

National Executive Committee at Conference, September 2018

Party conferences are best judged by those watching at home, so I am interested in your impressions whether or not you were there. The mainstream media were unusually positive, highlighting policies which strike a popular chord on childcare, workers' rights, green energy and housing, the party relatively united and Jeremy firmly in charge, laying down challenges for the Tories. This is a personal view of the week.

Women's Conference, Saturday 22 September 2018

The day opened with speeches from Jennie Formby, Welsh local government leader Debbie Wilcox, shadow minister for women and equalities Dawn Butler and, the only man to speak, Jeremy Corbyn, who was rapturously received. Together with Sarah Owen of the GMB I was proud to chair the policy sessions, the first time for more than twenty years that women's conference has voted on motions. More than 60 were submitted, and constituencies and affiliates had prioritised women and the economy, childcare, abortion rights and women's health and safety. Many women spoke movingly and directly from their experience, reminding us that the personal is political. All were carried unanimously, and delegates then voted to send the motion on women and the economy on to annual conference.

The next women's conference will be a standalone event, in Telford on 23/24 February 2019, and no longer seen as a mere curtain-raiser for annual conference. The democracy review has not yet defined women's structures and procedures. but I have stressed that CLPs must be given 6-8 weeks' notice of deadlines, fees, delegations and motions, and hope that the incoming NEC will treat this as a priority.

National Executive Committee, 22 September 2018

Conversations with key stakeholders since Tuesday had produced compromises on the most contentious issues. For Westminster selections the NEC was asked to accept a modified trigger ballot process whereby CLPs would move to an open selection if requested by more than one-third of party branches or more than one-third of affiliate branches. This fell far short of demands for open selections in every seat, but as well as time, cost and staff overload it was pointed out that MPs only get "severance pay" if they leave parliament through losing an election. So deselected MPs would hang on, and though their personal vote would not be enough to re-elect them, it could stop official Labour candidates from winning. Some would have no incentive to try to stop the boundary changes, which could cost Labour more than 20 seats, and others would resign and cause expensive by-elections at inconvenient times. In strong Remain areas challenges could come not from more pro-Corbyn candidates but from champions of a people's vote on Brexit, and perhaps the reverse situation in Leave constituencies.

I welcomed the separation of party from affiliate branches, so that local members could no longer be swamped by mass affiliations, and though I would have preferred a 50% threshold, this was a relatively sensible proposal which would allow serious discontent to be acted on. It was agreed by consensus.

One Step Forward, One Step Back

The 30 pages of rule changes agreed four days earlier were waved through, and we returned to procedures for electing the leader and deputy leader. The latest proposal was for candidates to require nominations from 10% of MPs and MEPs, plus 5% of CLPs or three affiliates (including at least two trade unions and representing at least 5% of affiliated membership). This was also agreed by consensus. Though some argue that it still gives MPs too much of a say, it also allows CLPs to exercise a veto, as candidates will require at least 32 CLP nominations. In 2015 Liz Kendall, with just 18, would not have been on the ballot.

The NEC also agreed that members should be able to vote if they join up to two weeks after the timetable is set, which is actually what we did in 2007 and 2010. The role of registered supporters was, to my regret, deferred for further consideration. Nor was a charge agreed: as in July 2016 suggestions ranged from £3 through 20% of the standard rate (currently £10) to £25. The question of what to do if there is an early leadership election was left unanswered. No-one believes this is likely, but that is what we thought in 2015, and failure to review the process then led directly to the bitter divisions of 2016.

We then debated a proposal to set out the responsibilities of an acting leader, including the requirement for the NEC to approve their actions. Only one person spoke from experience: when John Smith died, suddenly and unexpectedly, Margaret Beckett immediately took on every aspect of the role, including PMQs and leading the campaign for the Euro-elections, just weeks away. She had spoken with every NEC member individually, but if the NEC had had to approve every operational decision she simply could not have done the job. Margaret described the idea, with restraint, as utter madness, and said that we would live to regret it. Like Cassandra, always right but never believed, she was ignored and the NEC voted 17-13 to write this into rule. I was, again, in the minority.

As this would apply in government as well, a Labour deputy prime minister would spend most of their time closeted in endless meetings at party HQ rather than running the country. There are real issues here, because although John Prescott was deputy prime minister, Gordon Brown never gave Harriet Harman that title, so Labour had a deputy leader but not a deputy prime minister. But the NEC did not explore them.

Pressure From Below

Many amendments from CLPs were on matters covered by the democracy review and would fall if the review was carried, along with those on Westminster selections. Others required an NEC position, including Broxtowe, who would only bar members of other political organisations from joining the party if those organisations were in conflict with Labour's aims and principles. I have no problem with members of other groups seeing the light and converting to Labour, but they cannot continue in both. The NEC agreed, on a vote, to oppose.

The NEC then decided to support Islington North's request for standing orders for party conference, and I managed to rescue Filton & Bradley Stoke's demand for constitutional amendments to be debated in the year that they are submitted, changing the NEC decision from oppose to support. Wirral West's proposal for two deputy leaders, of whom at least one must be a woman, was supported after Tom Watson threw his weight behind it, but a complicated plan for achieving gender balance in the leadership team from Hornsey & Wood Green would be opposed, as would election of the general secretary by the membership, and Richmond Park's request for local parties to decide whether or not to stand candidates.

The final decision was on filling the new national constitutional committee places after conference had approved them. On 18 September many of us thought we had agreed that the extra members would be nominated by CLPs and affiliates after conference and then elected by conference delegates. Instead we were presented with a timetable which would require delegates to nominate on Monday and elect on Tuesday, allowing no say for CLPs back home. The only alternative presented was a full OMOV ballot costing £300,000, which no-one had suggested, and way above the £70,000 figure quoted for NEC by-elections. I asked officers to go away and come back with a proposal which gave CLPs their proper role.

Candidates for these NCC places must still have five years membership, even though conference was expected to reduce this to one year, because they are elected under pre-conference rules. We were told that new rules come into effect at the end of conference, and not the following 1 January as I had thought, which means that we are now all bound by rules which have not yet been published.

We finished by 9 p.m., leaving the conference arrangements committee (CAC) to draw up papers for the opening session on the following morning.

Annual Conference 23/25 September 2018

These reached delegates at 8 a.m. on Sunday, and they were not impressed with having to vote on 40 pages of far-reaching rules and recommendations which they had barely had time to read, let alone to consult their local parties, an unfortunate way to begin a debate on party democracy. Many were also upset that the NEC proposal for reformed trigger ballots would be taken in advance of all the constitutional amendments on Westminster selections, calling it a stitch-up and a fix. Both factors contributed to 90.5% of CLP delegates voting against the CAC report and the agenda as set out, but with 98% of affiliates in favour the report was approved by 53.6% for, 46.4% against, and debate proceeded. For those who like these things, the CAC reports are available at

<https://labour.org.uk/conference/at-conference/annual-conference-2018-reports-2/>

They include the text of motions and rule changes, and all card votes broken down by CLPs and affiliates.

Many speakers returned to selections, stressing that being an MP was a privilege not a job for life, criticising those who worked against the twice-elected leader and describing the NEC's offering as a dog's dinner. Some did point out that ousting a sitting MP might be seen negatively by voters, and anyone who thinks that trigger ballots are more time-consuming than open selections has never conducted either.

Momentum had collected more than 50,000 signatures supporting open selections and reducing the threshold for leadership nominations, and speakers were fired up and passionate. However halfway through the afternoon, LabourList reported that Momentum were now asking delegates to support the NEC proposals for reformed trigger ballots and for electing the leader. Reprogramming them on the fly was tricky, and some, reading from their phones, were struggling to absorb and project the new line: that this is a step in the right direction, and don't make the perfect the enemy of the good. Possibly it was realised that conference could vote down the NEC proposals and then vote down all the open selection amendments on Tuesday, leaving the even less desirable status quo.

Be that as it may, all eight batches of the democracy review changes were voted through, most with majorities in the 90 per cent range. However trigger ballots were carried by 65.3% with 96.8% of the affiliates in favour but only 33.8% of CLPs, while the leadership nomination change was carried by 63.9%, with 97.0% of the affiliates and only 30.8% of CLPs.

There were audible tensions between delegates from constituencies and those from the unions, though Gordon McKay of UNISON reminded conference that the unions were the one part of the movement which had never walked away from the party, regardless of splits. UNISON had backed Jeremy Corbyn twice, and any MP not 100% committed to public services would not get their support. The unions deserved a say in choosing parliamentary candidates, and in electing the leader.

Looking back, Tony Blair always ignored the unions as “producer interests” when they opposed his policies, and considered the two-thirds of CLPs who supported anything he asked for as the authentic voice of the people. Now party managers seem to be relying on union votes to keep CLP delegates in check. And throughout the democracy review the unions have maintained control: in addition to 13 seats on the NEC, electoral colleges give them the treasurer, youth, BAME and disabled places if they work together: 17 of the 39 votes. If the unions chose to act collectively, in the interests of their three million members, they could turn the party on a sixpence.

After The Storm

The treasurer Diana Holland reported that the general election was successful in raising money, as well as gaining seats. She explained of current funding arrangements for CLPs and confirmed that these would be reviewed by the NEC. Some delegates requested special treatment on geographical or demographic grounds and one, unusually, asked if there was a mechanism for them to transfer money to less affluent CLPs. Diana assured conference that the costs of the democracy review would be contained within the overall finance strategy, and said the outcome of LabourLive (aka JezFest) would be included in next year's accounts. So far it has only been reported to the business board, which does not leak.

Meanwhile delegates had been voting on which contemporary issues to debate, choosing An Economy for the Many, Brexit, Government Contracts, Housing, In-Work Poverty, Justice for the Windrush Generation, Palestine, and Schools System. It was clear that many of the CLPs submitting motions on Brexit had not voted to prioritise it, though the unions ensured that it was on the agenda. Compositing meetings were convened for each topic, with the Brexit session lasting almost as long as an NEC meeting.

Conference business continued, with keynote shadow cabinet speakers, but as last year priority was rightly given to floor delegates. Though the jumping and waving of objects was reined in, many were still frustrated and began to raise points of order about not being called, the only guaranteed way to get to the rostrum. I would urge the CAC to be more radical in deciding how speakers are chosen, and the NEC to consider defining points of order more tightly. I spent more time on the platform than usual, not as a leaving present, but because most NEC members were otherwise occupied.

Nevertheless They Persisted

Rule changes have always been my favourite session, and it was a pleasure to see Filton & Bradley Stoke argue successfully for amendments to be heard in the year that they are submitted. It was carried by 64.1% to 35.9% (CLPs 89.9% in favour, affiliates 38.2% in favour). Broxtowe then argued for accepting members of other organisations because current rules exclude hard-working socialists belonging to political groups whose aims and values are in line with those of the Labour party. Their amendment would allow many of those expelled in 2016 to return, and prevent them being excluded in future. Nearly half of CLPs – 48.1% - voted in favour, but with support from only 0.3% of affiliates it was lost by 24.2% to 75.8%.

The amendment on standing orders for conference was carried by 65% to 35%, with 98.7% of CLPs in favour but only 31.3% of affiliates. Wirral West spoke for their amendment on a second deputy leader but withdrew it from a vote, and the complicated proposal from Hornsey & Wood Green was rejected with 18.6% in favour and, 81.4% against (CLPs 36.8% in favour, affiliates 0.4% in favour). Richmond Park spoke for CLPs to have the right to decide whether to stand candidates, saying that in 2017 we could have blocked Zac Goldsmith and also won Putney for Labour. Local members must be trusted. Others argued that there are no no-go areas, and Labour MPs supporting so-called progressive alliances should be told to behave. This is actually a message about deployment of resources, which should obviously be focused on the most promising targets. It was lost by 6.4% to 93.6% (CLPs 12.7% in favour, affiliates 0.1% in favour).

Dish of the Day

The debate on Brexit was the high point of the policy agenda, and Keir Starmer won a standing ovation from most of the hall for saying that no-one was ruling out a people's vote, with Remain as an option. Some delegates claimed that Labour could gain 60 seats with a commitment to a people's vote, while others expressed caution: the government, not Labour, would decide the wording of any question, and another close result would not bring unity. Personally I am waiting to be convinced that the mood of the country has changed sufficiently to produce a clear and different result,

This was followed by an emotional debate on Palestine, chaired skilfully by Rhea Wolfson. The sea of waving Palestinian flags was applauded except by the delegate whose lone European Union flag had been confiscated by stewards. The lesson is: bring so many that they cannot take them all away..

National Executive Committee, 25 September 2018

This meeting, on the last evening of conference, is traditionally ceremonial, saying farewell to departing NEC members, welcoming new colleagues, and electing a Chair and vice-chair for the year ahead.

However we still had to deal with filling the newly-agreed NCC places. To my amazement a paper mailed round at lunchtime still failed to allow CLPs a meaningful role, giving them only a week to make nominations. I objected immediately, and a fourth version was produced which allowed CLPs 27 days to nominate at properly convened meetings. The rulebook only required one nomination by the candidate's home CLP but the paper proposed an additional nine CLP nominations because of fears that otherwise there would be too many candidates. The NEC reduced this to five, including the home CLP. *[Since conference the CLP secretaries' Facebook forum has been abuzz with complaints, repeating that a minimum of 6-8 weeks is needed for such requests. I pushed the time from zero to seven days and then to 27 days, and with my departure imminent, could do no more. Hopefully the new NEC CLP members will be mindful of this going forward.]*

Of the six new NCC members two will serve for three years, two for two years, and two for one year so that turnover is staggered. How this allocation will be determined was not specified – the obvious way is to take the highest-polling for the longest terms, but I guess it depends on who is elected. I've also heard from various sources that delays in the disciplinary process are not because there are too few NCC members, but due to continuing staff shortages in the unit which prepares cases on behalf of the NEC. We shall see.

This was a very simple matter, and making such a meal of it raises worrying questions about the implementation of the remaining 90% of the democracy review. I hope that other NEC members will pay close attention to detail and make sure that CLP rights are defended.

The NEC welcomed new members Jayne Taylor, Michael Wheeler, Huda Elmi, Navendu Mishra and Ann Henderson. Paddy Lillis, Rhea Wolfson, Eddie Izzard and I were given the traditional flowers and certificates. I asked Margaret Beckett to present mine, as Labour's first woman leader, and the person who would once, according to precedent, have been the rightful Chair of the NEC. Andy Kerr was thanked for navigating another turbulent year and the new NEC elected vice-chair Wendy Nicholls of UNISON as Chair, something which would also once have been automatic, but was, I gather, anything but. Andi Fox of the TSSA was elected as vice-chair.

Annual conference 26 September 2018 – Closing Time

I am sure you will all have watched the final act. The singing – Change is Gonna Come, He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother – was the best intro to a leader's speech ever, and Jeremy gave a bravura performance before we all headed home from Liverpool and back to reality.

That's it, folks. Goodbye and good luck

Ann Black
2 October 2018