**National Executive Committee, 23 January 2018**

Hopes of shorter meetings this year were dashed, and even without a report from deputy leader Tom Watson we continued for more than seven hours. When I joined the NEC in 2000 many papers were tabled on the day, and we had to arrive early to check them for surprises. General secretary Iain McNicol now ensures that everything on the agenda is sent out in advance, but members increasingly raise issues under urgent business without supporting information, based on emails which not everyone has seen, and explanations take time. Sadly despite repeated exhortations someone continues to live-stream proceedings to the media, and I am afraid that you will read more on social media than in this report.

Each NEC meeting pays tribute to members who have died, and Pete Willsman and Jeremy Corbyn added to my appreciation of Jennifer Pegg, the second Oxford councillor in the past year to die before her time. Jeremy also praised Jasmin Beckett, the departing youth representative, as the true voice of Labour, and welcomed new members Joanne Cairns, Yasmine Dar, Rachel Garnham and Jon Lansman. He said that for the first time the NEC had a female majority. In fact there have been more women than men for some years, with 19 out of 33 under Ed Miliband in 2014 against the current 20 out of 39, and the constituency section has had as many as five women in the six places.

**Leader’s Report**

Jeremy Corbyn covered the crisis in the NHS and the collapse of Carillion, as well as rail fare rises, the plight of 66 million refugees worldwide, Karen Buck’s bill on homes fit for human habitation, the WASPI women, Action Saturday campaigning, and the need to maintain tariff-free access to the single market after Brexit. Jon Trickett was leading preparations for entering government, with each shadow departmental team developing their priorities. Trade union representatives particularly welcomed Labour’s rapid response on Carillion. Contracts had continued to be signed and bonuses paid after clear warning signals, and delaying payment of invoices by up to 120 days left smaller organisations in supply chains vulnerable.

NEC members also raised the need to implement part two of the Leveson inquiry and the overwhelming vote for strike action by university lecturers facing attacks on their pension scheme. Some feared that abusive language was becoming normalised, with staff having to run the gauntlet of people calling for “red Tories” to be cleared out of party headquarters: it seems that Labour Against the Witch-Hunt is only against some witch-hunts. MPs were unsettled by the Sunday Times’ claim that up to 50 were targeted for deselection. Some had reacted before checking the facts: the story was unfounded, and they may be reassured by Jon Lansman’s statement that those who work hard and listen to their members have nothing to fear. The priority for local parties is clearly not trigger ballots for current MPs but selecting their own candidates in every seat, ready for a general election whenever it comes. A further complication is the boundary review and a possible reduction to 600 constituencies. This is not dead and its fate may not be settled till October, at which point the rulebook will have to be updated.

**Walking the Walk**

Keith Vaz and others were concerned that of 23 parliamentary candidates selected so far, none was from an ethnic minority. For the snap election the NEC imposed candidates in all 631 seats, and though this bypassed local democracy, they were considerably more diverse. However in July the NEC, with input from the leader’s office, agreed all-women shortlists in six target seats which had black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) male candidates in June, thereby preventing them from standing again. Everyone agreed on the need to do better in all constituencies, not just those with high ethnic minority populations, and also at local government level, where there are only three Chinese councillors in the entire country. Pete Willsman asked for legal advice on whether it would be possible to implement all-BAME shortlists.

Version 5 of the selection procedure should be circulated soon, and I hope it will resolve any remaining inconsistencies. One member read out a list of detailed complaints from a procedures secretary regarding a candidate endorsed by the organisation committee a week earlier. I followed up this case and others, but if the NEC representative and the regional officer sign off the process there is no appeal. Worryingly some constituencies are having to start again because there are too few applicants, expensive for candidates and local parties alike. There are already considerable tensions, and these seats require up to four years’ hard slog with no guarantee of success. I hate to think what will happen when sitting MPs start to retire.

**Crisis, What Crisis?**

The NEC welcomed Jonathan Ashworth, shadow health secretary. A year ago he spoke to the NEC about the worst winter crisis ever, and since then the situation had deteriorated further. Theresa May could claim that cancelling all routine operations amounted to a plan, but these were far from routine to people waiting in pain and anxiety for hip replacements, cataract operations or heart surgery, and delays could lead to patients ending up in A&E, with greater costs and greater suffering.

The facts were shocking: over 100,000 people waiting more than 30 minutes in ambulances, bed occupancy close to 100% against a safe level of 85%, and 100,000 staff vacancies. Cutbacks in mental health and addiction services added to the pressures. All the improvements in the Labour years had been thrown into reverse, with continued under-funding and the disastrous Tory / LibDem reorganisation in 2012.

Health inequalities were widening again, with a child born in Leicester expected to die nine years earlier than a child born in Chelsea. Poor air quality, bad housing and poverty all contributed. I asked about legislation to encourage healthier lifestyles, and Jon said that a Labour government would ban advertisements for junk food and introduce stricter legislation on salt and sugar levels. Scotland had just brought in unit pricing for alcohol and its impact would be followed with interest.

**Local Government**

Nick Forbes reported that the government was devolving responsibility, and blame, to councils for rises in council tax of up to 6% and cuts in services. He thanked the leadership for promptly ruling out a proposal to double council tax. This played badly on the doorstep, and because of patterns of wealth and poverty Surrey could have gained £276 million while Labour councils in poorer areas actually lost money. He had led negotiations giving staff a 2% pay rise, still way behind inflation but breaking the 1% cap and bringing up to 16% extra for those at the bottom of the scale.

Haringey council’s development plan has been in the news for months, and was raised as urgent business. The discussion was immediately leaked, including the “private and confidential” letter from 21 councillors. As well as the scheme’s merit or otherwise, NEC members considered whether rejecting it was legal, wise, within our remit and consistent with principles of natural justice which allow both sides to be heard, and the precedent for intervening in other council decisions. But Labour is committed to stopping all outsourcing, and the message to councillors is clear. Christine Shawcroft then listed complaints about selections in Sandwell, and I also have a dossier. As advised, we will forward these to the Chair Andy Kerr.

Finally Alice Perry outlined her cross-party work within the local government association, covering flexible maternity and paternity leave; restoring pension rights; security in ward surgeries; omitting candidates’ addresses from ballot papers; tackling abuse on social media; and allowing all-women shortlists for mayors.

**Europe**

Richard Corbett MEP, Glenis Willmott’s successor as Labour’s leader in Europe, reported. Alongside Brexit, political battles continued on arms exports, energy efficiency and renewables, and tax dodging. The estimated total amount lost through tax evasion exceeded the sum of the deficits of all the member states, and could, if tackled, eliminate any economic justification for austerity. Applications from the EU27 for jobs as nurses had fallen by 90%. The NEC reinforced the need to reassure all European nationals that they would be welcome to stay under a Labour government.

**Finance and Organisation**

Party finances were reported as healthy, and the budget for 2018 was summarised. Membership was currently around 530,000 paid-up, with another 40,000 to 50,000 in arrears, but volatility indicated the need for caution. Members about to lapse are followed up nationally, but local parties making personal contact is the most effective way of keeping them in. Also trade union political funds were depleted after two general elections and the cumulative impact of government attacks on union funding. The NEC received the usual round-up of national and regional activity, and I asked for copies of Scottish and Welsh procedures for selecting candidates and electing their leadership, for information and sharing of good practice. Welsh Labour had decided to elect their deputy leader from an all-women list. The party’s gender pay audit showed a gap of 2.45%, still work to do but already better than the national average of 9.1%

**Forums and Conferences**

Carol Linforth introduced a full report of the 2017 conference, summarised in my November account. Unlike the Tory conference our backdrop didn’t fall down, no-one handed the leader a P45, and delegates and visitors experienced a real buzz. I asked who made the decision to allow visitors as well as delegates to attend the policy seminars: these give many delegates their only chance to speak directly to the frontbench, and the previous policy helped to exclude trouble-making journalists. Members may like to know that in line with environmental policy, £33,000 from carbon-offsetting charges is supporting the planting of 9,683 trees in Jess’s Wood in Carmarthenshire. Several members suggested returning to Blackpool, a working-class area with cheap accommodation. However prices would rocket up as soon as we booked, and last time Labour went to Blackpool it rained on delegates inside the conference hall.

Proposals for reviewing criteria for contemporary motions and more options within policy documents should surely be included in the party democracy review, and discussed at the national policy forum on 17/18 February. The Forum will also agree short consultation documents on priority topics handed down by the joint policy committee, and I have asked for the timetable to be sent to CLP secretaries and members.

**Women’s Conference in Transition**

Katy Clark gave an update on the first tranche of the review. There was an overwhelming need to record members who identify as disabled or from an ethnic minority to underpin organisation and participation at local, national and regional level. LGBT+ representatives were still consulting their members. I was encouraged to hear that this will be taken forward soon.

The NEC agreed that for 2018, as already advertised, women’s conference will be held on Saturday 22 September. Moving forward from last year, constituencies and affiliates will be able to submit motions, not just statements, and as well as voting on those prioritised, delegates will choose one to go forward to the annual conference agenda. For this year only, because of constraints on time and space, delegates will be on the same basis as 2017, with each CLP entitled to one delegate elected by their women members, and affiliates represented on the basis of their membership, though I am not sure if this is total membership or women’s membership. As previously the conference will be open to all women members as visitors. I repeated, again, the need to inform CLP women’s officers and not just CLP secretaries of the right to send delegates and, when the women’s conference arrangements committee (WCAC) have agreed them, the timetable and guidelines for submitting motions.

However the NEC agreed to support standalone women’s conferences in spring 2019 and 2010, and as the newly re-elected vice-chair for women I am asking all NEC women members to scope out all aspects – basis of delegations, motions, interaction with annual conference – and take this through the equalities committee. The WCAC will take the lead in setting the programme. In addition a national party democracy event for women will be held in late June or early July, with all CLPs invited to send representatives.

Before the meeting I talked all this through with Rachel Garnham, one of the three new NEC constituency members, who has been liaising with the new WCAC constituency members. Initially the Chair told her that only two of the three could be on the equalities committee, and these would be Yasmine Dar and Jon Lansman. I proposed including Rachel as well, and was pleased that objections were withdrawn.

**Committee Matters**

Seven days earlier the organisation committee met and received reports on safeguarding procedures, Northern Ireland, CLPs in special measures, and the boundary review. Half the meeting was spent on Newham, and whether to re-run the trigger ballot for the sitting mayor or go straight to an open selection. I favoured the second option until informed that it might lead to fresh litigation running past the election date in May, and the unions opposed it because their numerous affiliated branches would be excluded. The meeting voted 11-8 to continue with a trigger ballot first, but this did not prevent a further discussion at the NEC and more arguments over whose legal advice was correct.

**Disputes Panel**

As is widely known, Christine Shawcroft was elected Chair of the disputes panel with 22 votes against 15 for me. The move was known to *The Independent* in advance, but not to Pete Willsman or to many other NEC members. I do not believe that it presages greater lenience in enforcing party rules: all cases are discussed by the panel as a whole, and every NEC member is responsible. It is true that the Chair attracts blame for unpopular decisions. This happened to me, and it will happen to Christine: it goes with the territory. In nine years I have never been personally involved in any case as a witness or supporter, and I have tried to work collegially with all NEC members and with staff. My chief regret is failing to make more progress in resolving the backlog of appeals and referrals, and at this meeting, regrettably, we deferred two cases. Christine also replaces me as an NEC officer, but that will not change the existing political balance.

I’d like to thank everyone for the kind texts, calls, tweets, posts and emails, particularly those with whom I have differed over the years. In leaving the chair I made the point that while NEC members are criticised, sometimes robustly or even rudely, we also have friends and supporters in our various networks. Party staff get all the abuse but rarely the appreciation that they deserve, and none of us should forget that.

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

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