

National Executive Committee, 23 July 2024

The NEC met under a Labour government for the first time in 14 years, and members were in good spirits. Seven colleagues were congratulated on their election as MPs, and therefore were no longer eligible to serve in their former sections. They included socialist societies representative and NEC chair James Asser, who will be replaced in a by-election at conference. The vice-chair Ellie Reeves ran through other changes: Luke Akehurst, Johanna Baxter and Gurinder Singh Josan were replaced as CLP representatives by Jane Thomas, Neeraj Patil and Jose Alexander, the runners-up in 2022. Margaret Beckett and George Howarth had left parliament and Angela Eagle is now a minister, and MPs elected Luke Akehurst, Gurinder Singh Josan and Melanie Onn from the backbenches to replace them. Mark Ferguson and Michael Wheeler's seats in the trade union section will be filled shortly by the unions. Nesil Caliskan's place will remain vacant until new local government representatives are elected in the summer.

Members then paid tribute to Doug Hoyle, Frank Field, David Marquand, Doreen Massey and former NEC chair Richard Rosser, and observed a moment's silence.

Prime Minister's Questions

Keir Starmer thanked the NEC for their constant support, and celebrated the election of 411 Labour MPs, some in seats we had never held before. The mood in the country was one of relief and hope. In less than three weeks Labour was already delivering on the manifesto, with draft legislation including workers' rights, the national wealth fund, taking railways back into public ownership and expanding onshore wind. He represented the UK at the NATO summit and the European political conference with the message that Britain is back, and was warmly received. He had met the leaders in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and also the metro mayors to discuss local growth plans and devolving decisions away from Westminster. On the downside the legacy of the departing Tory government was even worse than expected, with the prison situation just one of many horror stories being unearthed.

Neeraj, who has worked in the NHS for 28 years, asked for urgent action to reduce NHS waiting times, and other members raised sky-high private rents, arms sales to Israel and local government pay. I welcomed the new attitude towards Europe and the world, and the commitment to international law. Keir confirmed that he would never leave the European convention on human rights, and Britain would respect domestic and international law on arms sales. Work on waiting times in A&E was underway, though reducing the record waiting lists would take a bit longer. Tenants would be protected against no-fault evictions, and he promised to listen to local government workers.

I also mentioned the two-child benefit cap, recalling that Tony Blair's honeymoon ended when more than 140 Labour MPs abstained or opposed cuts to lone-parent benefit. Repairing that damage incurred huge political and financial costs. But that was after six months, not three weeks. Keir Starmer reiterated his absolute determination to drive down child poverty even more effectively than the last Labour government, and the taskforce led by Bridget Phillipson and Liz Kendall would look at all contributing factors. I am prepared to allow time for this to be done in a fiscally responsible way, but urge paying attention to Gordon Brown, to new MP Torsten Bell, who wrote in April 2024 that for many children in larger families:

"we have now come close to creating a poverty guarantee"

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/27/abolish-two-child-ban-child-poverty-torsten-bell>)

and to Keir Starmer's own mission from July 2023:

"To fight – at every stage, for every child – the pernicious idea that background equals destiny. That your circumstances ... might shape your life more than your talent, your effort and your enterprise."

(<https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/keir-starmer-unveils-labours-mission-to-break-down-barriers-to-opportunity-at-every-stage/>).

Those circumstances include the number of siblings. Responsible parenthood should be encouraged, but once the children are born, they should not be punished for decisions made by others before they existed.

Change with Ange

Deputy prime minister Angela Rayner said that one day in government was worth ten years in opposition. She listed her current programme: the New Deal for working people, strengthening sick pay, employment rights from Day 1, ending fire-and-rehire, changing the remit of the low pay commission to guarantee a genuine living wage, a negotiating body for school support staff, better pay and conditions for care workers, an infrastructure bill allowing up to 1.5 million new homes, tenants' rights, tackling rip-off leasehold ground rents, more devolved powers and the Holocaust Memorial bill. She promised that further measures on democracy would follow, and 16- and 17-year-olds would be able to vote in the next general election.

Angela reassured the trade unions that she would continue to work with them in government as she had through the long wilderness years. And at some point I would like to explore what devolution means in areas where there are no elected mayors, just a patchwork of multi-tier councils with conflicting views, run by different parties and shifting alliances.

First Reflections

General secretary David Evans and Ellie Reeves asked for initial comments on the election, stressing that a comprehensive review would be undertaken for conference and the NEC awayday in November. Members are invited to comment at <https://labour.org.uk/updates/members-updates/general-election-2024-survey/> - please use this to feed back your experiences and suggestions. There is also a digital survey at <https://survey.labour.org.uk/techsurvey> for those who used the party's IT systems. In addition voters, MPs, candidates, affiliates and external partners will be consulted.

David stressed that while with hindsight victory seemed inevitable, it didn't always feel that way. In 2021 Labour lost the Hartlepool by-election and only held Batley & Spen by 300 votes. Following contests saw Labour steadily gain in Mid-Bedfordshire, Tamworth and areas previously written off, learning and refining campaign tactics, including digital, every time. When Rishi Sunak called the election our activists were out within 30 minutes, far more prepared than his own party. They spoke to 3.1 million voters between 22 May and 4 July alone, and financial appeals raised £5 million for central funds on top of local donations. Efforts were concentrated on undecided voters in battleground seats, where we won 92% of the 216 targets, including 100% of those in Scotland. This efficiency gained 63% of the seats on 34% of the vote, and as in 1997 voters turned to the LibDems where they were more likely to get the Tories out. Twenty-six Labour MPs have majorities of under 1,000 and all will be defended next time. Competence was the key driver among voters switching to Labour, so a government which delivers is critical. The NEC unanimously recorded thanks to all the staff who worked tirelessly to deliver incredible results.

Sticks and Carrots

I have raised concerns about selections previously, and as Keir Starmer will choose the date of the next election we will be able to plan in advance. On the campaign I supported the focus on battleground seats, and overall the judgments, guided by data at every stage, were excellent. Prediction is not an exact science: some non-battlegrounds were won and others lost only narrowly, perhaps because the high Reform vote made calculations difficult. I also supported strongly urging members to campaign in the key seats. However from my feedback the party did not acknowledge that some cannot travel long distances because of work or family demands, lack of transport, illness or mobility difficulties. We are all volunteers, and punishing members will not move them *en masse* 50 miles down the road. Instead some did nothing, and will do less when we need them in future. Local parties particularly resented losing access to Contact Creator without warning, even when they were fully meeting their twinning obligations.

One CLP officer, prevented from organising any polling day activity, reported 25 members who were over 80 and would sit outside polling stations, but not make three-hour round trips no matter how much they were shouted at. They had no role. Another activist writes:

"In future there needs to be a better understanding that some members cannot campaign away from home. For example, I have a seriously ill wife so when I was able to work I needed to be doing it locally, and not in my twinned seat. Cutting off our IT was a disgraceful idea and whoever thought of that needs a good talking to ..."

These sanctions seem to have been applied inconsistently. One candidate told me:

"My understanding is that CLPs are fine to do far more than 500 contacts a week, as many as they want, as long as they are also doing 3 sessions a week in their twinned battleground seat. We just did 300 in one day, but are putting in the required shifts in the battleground."

Others were not aware of any CLPs in their region being cut off, and it seems that results were achieved through sensitive persuasion. It's also constitutionally dubious, as CLPs are guaranteed free access to Contact Creator in appendix 5 of the rulebook, as part of the settlement on membership subscriptions.

An unintended consequence is that some CLPs kept local activity below the radar, and even won through their own enterprise without party IT tools. Another said their running joke was *"I swear if we win here, Region will suspend us."* They did win. And in Scotland the NEC were told that some seats were gained without putting in a penny. Covert parallel and informal organisation, and setting local parties against regional and national officers, is not good for the party as a whole, and relationships need to be mended.

So while the strategy was brilliantly planned and executed, there are lessons to be learned. Without the Operation Toehold initiative, which built up Labour council representation in unpromising areas over decades, Aldershot would not now have a Labour MP. Where will future Aldershots come from?

Milestones on the Way Ahead

There are some immediate challenges, in particular those arising from the de facto non-aggression pact with the LibDems. In nine months' time Labour will be contesting county council seats where the LibDems are the main opponents, and it will be difficult to pivot from giving them a free ride to taking them on directly. We also need to understand the reasons for the Reform vote, and develop dividing lines with the Greens and nationalist parties. In 2026 the Welsh Senedd will elect 96 members, up from the current 60, with six coming from each of 16 regions, using STV (single transferable vote) from closed party lists. This is similar to the former system for electing MEPs which gave UKIP a platform and access to resources in the European parliament, and the results may influence the ongoing debate about proportional representation for Westminster. There are also all-out elections in London and Birmingham. Local results tend to swing against the national governing party, so maintaining a campaigning culture is essential.

The NEC deplored the levels of violence and intimidation experienced by some candidates, and David said that all relevant authorities had been involved. He would write to thank all those who were not elected.

Housekeeping

David then reported on organisational issues. Staffing would be reduced to non-election levels, with a new streamlined structure, but he hoped that all those on temporary contracts would be able to find employment within the party or with one of the hundreds of new MPs. The party had to keep finances healthy, maintain campaigning capacity, and support its active and flourishing member-led base.

Annual conference was set to break all records for attendance and income, and as a party in government, security will be heightened. Some members argued that the guidance on contemporary motions was unduly restrictive, limiting them to events after 4 July, but PLP representatives said that CLP delegates do not want big arguments or new policies. Local parties can continue submitting motions and comments through the national policy forum website at <https://www.policyforum.labour.org.uk/> until the new NPF is established after conference, and these will be considered as part of the next policy-making cycle. In September the NEC will agree attitudes to rule changes submitted in 2023 for debate this year.

For women's conference the deadline for motions stays at 21 August 2024, because otherwise it is not possible to prioritise and composite motions before the conference opens. As with annual conference, motions can only refer to matters arising after the general election. I hope that CLPs and women's branches will still manage to contribute despite the short timescale.

Membership stood at 358,080 including those in arrears, up from 354,891 in March. Recent post-election surges have been driven largely by the desire to participate in leadership elections – 120,000 in January 2020 – but first, we are definitely keeping our current leader, and second, the rules have changed so that new joiners no longer get an immediate vote. Other recruitment approaches were suggested, such as posting each new government success online with a Join link below the message. Finally the NEC approved the list of international guests for conference.

NEC Elections

Thank you for all the nominations – as of today, 95 and counting. I'll mail again when we have dates for the ballot, where every member will get a vote, and I will do my best to continue representing you. My statement is at <https://www.annblack.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/NEC-2024-Letter-3-Ann-Black.pdf>

As always, comments and questions are welcome – please contact me at annblack50@btinternet.com / 07956-637958.

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