

NEC at Conference, Liverpool, 7/11 October 2023

The horrors unfolding in the Middle East overshadowed all else and in comparison internal party manoeuvrings seem insignificant, whether points of order about motions or the “Moderates” gloating over defeats for the “Hard Left”. Nevertheless for the record I have included notes of NEC meetings alongside some overall impressions. Attached are reports from the women’s conference arrangements committee ([here](#)), results of women’s committee elections ([here](#)) and conference arrangements committee reports ([CAC 1](#), [CAC 1 Addendum](#), [CAC 2](#), [CAC 2 Addendum](#), [CAC 3](#) and [CAC 4](#)). These contain all the motions, composites and results of card votes and elections to internal committees. As always I am keen to hear feedback from delegates, visitors and members watching from home, and what the next steps should be.

National Women’s Conference, 7 October 2023

The week opened with the national women’s conference. After a standalone conference in 2019 and online-only events during Covid this returned to its former position as a curtain-raiser for annual conference. Members were not happy about this, and I have suggested a meeting between the chair Ruth Hayes and Angela Eagle, who chairs the NEC’s equalities committee, with the aim of strengthening links between the women’s organisation and the NEC. In elections for the constituency places on the national women’s committee the six “Moderates” swept the board. What difference this will make is hard to tell, as no meetings have yet been scheduled.

On the conference floor many speakers shared their personal stories, and delegates voted to send motions on violence against women and girls and on equal pay to annual conference. For me the highlight was hearing Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in conversation with Lisa Nandy. She shared a cell in Evin jail with Nobel prizewinner Narges Mohammadi, and though now free herself she continues to work for all those still unjustly imprisoned.

NEC Meeting, 7 October 2023

This was a short meeting as all the detailed work on rule changes had been done in September (see <https://www.annblack.co.uk/nec-meeting-26-september-2023/>).

One member asked about rumours that the NEC officers had over-ruled the conference arrangements committee (CAC) with respect to certain motions. They argued that this was unprecedented and undermined the CAC’s impartiality. The general secretary explained that the NEC had a duty to intervene when the letter or the spirit of the rules were in jeopardy.

As it happens, my CLP Oxford East submitted one of the NHS motions, based on the Socialist Health Association model. Initially the CAC ruled it out on the grounds that it concerned an organisational matter, which I took as relating to the underlined sentence:

The next Labour government will ban political donations from private healthcare corporations, their lobbyists, or those invested in private healthcare corporations. Labour and Labour MPs will not accept such donations.

It is true that the NEC’s business board decides on whether donations are acceptable, but at the 2022 conference a motion was accepted and carried which included this:

Conference resolves Labour must ... not accept donations from companies interested in outsourcing NHS functions

Oxford East therefore appealed on the grounds of consistency. I expected to lose and was pleasantly surprised when our motion was accepted. However, I then discovered that motions on the NHS were split into two separate categories for the priorities ballot which decides topics for debate. Five near-identical motions were classified as An NHS Fit for the Future, and another 14 were lumped together under Health Services and Funding, including ours, and also this from Redditch which doesn’t mention money at all:

Conference is concerned at the withdrawal of local health services and lack of provision, and wish to introduce accountable elected local people with voting rights in the NHS Trust and ICB’s in order to stand up for the wishes of local people.

and this from Harborough, Oadby & Wigton which has no relation to the SHA model either:

The NHS is at the heart of this party and our country. The Labour Party will invest in the future of our NHS, but should extend this to ensuring NHS staff are given a fair deal at work. The parking charges should be exempt for all NHS staff.

It seems that initially the CAC allocated all motions on the NHS to a single category. The first five CLPs then argued that they wanted their own grouping, which indicates that they not only knew about their own motion but about the others as well, information not publicly available. Indeed I didn't know that CLPs could appeal against classification as well as rejection. As I understand it the NEC supported them and over-ruled the CAC. There was a separate issue around whether a motion on public ownership should have been moved to the energy grouping, but I know less about that.

Despite assurances that the NEC officers had made a limited one-off intervention, this did seem to enter new territory. Formerly all motions on a subject area would be placed in a single group and, if there were different views, two or more composites could emerge. The leadership would argue against those they did not agree with, and ignore them if conference voted for them anyway. I would not want a situation where motions are grouped into, for instance, Education (helpful) and Education (unhelpful and everything else). New Labour never went that far, and even on Iraq different views could be, and were, debated.

Annual Conference 8/11 October 2023

Most important was whether Labour, and Keir Starmer, were seen as ready for government, able to meet all challenges at home and abroad. In this I think the conference succeeded. Victory in the Rutherglen & Hamilton West by-election gave the best possible start, and Johanna Baxter as chair led the wave of positivity and enthusiasm. Shadow cabinet members are gaining in confidence and profile, with enthusiastic receptions for Angela Rayner, Rachel Reeves, Lisa Nandy and others. As in the run-up to 1997 most members are willing to do whatever is necessary to win, and are beginning to believe that we can win. Record income from stalls and fringes suggested that businesses share that view, and Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England, has publicly endorsed Rachel Reeves as chancellor.

As expected all the NEC's constitutional amendments were endorsed, with 65% of CLPs and 52% of affiliates supporting new rules for CLPs, and 81% of CLPs and 54% of affiliates favouring restriction of motions to "contemporary" issues and 65% of CLPs and 52% of affiliates supporting new rules for CLPs. The low trade union vote surprised me as they, unlike CLP representatives, were fully consulted in advance. There were no constitutional amendments from CLPs because the 2022 conference changed the rules and they again have to wait a year during which the NEC is supposed to reflect on them. Those submitted in 2023 will be discussed in 2024.

The national policy forum report was carried with 91% of CLPs and 69% of affiliates in favour. As this is now the settled basis for the manifesto, all policy motions would be referred to the next cycle of policy-making which will begin after the general election.

Keir Starmer gave his best speech yet, and keen listeners may have noticed the B-word in suggesting that the Tories were wrong when "they told you – to your face – that Brexit would only bring benefits to your business". The security breach was alarming, and though he turned it to his advantage, it could have been serious. In the New Labour years conference had airport-style security, and small objects – apples, boiled sweets – were confiscated in case they were thrown. There were also concerns about a near-accident to a wheelchair user leaving the stage and I hope there will be a full debrief with Disability Labour.

Otherwise everything ran like clockwork. Angela Rayner provided welcome reassurance on employment rights, but policy gaps included public sector pay, resolving industrial action, changes to universal credit and, notably, funding social care. Much was said about valuing and paying care workers properly, all of which I support because I recognise the skills involved, but full-time live-in carers can cost as much as £15,000 a month. Even cashing in the parental home only covers a couple of years. I understand the need to avoid giving hostages to fortune, but taxing non-doms and charging VAT on private school fees will only go so far, and growing the economy while maintaining sustainability will take time.

Outside the main hall I went to the general secretary's session with constituency secretaries, now a regular feature and much appreciated. I also spoke on electoral reform at a LabourList rally (see notes at the end).

NEC Meeting, 10 October 2023

This was the usual handover meeting, where the NEC welcomes new members and thanks those who are leaving. James Asser was elected as chair and Ellie Reeves as vice-chair, a position she previously held in 2017/2018. I wish them well. The NEC also thanked all the staff who had done so much to make the week a success. After the meeting closed flowers were presented to Johanna as chair, and to retiring members.

Postscript

As I left Liverpool I felt that as in 1997 the party has moved on to a new and younger generation of activists, candidates and representatives, and this is healthy and a positive sign for the future. But back then older members, resistant to Tony Blair's changes, just tended to stay away from set-piece speeches and events. Now more of them are outside the party altogether, and not always through choice. I heard of an 80-year-old, expelled for mistakenly sympathising with an organisation before it was proscribed, and met a dedicated trade unionist and former friend who was more loyal to the party than they were to him. I hope that at some point factionalism will diminish, and they can come in from the cold.

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

LabourList speech, October 2023

Suggested theme: one specific thing you'd really like to be different in Britain in 2030 after 5 years of Labour government.

Hello, I'm Ann Black. I'm in my 21st year on the NEC, ten years in government, ten years in opposition, and I can tell you that government is always better. During that time I've been called Hard Left, a Blairite stooge, and everything in between.

I'd like a lot of things: properly funded social care before I'm as old as my mother; ending the two-child benefit cap; and stop punishing people who happen to be unemployed or fleeing war or persecution.

To get all these things we not only need to elect a Labour government – which is not a done deal – we need to keep Labour in government.

Five years is just the start, and we cannot risk the most vicious rightwing Tory party in living memory getting back and unpicking all our work all over again.

That means electoral reform as a first term priority. If we'd had proportional representation in 1992 Neil Kinnock would have been prime minister and the railways would never have been privatised. If we'd had PR in 2010 we could have avoided the pain of austerity. If we'd had PR in 2015 the divisive Brexit vote and everything that followed might never have happened.

The late great Robin Cook said that parties in power never change the system because they think they don't need to.* And when they lose, they have no power to change it. We should have learned that lesson after 1997 – let's not make the same mistake again.

Yesterday conference agreed the NPF report which states that flaws in the current voting system contribute to the distrust and alienation which we see in politics.

The Scottish and Welsh parliaments have been elected by proportional systems from the start. The sky hasn't fallen in, they still have constituency links, and they have stable government. Let's learn from them and from our past failures, let's change British politics, put an end to wrecking Tory governments, and make first-past-the-post history.

** Robin Cook, May 2005, a month before he died: "My nightmare is that we will have been 12 years in office, with the ability to reform the electoral system, and will fail to do so until we are back in opposition, in perhaps a decade of Conservative government, regretting that we left in place the electoral system that allowed Conservative governments on a minority vote."*