

National Policy Forum, Nottingham, 21/23 July 2023

The national policy forum (NPF) last gathered to finalise a manifesto platform in 2014. Since then we had lived through three more lost elections, the Brexit referendum, three leadership elections and much internal upheaval, while the Tories steadily dismantled our legacy. At last there were signs of hope, with poll leads up to 20%, but fears of letting it slip away again. Many staff and activists arrived with little sleep from the by-elections, euphoric over Selby & Ainsty, sobered by Uxbridge & South Ruislip.

On Saturday we heard powerful speeches from campaign co-ordinator Shabana Mahmood, from Danny Beales who came so close in Uxbridge, and from Keir Starmer. Shabana stressed that organisation in both by-elections was equally professional, but ultimately organisation could not fix political problems. Danny was clear that voters were keen on the party and the leader, but Labour could not tackle the cost of living crisis by penalising people for driving to work, and ULEZ (the ultra-low emission zone) cut us off at the knees. Keir Starmer added that we must be doing something wrong when Labour's policies featured on all our opponents' leaflets. Scottish representatives later raised this in the context of the Rutherglen & Hamilton West by-election, where the SNP were doing exactly that.

As at previous final stage NPF meetings most of the weekend was spent discussing hundreds of amendments in groups and one-to-ones with shadow ministers. In each area the front bench suggested alternative wording, followed by negotiations aimed at reaching a mutually acceptable compromise. The logistics were challenging and staff worked heroically, shuttling between delegates, facilitating meetings, printing updates and getting changes signed off. A great deal of useful work was done, and 2024 will show whether we got it right.

Steps Forward

I sent in five amendments, so have focused on these. From an amendment suggested by Aldershot CLP I obtained commitments from shadow defence secretary John Healey to talk with Gurkha veterans about all their concerns, and a promise that he would personally visit Aldershot soon. I also agreed wording with Ed Miliband which would ensure a comprehensive and safe process for the disposal of radioactive waste as [nuclear] plants are decommissioned. The public health document now includes a commitment to ensure that everyone can afford a healthy diet and has opportunities for exercise. This section would also ban vapes from being advertised to appeal to children and ensure that they are used as a stop-smoking aid rather than a new form of smoking. In addition Labour would work across departments to tackle health problems related to poverty, including cold, damp, mouldy and overcrowded housing conditions.

A House is not a Home

Housing itself was more difficult, and many members had commented on the sparse nature of the section on private rented housing. A proposed renters' charter would give new protection against unfair fees, harassment and extortionate within-tenancy rent increases, and introduce a right to have pets. However any form of rent control was off the agenda amid fears that restrictions would lead to a mass exodus of landlords, and that included any reference to unaffordability, or the drain on the housing benefit budget. I managed to get two minor changes: first, to add the underlined words:

"The lack of certainty and security and the high costs that are now inherent to renting privately takes an immense toll on private tenants, including more than one million children with families."

and second, to change *"the private sector will remain the tenure of choice for many families"* to *"many people will continue to live in the private rented sector"* As my seconder pointed out, the private sector is often the tenure of no alternative rather than the tenure of choice, and I am still concerned that the paper does not fully understand the position of younger people without access to a Bank of Mum and Dad.

Why Oh Why?

My fifth amendment was on universal credit, and included everything raised with me over the years:

"A Labour government will deliver this much-needed, fundamental reform of Universal Credit, providing a social security system which shares risk, prevents poverty and helps with additional costs such as childcare or disability assistance at any income level or stage of life. This system will make work pay, support people back to work and allow people to live their lives in dignity whatever their circumstances. To give proper security requires a platform of stability, rather than Universal Credit income fluctuating monthly for people in precarious employment or who are paid every four weeks. We will end the five-week wait before payment so that families do not start off in debt, scrap the bedroom tax which is levied regardless of whether alternative accommodation is available, restore the cuts in local housing allowances and raise or abolish the housing benefit cap."

We will build on the proud record of the last Labour government in lifting children out of poverty by ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life and the opportunity to thrive. This will include ending the two-child limit on child benefit, where children begin life at a disadvantage simply because they have older siblings."

I understood the need to avoid unfunded spending commitments, and accepted that an incoming Labour government would inherit a trashed economy and could not do everything everywhere all at once. But I was not the only person surprised by Keir Starmer's specific support for the two-child limit just days before the NPF meeting. This ran counter to his mission on 6 July 2023: *"To fight - at every stage, for every child - the pernicious idea that background equals destiny."* If a child's background includes a larger family with less support, the impact on their destiny is obvious, and that child has no choice about being born.

Some recalled the loss of the Glasgow East by-election in 2008, after Gordon Brown scrapped the 10p tax band and the SNP cashed in. I was reminded of the abrupt end of Tony Blair's honeymoon in 1997 when he forced through cuts to lone-parent benefits, and a survivor from that time told me that no-one understood why on earth they were doing it. Both episodes were politically and financially costly.

Creative Solutions

Jonathan Ashworth, shadow secretary for work and pensions, handled the hot potato skilfully. The entire section on universal credit had been rewritten and expanded, with a whole new page on a bold and ambitious strategy to tackle child poverty. This would monitor relative as well as absolute poverty, and brought in references to childcare, education, breakfast clubs, housing, energy bills, health inequalities, sick pay, rights at work, full wages from the age of 18, and expanding the remit of the low pay commission. Individual regressive features of the current universal credit system were not mentioned, and collectively could cost billions to reverse, but all government departments would be responsible for tackling the fundamental drivers of poverty. Which can presumably be established later. Along with all the other contributors in this area I withdrew my amendment, and look forward to delivery in government.

Reasons to be Cheerful

I also seconded one of the motions on electoral reform. Most speakers in the workshop supported a more proportional system for the Commons, as backed by conference and a clear majority of members, but some took different views and after discussion all sides agreed to accept the words in the draft document:

"The flaws in the current voting system are contributing to the distrust and alienation we see in politics, but there is no consensus for a new system. Any proposed change to our voting system must be carefully thought-through - it cannot be dictated by political leaders or forced upon the country from the top down. However, there are some urgent steps that can be taken to restore faith in our democracy."

Labour for a New Democracy commented:

"Over the course of the weekend we negotiated a text which rightly reflects the consensus which exists across the Labour Party that the voting system is a driver of 'the distrust and alienation we see in politics'. This is a significant turning point. We will continue to work over coming months to build on the now officially accepted policy of the Labour party that our current voting system is flawed and damaging - and to push for Labour in government to introduce proportional representation for general elections."

A good example of how to encourage supporters with what has been achieved rather than complaining about what is still to be won, and a lesson in positivity from which other stakeholders could learn.

Other Business

At the final NPF meetings in 1999, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2014 every member received details of all amendments, proposers and alternative wording. This time representatives were only given papers for areas where they submitted amendments, unless they requested hundreds of separate pages. So it is hard to trace what happened in other sessions, especially for constituency representatives who cannot share documents and work collectively. If you have a specific interest I will try to follow up, but it may take a while.

It's also the first time that the NPF has voted on text without seeing it. In 2008 a 27-page supplement arrived halfway through the closing session still warm from the printer, but at least it was there. This year some outstanding text was read out by the chair, but the outcome of discussions with the unions was too complex and wide-ranging. NPF members voted for it anyway, but I still don't know what is in it, except for arguments on Twitter. A few amendments were still outstanding but clearly did not have the 35% support needed for a minority position, and the NPF endorsed all other consensus wording before heading home.

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