

NEC at Conference, 21/25 September 2024

The mood in Liverpool was less exuberant this year as Labour confronts the realities of government amid the wreckage inherited from the Tories. Nevertheless there was real satisfaction in being able to act, not just to talk, in listening to Labour ministers for the first time since Harriet Harman closed conference in 2009, and in shared determination to succeed and to win again.

Members will have seen reports in mainstream and social media, so I've added notes of NEC meetings and some personal impressions. I've also attached the results of elections to the women's conference arrangements committee [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, constitutional amendments 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.

National Women's Conference, 21 September 2024

The week opened with the national women's conference, in a smaller hall because of access issues last year, and with no room for visitors. This was disappointing for women who had travelled to Liverpool expecting to get in, and there were renewed calls for a two-day standalone event with networking opportunities and longer policy debates. Nevertheless delegates celebrated victory, with more Labour women MPs than all the Tory MPs together. The conference was addressed by Yvette Cooper, Bridget Phillipson, Anneliese Dodds, first minister of Wales Eluned Morgan and Rachel Reeves.

All motions were overwhelmingly carried, and motions on women's health and women in the workplace were prioritised to go forward to annual conference. In the afternoon Lucy Powell chaired a review of the election campaign, with new general secretary Hollie Ridley, senior women staff and Naushabah Khan MP. Hollie stressed that victory would not have been possible without members, who are the heart and soul of the party. Candidates and activists spoke frankly of their experiences, with some suffering from racism and misogyny. They recognised the necessity and the effectiveness of the targeting strategy, but found the NBG / non-battleground description demoralising and emphasised that to maximise success, everyone has to buy in. Some asked if there were secret plans to give the LibDems a free run where they were best placed to beat the Tories, as that seemed to be the outcome, but were assured that there were no deals.

In elections for the women's conference arrangements committee the three "moderates" swept the constituency places, with vice-chair Jean Crocker leaving after seven years' service. Whether this matters remains to be seen: there is agreement across all factions and all sections that the women's organisation is not functioning fully. The national women's committee is not integrated into other party structures but has not yet developed its own role. We have been promised an awayday soon, to take us forward.

NEC Meeting, 21 September 2024

This was a short meeting as the detailed work on rule changes had been done on 17 September (see [report here](#)). The NEC signed off final details and agreed that any access issues should be speedily resolved.

Annual Conference 22/25 September 2024

The party chair Ellie Reeves opened conference, thanked everyone for all their work and paid tribute to outgoing general secretary David Evans, who had pushed boundaries beyond anything previously considered possible. David said that the party had learned from defeat, turned outwards to listen to the voters, and become more open, inclusive and patriotic. Hollie Ridley was endorsed as his successor by acclamation, following Margaret McDonagh and Jennie Formby as Labour's third female general secretary, a more dignified transition than 2021 when David had to win a card vote to keep his job.

As expected all the rule changes proposed by the NEC were comfortably endorsed. Two of the three amendments from CLPs were withdrawn, and the third, on defining what types of due diligence checks were admissible, was defeated, with 41% of affiliates and only 16% of CLPs voting in favour. Some NEC members thought that anyone disqualified for due diligence reasons could see them and appeal, but this is only true of applicants with affiliate nominations. Others have been overlooked and still do not know why.

Filling the Vacuum

Keir Starmer's speech, like those of other ministers, was positive and well received. However, most of them focused on work already in progress. The new deal for working people, taking rail back into public ownership, buffer zones around abortion clinics, Great British Energy are all popular, but not new. The only exception that I noticed was justice secretary Shabana Mahmood's announcement of a Women's Justice Board, with the goal of sending fewer women to prison and the ultimate ambition of fewer women's prisons. This is the right direction for women offenders and their families and it will presumably also save money. But Shabana had the slot immediately after the leader's speech, so she got little coverage.

The lack of novelty allowed the media to continue running headlines about clothes and concert tickets, and about means-testing the winter fuel allowance (WFA), a move which was not in the manifesto. Without adding to the frenzy I would just point out that Keir Starmer had planned a family holiday in August which he quietly gave up to lead the country in the wake of the Southport stabbings and the riots which followed, a sense of duty which Boris Johnson certainly never showed.

This Will Run and Run

Much attention has been paid to the motion from Unite, which among other things called for the WFA to stay. It was moved to the final session, with the knock-on effect that after Wes Streeting, Bridget Phillipson and Liz Kendall had spoken there was time for only three floor speakers on health, education and welfare combined, while in earlier debates up to 25 speakers were called. One delegate said she did not need the WFA, and the money should go to children instead. However, MPs who tried to give money to children lost the whip for opposing the two-child limit, which directly disadvantages children from larger families. Although Liz Kendall said that helping the four million children growing up in poverty was her priority, it is not clear how this can be achieved without cash. She, and Keir Starmer, claimed that WFA would still go to the poorest pensioners, and every pensioner would be better off under Labour. I am not convinced: those with a full contribution record get a state pension £3 a week above the pension credit threshold, and will end up with less than those with partial records. I have asked the chancellor to check my calculations.

On the vote, it looked as if most trade union delegates supported the motion, and most CLP delegates opposed it. Each section has half the votes and the chair declared the motion carried, to murmurs of dissatisfaction and calls for a card vote. Tony Blair used to deal with such motions differently: he allowed card votes, and when a motion was supported by 98% of the trade unions and opposed by two-thirds of the CLPs he claimed a moral victory because CLP delegates were more rooted in their communities and reflected the views of ordinary people. But this is not an option 20 minutes before conference closes.

Less noticed was the motion on border security, prioritised by the "moderates", which disappeared entirely. This is in the addendum to CAC 2 and includes: *"Over the last 14 years of Tory rule, immigration has soared despite increasing public disquiet around this problem. Rather than a serious plan to confront this crisis ..."* and calls on the government to *"negotiate additional returns arrangements to speed up returns and increase the number of safe countries to which failed asylum seekers can swiftly be returned."* Presumably the movers were asked to withdraw it when it was clearly heading for defeat.

Through the week there were many references to a changed Labour party. I'd just make a few comments. First, Tony Blair changed the party to New Labour in the 1990s, but it did not stop the pendulum swinging back in the 2010s. Second, there is still too much factional sniping from all sides, including a leading "moderate" whose blog has "subtitles for the Hard of Left". What goes around comes around, so less triumphalism, more tolerance and more positive, popular and progressive policies are as important as ever.

NEC Meeting, 23 September 2024

This was the AGM, the handover meeting where the NEC welcomes new members and thanks those who are leaving, with a record 14 departing during the year. Ellie Reeves had been chairing meetings since July, when James Asser was elected as an MP, and was unanimously elected as chair for the year ahead. She has waited a long time, serving as a CLP representative for ten years and poised to take over in 2016 when she was swept away by the Momentum tide, two years before I followed her into exile. Good to see patience rewarded. Shabana Mahmood was then elected as vice-chair for 2024/2025.

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