

National Executive Committee, 28 November 2023

The first NEC meeting after conference always sets the party's direction for the year ahead. With the chancellor's highly political autumn statement and hints of an early budget in February, speculation about a May election was rising. There might only be one more normal meeting before moving into full-on campaign mode. This year's aims and objectives therefore concentrated on Labour's political and organisational readiness to fight and win, requiring discipline at every level, funds to match Tory spending, evidence-based and innovative strategies, a clear, optimistic and persuasive offer, state of the art digital technology, a strong and active membership in battleground seats, communications which present Labour as a government in waiting, and a diverse and inclusive organisation with a healthy internal culture.

NEC members were united in supporting these priorities. Constructive amendments added references to the key role of Labour's affiliated trade unions and socialist societies, and spelled out that all forms of discrimination and prejudice must be tackled, so that the party is open and welcoming to all. The chair of the Forde working group asked for further discussion of his recommendations as the group had not met since July, and I supported this. So far the NEC has not considered Forde's suggestion that motions are inherently polarising and local parties should explore alternative meeting formats, nor addressed the factional behaviour which is still, sadly, undermining Labour's electoral prospects in some areas. This will be followed up in January.

All Systems Go

The possibility of an early election has at last focused minds on the many constituencies still without candidates, as the procedures agreed in May are clearly not streamlined enough. All non-battleground seats will be opened imminently, and members who expressed an interest back in September will now be asked if they wish to apply formally. I think this means the batch of 94 plus all others in this category. Regional panels comprising two NEC members and one regional executive committee member will draw up provisional shortlists and, after due diligence checks, agree the final shortlist, with or without interviewing applicants. Hustings will then be held within 14 days, with members given at least three days' notice, unless there is only one viable candidate who might be imposed. The CLP officers will administer the campaign period and arrange the hustings, overseen by a regional director's appointee. Postal votes will be allowed where practicable.

Both trade unions and CLP representatives asked for a role in the process. We were assured that the wishes of CLPs would be taken into account, and await details of the mechanism for this. The intention is to start initial work now and set up shortlisting days for panels early in 2024, but CLPs will need sufficient warning if expected to book rooms. I am also not clear about the schedule for seats which could be won at a stretch, as I think these "in-betweens" are still subject to the full NEC process, but I hope that every CLP will be told, soon, exactly where they stand. The NEC were informed that problems in Croydon East were unrelated to Anonymvoter and unique to that constituency, and would be resolved as quickly as possible.

Women's Voices

The NEC agreed to hold the 2024 national women's conference on the Saturday before annual conference, as in 2023. Positive feedback from this year was reported, but there were also calls to replicate the standalone success of Telford in 2019. However it is now too late to organise for spring 2024, and an early general election could mean cancelling at short notice. I asked for better catering provision and more visitor places and, with trade union support, removed the NEC recommendation to restrict debate to four motions. This is a matter for the independent women's conference arrangements committee (WCAC). Some members pushed for commitment to a two-day separate event in 2025, but if the general election is in the autumn there will again be too little time to plan. I would be interested in views on the best time for the women's conference, taking into account accessibility, caring responsibilities and costs. Another option might be to explore online participation if speakers and ballots can be handled in hybrid format.

I stressed that the national women's committee (NWC) and the WCAC must be closely involved in these discussions. Although the NWC are independently elected, the NEC sets their meeting dates and makes many decisions affecting women members. The NWC chair is entitled to attend the NEC equalities committee, and hopefully this will strengthen connections. The NEC also agreed that representatives of relevant socialist societies and trade unions should continue to be invited to equalities committee meetings, along with groups such as the Labour Muslim Network which is applying to affiliate.

Internal Matters

Apart from local and general elections 2024 will bring a bumper crop of internal contests. These are listed below, with the timetables for annual conference and women's conference and I asked for CLPs to be sent, before Christmas, a full list so we can plan to elect delegates and make nominations by the appropriate deadlines. These include:

Friday 23 February 2024 – deadline for

- Nominations for the national committee of Labour Students
- Nominations for positions on the Young Labour National Committee (CLPs can nominate for these where there is no Young Labour branch, though only members under 27 vote in the ballots)

Thursday 7 – Friday 29 March 2024

- Ballots for Labour Students and Young Labour positions

Friday 28 June 2024 – deadline for

- Registering delegates to annual conference and women's conference
- Nominations for NEC CLP seats (nine, including at least four women) , NEC BAME, youth and disabled members' seats, national policy forum representatives (five per region/nation including one youth), national constitutional committee places (four, including at least two women)
- Nominations for the women's conference arrangements committee (three CLP places, nominated by CLPs where there is no women's branch)
- Constitutional amendments to be debated in 2025

Wednesday 21 August 2024

- Deadline for contemporary motions and constitutional amendments for women's conference (I am not sure why these have to be contemporary, and will check)

Wednesday 11 September 2024

- Deadline for emergency motions for women's conference

Thursday 12 September 2024, 5 p.m.

- Deadline for contemporary motions for annual conference

Friday 20 September 2024, 12 noon

- Deadline for emergency motions for annual conference

As a CLP secretary myself I can foresee spending many happy hours setting all these up.

Mobilising for Victory

The NEC then heard and discussed a series of presentations on political and organisational strategies. The overall message is that it's time for a change: the Tories have crashed the economy, imposed 25 tax rises and presided over record NHS waiting lists, with five prime ministers and seven chancellors in 14 years. In contrast Keir Starmer has changed the party and is now ready to change the country, and only Labour has a long-term plan. The first task is to gain voters' trust on the economy and on defence. Then, against a background of financial stability, Labour could offer an additional 700,000 dental appointments, two million extra NHS procedures, breakfast clubs in every primary school, Great British Energy, 1.5 million new homes, employment rights from Day One and an end to zero-hours contracts and fire-and-rehire practices. Reassurance and hope are two sides of the same coin.

The challenges are still formidable. To win an overall majority of just one, Labour must gain 125 seats. The string of by-elections were resource-intensive but provided useful lessons. Rutherglen & Hamilton West showed that Labour can win in Scotland, and Mid-Bedfordshire that we do not have to concede to the LibDems. Organisationally every Labour supporter should be signed up for a postal vote, and all support should be directed to the battleground seats. This year's model, where London activists were deployed in areas with council elections, showed the way. However I believe that every member must feel valued even if they have other commitments, limited time, or are only comfortable in their home patch, rather than guilty because they don't spend every waking hour on the road.

I asked, as always, for snappy slogans, so that canvassers can respond to the question "What does Labour stand for?" in 20 seconds before the door slams. Interestingly, party research showed that likely Labour voters respond better to positive Labour messages than to negative attacks. Other members raised the importance of investing £28 billion in green jobs and energy independence, avoiding being pigeon-holed as anti-car, devolution-proofing every communication, and rebuilding trust and confidence with all communities during the Middle East crisis, where the shadow team are holding regular phone calls to support candidates through difficult times. Above all we have to feel and act like winners. While the Tories have a sense of entitlement, Labour can suffer from imposter syndrome and must overcome psychological barriers as well as all the other difficulties.

Towards the Manifesto

The programme agreed by the national policy forum in July and endorsed by conference is final, and there will be no NPF reports to conference in 2024. Having said that, the world does not stand still. The Middle East has exploded and the Tories are laying traps for an incoming Labour government with upfront reductions in national insurance to be paid for with swingeing cuts to public spending after the election. Taxing non-doms and charging VAT on private school fees will only take us so far, and much else may happen in the year ahead. I argued that there is a continuing role for the policy commissions in liaising with members as we move towards the Clause V meeting which signs off the manifesto. The website at <https://www.policyforum.labour.org.uk/> is still accepting submissions and I recommend continuing to use it to send messages from the grassroots.

Good News for Councillors

And finally unwaged or low-paid councillors can find that their allowances leave them worse off if benefits are withdrawn, and they struggle to pay the 2% levy to the association of Labour councillors. The ALC has now agreed to waive the levy for councillors in receipt of means-tested benefits. Perhaps this should also be considered where councillors pay an additional levy to their local Labour group.

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