**Report from Annual Labour Party Conference September 2018**

I have deliberately tried to keep this report short, concentrating on issues of relevance to the local party, and a few personal reflections. If I have left anything out, I hope there will be an opportunity to answer questions at the All Member meeting on Friday.

**Women’s Conference**

The Conference got off to an uplifting and inspiring start with speeches from Dawn Butler and Jeremy Corbyn. Four motions were selected for debate, and all were carried unanimously. Contributions were of a high standard, with several courageous contributions from women relating their personal experiences of the issues debated. The unanimity felt very unifying, and was probably important whilst women’s conference is in its infancy as a policy making body. However, for example, the motion on Women’s Health and Safety was overtaken even before it was debated, by an announcement from Dawn Butler in her speech that Labour would introduce paid leave for domestic violence victims. If Women’s Conference is going to play an important role in policy making in future, I think it needs to develop the confidence to tackle more challenging and controversial issues.

**Policy Issues at Annual Conference**

Two of the topics prioritised by the local party, Brexit and Windrush, were selected by the priority ballot. Thankfully, I did not have to go to the very long compositing session for the Brexit motions, attended by Becky and Dan! The composite motions for both topics were in the end overwhelmingly carried.

The third topic, Social Care, was unfortunately not prioritised. In hindsight, it would have stood a better chance of selection if the motions had combined issues to do with the NHS and Social care together. As it was these issues were separated for the priority ballot, which split the vote. The combined vote for the two topics would have been enough to get prioritised. Rather bizarrely though, the issues of NHS and social care were still debated on the Wednesday morning in the context of the National Policy Forum Report, but the absence of any motion to debate meant that the discussion lacked focus. I did hope to speak in the debate, which would have enabled me to refer to our motion and highlight the key points. Unfortunately though, despite my best efforts, I didn’t get selected to speak. The best I could do was vote to refer back the section on social care in the NPF Report, which was overwhelmingly carried. Hopefully this will indicate to the Shadow team that the issue of social care needs to be a much bigger priority in the future.

Another issue, which I know is important to many OxWAb members, that of electoral reform, did also get a brief airing at Conference, again in the context of the NPF Report. A section in the Report which mentioned electoral reform was referred back for further consideration. I voted for the reference back, as did a large number of other CLP delegates. Unfortunately, from where I was sitting it looked like the trades union block of delegates voted solidly against it, meaning it was lost, so electoral reform supporters need to take note of this in their future campaigning.

**Party democracy**

There is no doubt that considerable progress on party democracy is being made, and that some of the decisions made at conference this year were very important. In particular, the new rules establishing democratically accountable representation of Youth, Disabled and BAME representation on the NEC are a big step forward. Well done to Marie and Becky who both made excellent contributions to Conference on this. Also, from now on, CLPs will be able to submit any motion to Conference, not just contemporary ones, and will be guaranteed a debate on their 10 top priority topics (as opposed to the 4 allowed this time). Another decision, to increase the size of the National Constitutional Committee, is also now being enacted.

Conference itself also felt much more democratic this year (albeit having seen previous conferences on television!). There were far more speakers from the floor – over 200 I think. All points of order and reference backs from the floor were listened to by the platform. The Chairs did their best to select speakers fairly, but this remains an area of contention. The diversity of our Party was highly visible amongst delegates, but there is still under-representation of many groups. The way speakers are selected from the floor at the moment, disadvantages many delegates, and needs to be looked at again. I think that the Conference Arrangements Committee is well aware of this, but as Conference grows, it is not an easy problem to resolve.

The democratic deficit that still exists in our Party was perhaps demonstrated most clearly in the votes on the Conference Arrangements Committee report and the NEC democracy review recommendations which took place on the first day of Conference. One of the key controversies was the NEC recommendation on Westminster selections. Their proposal to force a vote on their ‘trigger ballot’ recommendation, appeared to be a way of preventing conference delegates from debating alternative proposals, including that of open selections, which had been proposed as rule changes by CLPs, and which were due to be debated later in the week. I voted, along with 90% of other CLP delegates to refer back the CAC Report, to enable a rethink of this apparently undemocratic proposal. However, 98% of the union and affiliates votes were cast in support of the CAC Report, and therefore the vote on the NEC recommendation went ahead, and again with majority union support was carried. Len McCluskey was strongly criticised for voting for the NEC recommendation even though the Unite policy is in favour of open selection. He has since justified his stance on the basis that it was at the request of the party leadership, and in the interest of party unity.

**Personal Reflections**

I am hugely grateful to have been given the opportunity to be a delegate, and thoroughly enjoyed it. The responsibility of casting a vote on behalf of 1600 other members can feel quite onerous at times, especially when sometimes you feel that there isn’t enough explanation or information to guide you. That’s where I found that being one of a group of delegates was really helpful. It also means that you are able to leave the Hall to get a coffee (no hot drinks allowed inside the Hall!) knowing that others are still in there to represent our CLPs.

The downside of being a delegate is that you don’t get the opportunity to get to many fringe events, and even if you try, because votes are always taken right at the end of sessions, you often arrive late when all the seats have been taken, and there isn’t much food left! Also, there are lots of training sessions put on by the Labour Party which I would have loved to attend, but didn’t manage to organise. What it means though is that I will definitely go to Conference again as a visitor, so that I can take advantage of the huge amount on offer outside the Conference Hall.

A personal highlight for me was being in the Conference Hall for the debate on Palestine, the first time for many years that the issue has been debated on the floor of Conference. It was a powerful moment when a thousand Palestinian flags were raised in solidarity with the Palestinian people. The biggest frustration was not being able to speak in any of the debates, despite trying very hard. I obviously need to get advice in future from Marie, Becky, Dan and Erica who all managed to speak!

Finally, my overriding feeling as I left conference was of a Party energised and full of ideas, excited about its transformational policies, united in its purpose, and ready to form the next government. Bring on the General Election!

Jane Stockton (OxWAb delegate)

7/10/18