National Executive Committee, 26 September 2023

NEC members gathered in Glasgow and spent the morning campaigning for Michael Shanks in the Rutherglen & Hamilton West by-election before the formal meeting in the afternoon. Unfortunately there were technical glitches and those joining remotely could not hear all the discussion, reinforcing my view that hybrid meetings are not an easy or universal answer to problems of exclusion.

The NEC welcomed Ellie Reeves, returning as deputy campaign co-ordinator. Ellie previously represented constituencies for ten years and was poised to become the second chair from the CLP section when Momentum-backed candidates swept the board in 2016. The NEC observed a moment's silence in tribute to Ann Clwyd, Gerry Bermingham, Ann Clwyd, Fiona Dent, Doug Naysmith and Una Walker.

Onward to Liverpool

Harry Donaldson, chair of the conference arrangements committee, reported that currently 1,012 CLP delegates and 280 affiliate delegates were registered, with total attendance at 16,177. Income from fringes and exhibitions was breaking all records, with 850 fringe events and 237 stalls. The charity collection would fund research into glioblastoma in memory of former general secretary Margaret McDonagh.

A total of 323 motions had been submitted, with some appeals against rejection still to be heard. Conference would cast a single vote on the final national policy forum report, with no references back this year as the policy-making process for this parliament has concluded. Any motions which raised additional or conflicting points would be carried forward to the next cycle. The NEC, charged with electing three assistant conference chairs, chose Luke Akehurst, Nesil Caliskan, Abdi Duale, Wendy Nichols, Ellie Reeves and Gavin Sibthorpe, in addition to the chair Johanna Baxter and vice-chair James Asser.

Women in the Lead

The women's conference on the Saturday will have a key role in setting the stage. The national women's committee would have preferred a standalone conference as in 2019 and, if that was not practicable, to play a greater role on the day, with sessions chaired by women's committee members representing CLPs as well as affiliates. More generally there is a need for the women's organisation to be valued and resourced as a vital part of Labour's democratic structures, and I hope the new committee, to be elected in Liverpool, will take this forward. Harry confirmed that the two motions prioritised by the women's conference would be scheduled at annual conference, probably with other motions on the same topics.

The NEC approved the draft timetable, though with concerns that public services were again on the Wednesday morning, after the leader's speech and after the media circus had left. A final programme, with additional exciting guest appearances, would come to the NEC on Saturday evening.

Surprises

Back in the day the NEC used to discuss rule changes in July, which allowed time for full consideration and for CLPs to advise their delegates. Regrettably this has slid back to September, and some fairly sweeping amendments were presented. As usual these were leaked in advance, at

https://labourlist.org/2023/09/labour-nec-meeting-rule-changes-clps-conference-motions-jeremy-corbyn/

but for those who don't follow LabourList here is my account.

First, new wording spells out that members can be expelled for supporting individuals, as well as organisations, who stand and campaign against Labour candidates. The party has always done so, but this adds clarity. Though I am still concerned about defining "support" to include ten-year-old likes of slightly dodgy Facebook posts.

Second, there is some tidying up in the disciplinary area for those who confuse proscribed acts with prohibited acts, and need to distinguish their NCCs from their ICBs.

Third, removing the power of CLPs to investigate complaints within their own party and to refer cases directly to the national constitutional committee. I welcome this. I do not believe it is appropriate for individuals to be discussed by their own executive and by all members at a general meeting. Networks and personal loyalties make a fair hearing difficult, and vexatious complaints can stoke up tensions.

Fourth, and more controversially, from next year motions will again be restricted to "contemporary" issues not addressed in reports from the NEC or the national policy forum. The arbitrary use of this criterion has caused much discontent over the years. One member presented it as a compromise, with the ideal situation being no motions whatsoever and all policy developed through the NPF. I am sceptical. I was elected as chair of the NPF in 2018, left the NEC that September and returned to the position in November 2020 after it had lain vacant for two years. No-one noticed. After 25 years this is not a functioning system.

I would have preferred to keep a limited number of motions, with their importance assessed by the priorities ballot. It's hard to see how Labour for a New Democracy could have built their campaign for proportional representation from the grassroots up through CLPs and unions under the new regime, or to get a sense of what members care about. However the change was agreed by 19 votes to 7.

All Change, Again

Fifth, following the boundary review local parties have been diligently working to get new constituencies up and running immediately after conference, as instructed in the reorganisation handbook. This states that

"*new CLPs will be established in accordance with the Rules for CLPs (Chapter 7) and Model Procedural Rules (Chapter 18) as outlined in the Labour Party Rule Book. Any necessary variations can be agreed with the Regional/Welsh office in advance of the CLPs next AGM*".

Secretaries naturally assumed that this meant the current 2023 rulebook and rushed to adapt their local rules. Following national and regional advice some have already held branch AGMs and scheduled CLP AGMs as early as 14 October 2023.

I was astonished to find that conference would be asked to approve significant changes to the model rules which CLPs will be required to adopt immediately, and disturbed that these had clearly been discussed in private for some time. So my first objection was to casually ignoring the extra work involved in revising local rules midway through their AGMs. This has not been well received, to put it mildly.

What Difference Does it Make?

Moving on to the substance, the main change is to the numbers and roles of executive officers. The six core voting officers will be chair, vice-chair campaigns and membership, secretary, treasurer, women's officer and trade union liaison officer. The TU liaison officer will be elected by trade union delegates only, where there are any, and must come from a union affiliated to the party. Other current roles, including policy officer and most equalities officers, will become "functional officers", encouraged to report to the executive committee but without a vote. My main concerns are:

- a hierarchy of equalities. Especially after the Forde report it sends the wrong signals to keep the women's officer but downgrade the BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic), LGBT+, disabled and youth officers. CLPs can apply to add them as full voting executive officers but will require regional sign-off before this can be implemented. As now, where there are equalities branches their secretaries will replace the corresponding executive or functional officer. The NEC agreed an amendment whereby if none of the six lead officers is BAME, the BAME officer will be promoted to the ruling group, but this does nothing for the other equalities strands. The NEC's own equalities subcommittee met two weeks earlier but was not consulted;

- combining campaigns, membership, vice-chair and perhaps election agent in a single post is a huge workload. Instead of having a separate campaign co-ordinator this postholder will co-ordinate constituency-wide campaigns; liaise with national and Scottish / Welsh / regional offices and affiliated organisations in promoting party campaigns; and liaise with other election agents over campaign strategies for elections and referendums. In addition to keeping on top of Organise and the party's other software, which in itself consumes many hours. The response was that the post could be job-shared. Actually all posts except chair and treasurer can be jobshared, but the point of a jobshare is for the two sharers to do 50% each, not for two people each to do 100%. I do not know if CLPs will be able to make sensible adjustments which recognise the total load and the different skill sets.

As for CLPs which are currently midway through the process, it was suggested that branch nominations for posts which will shortly disappear are deleted at the CLP AGM, or transferred to different posts. I understand the arguments for a smaller executive, but discussion in July would have allowed proper consideration, identified areas of agreement, and avoided unnecessary work for hard-pressed volunteers. And if 14 is judged too many for effective decision-making, what does that say about the 39-member NEC?

Further points reinforce delegate-based general committees as the default structure, though CLPs with all-member meetings – a majority in the south-east region – are free to keep them. I disagreed with the comment that GCs are helpful to new members in understanding their place in the party. Attending your first meeting and being told that you cannot vote or speak without the chair's permission is surely not the best welcome. I also recall 1995, when Tony Blair had to bypass GCs, dominated by the activist minority, and go directly to individual members to get his new Clause IV adopted. What goes around comes around.

I registered an abstention, but these proposals will go through conference supported by close to 100% of the trade unions, and a single vote on the entire package. The most I could get was an informal undertaking to look at issuing guidance to CLPs now, rather than waiting till the new rules have been rubber-stamped.

Sixth, I was pleased that the NEC approved my rule change which would allow the national women's committee to replace members leaving before the end of their term. Currently five of the six CLP positions are vacant.

General Secretary's Report

David Evans said the Tories would do anything to try to hang on to power, suppressing turnout through photo-ID and making postal votes harder to obtain, and increasing the limit on national election expenditure to more than £30 million. This made conference fundraising and other initiatives including the Rose Network and the lottery even more important. The new code of conduct was on its way to members.

The business board agreed a trial increase in the lowest membership rate of £3 a year, applying to 14 to 19-year-olds, students and the initial year for armed forces members. This would rise to £12 a year or £1 a month, the smallest amount for which direct debits can be set up. My experience is that most recent problems with membership relate to those paying annually by card or cheque, with some not receiving reminders and others simply vanishing. So I suggested cash incentives for single-payers to switch to direct debit, which saves administrative costs. It worked with me 30 years ago, when the bribe was a mere £5.

Leaders' Reports

Keir Starmer sent a written report, listing his activities in the UK and abroad, building partnerships which will serve Labour well if we can win the people's trust. He stressed that this conference might be the final opportunity to set out our positive offer to the country, and looked forward to meeting in Liverpool.

Angela Rayner emphasised Labour's offer on the future of work and the need for clarity and unity throughout the movement. Labour would not rejoin the European Union, but no-one wanted to water down consumer or environmental protections or employment rights. Members raised sustainable long-term funding for local government, the future of HS2, and facility time for trade union representatives.

Ellie Reeves gave a detailed update on the three upcoming by-elections, and campaign director Morgan McSweeney repeated the need to show Labour as a serious party, ready for government, with determination but absolutely no complacency. I asked when all CLPs would be able to choose their candidates, which they are desperately keen to do, but as yet there are no firm assurances.

NEC Development Fund Panel, 28 September 2023

Finally an update on the meeting which allocates money from membership subscription income. A larger proportion used to be returned to CLPs on a pro rata basis, but since 2011 much of it has been held centrally, with grants made in response to bids for support, either for local organisers or for projects which enhance democracy and diversity. Again the money largely went to those regions where directors co-ordinated bids, to national funding for digital trainees and key seat organisers, and to those who simply asked, including some Labour groups. We made two further grants to fund equipment for hybrid meetings, and asked for feedback from these and other similar bids to share best practice with local parties.

The good news is that the fund seems to have more money than previously thought, so look out for the next application of deadlines, but I am still not convinced that the scheme fulfils either its original aims or the rulebook. With a new party treasurer and a new finance officer I am hopeful that a genuine review will at last take place.

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