**National Executive Committee, 22 May 2018**

Jeremy Corbyn was in Manchester, joining other leaders on the anniversary of the Manchester Arena bombing. The Chair Andy Kerr congratulated Shabana Mahmood on completing the London marathon (the last 18 miles with an injured knee), Paddy Lillis on his birthday, and myself on being elected as Chair of the national policy forum. He welcomed Carwyn Jones from Wales, replacing Alun Davies, and Eddie Izzard, who stepped up after Christine Shawcroft’s departure. Andy hoped they would enjoy themselves as much as the rest of us. I am not sure what Eddie made of it, though after six hours he enquired, diffidently, if we had ever considered limits on speaking time. An idea which I would definitely support.

When Jennie Formby was appointed as general secretary her position as NEC vice-chair became vacant. Wendy Nichols was elected with 18 votes, against 17 for Andi Fox. I voted for Wendy, and not only because of our long acquaintance in UNISON. For decades the longest-serving NEC member has, with rare exceptions, become vice-chair and then Chair. Wendy joined the NEC in 2011, Andi in 2013. Unite allegedly promised to support Wendy next if UNISON backed Jennie last September, though both leapfrogged Margaret Beckett who was elected before either of them. “Buggins turn” gave Tony Benn the Chair in 1972, and replacing convention with naked factionalism may rebound against the left in future.

**Deputy Leader’s Report**

Tom Watson reported on campaigning in the English elections. As an optimist he saw the results as positive, making steady progress, neck-and-neck with the Tories and winning the popular vote in Wandsworth and Westminster. He was pleased to find new and longstanding members working closely together. In parliament he was disappointed that Leveson part two was killed off, but gratified that the government had implemented a Labour pledge to cut the maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals from £100 to £2. He was also lobbying for compensation for veterans of Britain’s H-bomb tests.

I and others passed on complaints about Labour MPs and senior figures talking the party down, some before the votes had been cast and counted. Even members who think we should be doing better want internal discussion to remain private: we have enough enemies outside. Tom shared our frustration, though he felt that most MPs were now united behind Jeremy’s leadership. I also argued that Labour’s nuanced stance on Brexit was becoming harder to sustain, with Leavers shifting towards the Tories, Remainers leaning to the LibDems, and more than 80 Labour peers defying orders to abstain on a Norway-style option. Tom replied that the Brexit subcommittee was developing policy as negotiations continued.

Alice Perry thanked the leadership for support during the college lecturers’ pension strike, and contrasted it favourably with a previous shadow minister who crossed their picket line. Others raised Windrush and the appalling human consequences of the Tories’ hostile environment, praising Diane Abbott and David Lammy. There were concerns about the low proportion of ethnic minority candidates in target marginals, though Lewisham East now had an excellent black candidate in Janet Daby. Everyone should stop inventing or believing stories about the selection, and just get out and campaign.

**Party Democracy Review**

Katy Clark reported that submissions were still flooding in, and she expected a final surge just before the 29 June deadline. National consultation events had been organised for LGBT, disabled, BAME and women members. Pete Willsman argued for an independent ombudsperson, though few appointments are independent these days. The youth representative reported consensus around Young Labour structures. The party was still clarifying the legal position around the YL equalities conference, challenged by Tory MP Andrew Budgen as unlawful because straight white men were excluded. Wales was conducting its own review of devolved functions. I asked about the process between the close of consultation and submitting proposals for conference, and Katy promised maximum engagement so that no-one felt bounced.

**Foreign Affairs**

The international report covered elections abroad, with results mostly predictable and not comforting for our fellow-socialists. The exception was Malaysia, where the coalition which includes our sister party is now in government, with Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister at the age of 92, more than 20 years older than Jeremy. The party had presented lessons from the 2017 general election to the international progressive campaign forum, and Keir Starmer had explained Labour’s Brexit policy to the party of European socialists.

Richard Corbett, leader of the EPLP, stressed that the involvement of Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer was important to our sister parties. The UK could not be allowed to undermine environmental, employment and consumer rights. MEPs were still working to promote socialist policies, including rights for workers posted to other EU countries, but Brexit overshadowed everything.

In the autumn the Tories would bring their withdrawal bill back to parliament, and Labour was committed to opposing a costly, damaging Tory Brexit which didn’t meet Keir Starmer’s six tests. Leaving with no deal at all was unthinkable. A government defeat could lead to a general election; or trying to negotiate a better deal; or rethinking Brexit entirely. Reversing article 50 was not an option, and Labour was not advocating a further referendum. He reported that the international policy commission received more submissions on Brexit than on all other topics put together. Only two were anti-Europe, most wanted to stay in a customs union and / or a single market, a few wanted another referendum, and a few didn’t want to leave at all.

Some NEC members suggested that when the consequences hit UK manufacturing, where components and products cross borders many times, people might think again. Withdrawal from EU agencies, including Galileo and aviation, would also cause problems. EU citizens in the UK could lose the right to bring their families and UK citizens might find themselves unable to move between EU countries.

**National Policy Forum**

Introducing a report of the current consultation and policy commission meetings, I said that the purpose of the Forum was to deliver an election-winning programme, based on the principles from Jeremy’s leadership campaign and the popular 2017 manifesto. It is not an alternative power-base or an arena for factional infighting. I have met with staff from the policy unit and the leader’s office, the other NPF officers, and Katy Clark, and hope to discuss the democracy review with NPF representatives from constituencies and socialist societies in July. I do not know what the review will propose, but as new representatives are being elected this summer it would surely be too cynical to abolish it immediately. Until then I hope that members are engaging with the policy documents and contributing at <https://policyforum.labour.org.uk/>

**Women’s Conference Latest**

I also presented an update on the 2018 women’s conference. This had been advertised to local parties, and a timescale was discussed with the women’s conference arrangements committee (WCAC) the following day. Delegates – one per CLP – would have to register by 22 June. CLPs and affiliates would have until 29 June to submit motions of up to 250 words, relevant to women, and covering policy rather than rule changes or organisation. An online ballot between 6 and 31 August would choose four subject areas for debate, two from affiliates and two from CLPs. Delegates with prioritised motions should arrive on Friday for compositing meetings at 8 a.m. on Saturday, and after the debate, women’s conference would vote on which motion should go forward to the annual conference agenda. Next year there will be a free-standing women’s conference on 23/24 February 2019 in Telford, allowing more time and flexibility.

**Elections 2018**

The NEC received a summary of the results, and recorded congratulations to newly-elected and re-elected councillors and commiserations to those who were unsuccessful. Taken together with demographic shifts at last year’s general election the party was drilling down to analyse why we lost in some areas and gained in others and to feed this into strategies for 2019, when more than 40% of council seats would be up for election. The collapsing UKIP vote mostly seemed to have benefited the Tories.

Jennie Formby, Nick Forbes and others thanked staff, unions and activists for all their work. Wandsworth and Westminster were always long shots, though there were different views on how far we should damp down expectations and how far we should aim high, to motivate members. Some thought that given mainstream media hostility, Labour had moved forward massively, with net gains of 71 against a high-water mark in 2014. We had to keep inspiring people with messages of hope, and campaigning against austerity.

Members also asked for breakdowns of councillors by gender, ethnicity, age, disability and LGBT status, and for all-male wards to be phased out. Currently 25% of council leaders were women, progress but not yet enough. Councillors highlighted their financial difficulties, with local authorities losing half their government support or more, and three-quarters of those responsible for social care were already overspent. The living wage was laudable, but added to cost pressures, with no central government help. Trade union representatives offered to work with councillors to find ways through challenging times.

Looking forward to the next general election, most target marginals now had candidates in place, with a few yet to select and a few having to be run again. However the boundary review was now back on the agenda, and this may affect selections for sitting MPs and for new candidates.

**What Price Democracy?**

Jennie Formby ran through staffing changes, and reported that finances were in line with the budget. Community organisers were working within regions and local parties, and membership was still growing.

We then had a long discussion on this year’s NEC / NPF ballot. The proposal was to post voting booklets only to members without an email address, or to those who shared an address. All others would receive an email link only. Many NEC members, and not only CLP representatives, were concerned. The recent ballot for the three extra places used this method and turnout was only 21%, compared with 49% in 2016 (inflated because it ran alongside the leadership election) and 33% in 2014. And when the ballot is presented online it’s easier just to tick names from a list rather than bother to read candidates’ statements.

Andy Kerr suggested a compromise: all members would be emailed and asked to opt for an email ballot. Those who did not reply would have a pack posted to them. This was agreed, and the timetable would be revised to accommodate the change. To those concerned about cost, I would point out that we have had two extra NEC ballots since 2016, one for the three new constituency representatives, one for the youth representative. Previously both would have been held back to 2018, saving tens of thousands of pounds.

Jennie Formby would also look into allegations of misuse of party membership data, and some NEC members asked about Momentum’s access to members. They were informed that Momentum’s controls were far more stringent than the party’s, and anyway it was a separate organisation.

Following Carwyn Jones’ decision to stand down, Welsh Labour would elect a new leader in the autumn. In Scotland Lesley Laird was the only candidate nominated for deputy leader, and is therefore elected.

**Equalities**

Anti-semitism had come up on the doorstep, and not only in Barnet. Jennie Formby had written to constituency secretaries stressing that discussion should be comradely, and that criticising members who expressed concern was deeply unhelpful. An anti-semitism working group had produced recommendations for handling allegations of anti-semitic behaviour, modelled on the sexual harassment procedures. A three-person panel, drawn from trained NEC members, would consider complaints in anonymised format, with power to refer them to the national constitutional committee, give verbal or written warnings, recommend training, or take no action. The group also discussed anti-semitism awareness training for members at every level. While it is, sadly, true that antisemitism exists in wider society, we are the Labour party and must hold ourselves to the highest standards. Final papers would come to the NEC in July. Separately a working group would review all aspects of complaints and disciplinary procedures, advised by the new in-house counsel when appointed.

We then agreed an NEC statement on all-women shortlists, women’s officers and quotas for women. I have had many messages on this, and would make the following points:

First, the paper recognises that this is a complex and emotive issue, but discussion should never take the form of abuse or intimidation of anyone, by anyone. Standards of acceptable behaviour would be enforced;

Second, there is no change in policy. Gender identity was added into the rulebook in 2008, with 98% of conference voting in favour. AWS, women’s officers and women’s quotas are open to all women, including trans women. It is also consistent with the 2010 Equality Act. This allows parties to make arrangements for selections which aim to reduce inequalities in representative bodies. This can be done for all protected characteristics. For women it allows but does not require shortlists which are explicitly for women only.

Third, anyone taking the mickey will be dealt with. The man who stood for the post of women’s officer by saying that he identified as a woman on Wednesdays has been suspended and faces disciplinary action.

And fourth, reform of the gender recognition act is a separate debate. Labour is committed to protecting and supporting trans people, but also to maintaining safeguards and protections for all women, including vulnerable women, and will be consulting further on how all these can be reconciled.

**LabourLive**

Members may have read about LabourLive, a musical and political extravaganza on Saturday 16 June. The NEC was informed that, contrary to press reports, sales were going well, and after the local elections there was now time to promote it properly. Some tickets are still available.

**Fond Farewells**

The NEC thanked all staff who were moving on, and in particular Julie Lawrence, an unsung heroine who has attended more than 300 NEC meetings over 20 years and been am adviser, a comrade and a friend to many of us. She has worked with nine general secretaries, and her departure is a sad loss to the party.

As usual please feel free to circulate and / or post online, and comments and questions are welcome.

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