership it will not have to hold an extra AGM. Others will need to arrange inaugural AGMs between 12 October and 31 December 2023, preceded by branch AGMs where required by delegate structures. Key interim officers will be appointed to convene the AGM. Where CLPs split, funds will be allocated in proportion to membership, with property, equipment and other assets needing separate negotiation. Scottish CLPs are organised along Holyrood boundaries and are unaffected.

More than 350 roleholders attended that briefing and raised many individual concerns about access, functionality and communication. These were echoed in the NEC. I suggested that the new chief operating officer John Lehal might attend the next session, and David Evans agreed. Along with Chris Tidswell as chief finance officer John succeeds Simon Mills, executive director for finance and operations, who steered the party through 16 years and numerous regime changes. The NEC unanimously recorded thanks to Simon. I look forward to explaining the CLP funding model to the new postholders, though note with pleasure that thanks to my initiatives in 2013 and 2017 CLPs now receive £3.31 per member, against the original £1.50 set in 2011. But the review promised by the NEC in 2018 has yet to take place.

Speeding Up

The NEC moved on to selecting candidates in non-priority seats, and recognised the need to move faster. Because of the snap elections in 2017 and 2019 many local parties have not chosen their own candidates for a decade. A streamlined procedure was presented whereby an NEC representative, usually a member of the regional executive committee (REC), would oversee the process, judge whether the party's commitment to diversity had been met, and review due diligence reports.

The initial draft said that two REC members plus one CLP representative would undertake shortlisting. I pointed out that this gave local parties even less of a voice than the full procedure, so it was changed to shortlisting by three CLP members, including an affiliate representative where available. Due diligence concerns will be reviewed by an NEC-led panel, though the REC member will be responsible for flagging them up. Affiliated organisations will be able to make supporting nominations and there will be a single hustings with absentee votes cast using electronic voting instead of paper ballots..

General Secretary's Report

David Evans gave an update on staffing, a new version of Connect, and a transformed Organise. He would brief NEC members on digital developments in June. Membership stood at 395,811 including 17,233 in arrears, with 48,295 joining in the last 12 months, and 15,000 in 2023 so far. Sales for conference exhibition stalls and fringe meetings were at record levels and income from the raffle doubled its target, with 60% sending extra donations, all showing how positively Labour is viewed. Further work on implementing the Forde report's recommendations would come to the NEC in July, and the next organisation committee meeting would receive information on the various campaign improvement boards.

The SNP MP Margaret Ferrier faced a recall petition, leading to a byelection in Rutherglen and Hamilton West, and NEC members were urged to join the campaign. Scotland is now seriously in play, with Anas Sarwar's leadership and the SNP's continuing travails. A further three English by-elections might follow if Boris Johnson's nominees took up their peerages before the general election. David was asked to ensure that all regions and nations covered work on diversity and inclusion in their reports to the NEC, and members asked the party to consider paying travel costs for Labour students attending a "Bootcamp" event in Edinburgh.

Following the May elections an unprecedented number of Labour groups in councils with no overall control sought approval for a variety of arrangements with other parties. These decisions are made by the two councillor representatives on the NEC plus the chair of the organisation committee, but because they are announced as "NEC decisions" members assume that we know about them, and we asked to be kept informed. The NEC were reassured that every case is considered individually, taking account of the numbers of seats, the proposed allocation of positions, the local context, and the risk of the council failing to set a budget. Where I have made enquiries I have had reasoned explanations, whether or not I agree with them. On Cherwell council, in my own backyard, the Tories continue as a minority administration.

Other NEC members again raised appeals against expulsion, lodged within 14 days but not acknowledged nor resolved after many months. David Evans said that backlogs were much reduced, but there still appeared to be no plan to deal with this group, no sense of urgency, and no idea of how many there are.

Onward and Upward

Campaign director Morgan McSweeney gave a detailed analysis of the results. Labour gained 536 councillors and 22 councils, while the Tories sank below their worst expectations, losing 1,061 councillors and control of 48 councils. In the national equivalent vote share Labour led by 9%, the biggest margin since 1997, but more important was winning where we needed to win. The largest swings were against Tory opponents and in Leave areas, reversing a trend which dated back before Brexit. Councils did best where they targeted opposition-held wards rather than increasing majorities in safe Labour seats, with Medway, Dover, Swindon, Plymouth showing the way. Voters understood very well how to get the Tories out, and tactical voting removed any need for backroom deals or changes to the electoral system. Labour could win in every type of seat under first past the post, and was working towards a majority Labour government.

Campaign messages had focused on key concerns: crime, NHS waiting lists and the cost of living crisis, where Labour would have frozen council tax. Sewage also bubbled up. The controversial attack advertisements shifted the debate onto Labour's agenda. Postal votes were critical, with users three times as likely to vote. Looking towards the general election the Tories might try eye-catching initiatives, but they were presiding over a Britain broken and in decline, where no-one believed that any politician can make a difference. Labour had to bring back hope.

Members made many contributions, including thanks to London activists, the nasty Tory culture wars, campaigning against the Greens, remembering coastal and rural areas, the parlous financial state of some councils which Labour would inherit, the need to select candidates earlier, and learning lessons from Leicester. I asked if there were signs of Tory voters staying home but maybe returning at a general election, and the impact of photo ID. This was still being analysed. Apparently in future postal vote applications will require renewal every three years and scanned ID such as a passport or driving licence, difficult for older voters who do not travel, drive or use the internet. I also wondered whether the pledge to freeze council tax would carry forward to the manifesto and, if so, how local services would be funded.

We Are Better Than This

I passed on feedback on the attack ads. While some NEC members reported similar comments, others had retweeted them with enthusiasm. So to be clear on my position:

First, I absolutely agree with tying the current prime minister into 13 years of collective Tory failure. John Major won in 1992 partly because he convinced voters that they had already had a change of government. We cannot repeat that mistake.

Second, my objection to most of them is that they have too many words with too many syllables, when British voters have an average reading age of nine years. For instance:

<https://twitter.com/UKLabour/status/1649118883293417472>

"Under the Tories, millions wait too long for cancer care. There is a solution, but Rishi Sunak chooses to protect a tax loophole for the richest instead – one he benefitted (benefited?) from. Labour will train 7,500 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses a year, paid for by scrapping the non-dom tax break, so cancer patients are treated on time again."

Messages have to be punchy, memorable, and fit into 20 seconds on the doorstep.

In the interests of balance some were good, for instance:

<https://twitter.com/UKLabour/status/1646777809787031563>

WARM HOMES WITH LABOUR - 19 million homes insulated to cut energy bills by up to £500.

with a lovely glowing picture.

Third, the Rishi Sunak soft-on-child-abuse ad: <https://twitter.com/UKLabour/status/1643973886311297028>

I stand with everyone from John McDonnell to David Blunkett in rejecting this. It is not the way to restore hope and trust in politics. It is the opposite of what Keir Starmer himself said when Boris Johnson accused him of being a paedophile protector for not prosecuting Jimmy Savile:

"The PM knew exactly what he was doing.... It's not about me, it's about the way we conduct our politics. I don't want to see us go down the route that this potentially takes us down".

and I prefer that Keir Starmer to the one who wrote in the Mail:

"I stand by every word Labour has said on the subject, no matter how squeamish it might make some feel."

At least four NEC members used the word "squeamish" and when accused by implication of being too squeamish to say what needs to be said, I began to wonder if I still belonged in the room.

Leader's Report

Keir Starmer had joined the meeting by then. He thanked everyone for their contribution to Labour's success, warned again that we could not simply coast towards the general election, and highlighted his speech on building an NHS fit for the future.

NEC members raised a range of issues, including the need to use the private sector to bring down waiting lists while new nurses and doctors were in training. Keir stressed his commitment to an NHS free at the point of use, funded from general taxation. Reform did not mean privatisation. On housing he agreed that everyone needed a secure roof over their head, and that meant building more homes, for ownership and for tackling the rental crisis. I passed on concerns about a digital-only NHS, and that care provided in a person's own home can actually be more expensive than residential care. Caregivers indeed deserve more than the minimum wage, and proper career progression, but that increases the cost to service users. Twelve years on from the Dilnot report no government has yet grasped that nettle.

Constant repetition of “working people” was again challenged as excluding disabled people. Members pointed out that some disabled people do work, but what about those not in paid employment for whatever reason? As a pensioner I share this concern, and managed to amend the introduction to the national policy forum paper from

“the Britain that Labour can build: a country run in the interests of working people”

to

“the Britain that Labour can build: a country run in the interests of everyone”

I understand the contrast between inherited wealth and those who work for a living, but the language has to be right.

Deputy Leader's Report

Deputy leader Angela Rayner reported on her campaigning visits and her work with unions and with business. She promised that a Labour government would repeal the 2016 Tory anti-trade union legislation as well as the bill currently before parliament. Her policy plans had drawn on the Welsh model, where employers, unions and government work in social partnership and there have been no strikes on the railway or in the NHS. When she was elected in 2020 it seemed impossible that Labour could win back power at the next election, but now it was within our grasp. We just had to imagine another five years of the Tories, and compare it with everything that Labour in government could do.

Finally Anneliese Dodds presented an update on the national policy forum process. The trade unions have been working co-operatively for months and their 70 NPF members are likely to submit more than 300 amendments across the entire policy agenda, but constituency representatives remain isolated from each other, and with a deadline of 5 June it is now too late to organise networking on Zoom or otherwise. I expect multiple copies of the amendment on electoral reform to be submitted, but regret that many small improvements may not be taken forward because we have no way to share them out. But we shall see.

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