

CAMPAIGN

No 66 September 2003

for labour party democracy

Widening inequalities

Foundation Hospitals Trusts [like Top-Up fees] represent a “Government Initiative” that is both unpopular and uncalled for. The idea was not in our General Election manifesto and hasn’t even been approved by “Partnership in Power”.

More seriously, like other attempts to “marketise” our Welfare State, it seeks to re-introduce competition between service-providers in a way which will widen still further the existing inequalities in our society. The “freedom” to “shop” around between increasingly unequal providers may benefit the rich and mobile. What most of us want, however, (and what fewer of us would get under FHTs), is a consistently good standard of service wherever we happen to live.

Even if one were to accept Alan Milburn’s insistence that that the creation of FHTs would not in itself be Privatisation, it is undeniable that the move would open that door invitingly to any future administration. The Arkinsons and Jarvises must already be rubbing their hands.

Apologists for FHTs insist that they are really a “socialist” concept with affinities to mutualism and the co-operative movement. But giving a local patient or staff-member a seat on an FHT board cannot conceal the essential anti-cooperative nature of the project as a whole.

There is indeed a debate to be had about the need to democratise the NHS, but that debate is impeded rather than advanced by the concept of FHTs. Our local health services certainly need to offer more of a voice to Local Government, patients’ forums and joint staff committees – but pleas for democracy come strangely from those who previously campaigned for our Community Health Councils to be not so much strengthened as abolished.

Under the Government’s proposals, moreover, the overall control of FHTs would lie not with a properly accountable Secretary of State but with an all-powerful unelected regulator. That is the opposite of a democratic advance.

Scores of Labour MPs have already voted against FHTs in the House of Commons, but scores of others have so far only abstained. Others have actually voted in favour.

This year’s Party Conference must therefore take a

● Foundation hospitals

Conference notes the strong opposition to Foundation Hospital Trusts voiced in debates in the summer in the House of Commons, in the House of Lords. (and probably at the TUC)

Conference welcomes the massive increase in spending on the National Health Service announced by the Government, and looks forward to UK health investment rising to the European average. This long-term investment will help to deliver the high-quality health service demanded by the electorate at the 2001 General Election.

Conference fears, however, that the introduction of Foundation Hospital Trusts would undermine this progress. The idea of Foundation Hospital Trusts is part of a new competitive market being introduced into the National Health Service in England, with hospitals competing for patients. Foundation Hospitals would fragment the system, widen inequalities and undermine the collaborative principles now being re-established. Conference believes that the Government should work for the improvement of all NHS hospitals, not for the improvement of hospitals in some areas at the expense of those in others. Foundation Hospitals would be accountable only to an unelected regulator, not the Secretary of State. The idea of Foundation Hospitals has not been approved by the Labour Party’s policy-making process and was not included in Labour’s General Election Manifesto.

Conference believes that Foundation Hospital Trusts would undermine Labour’s attempt to build a successful modern National Health Service, and calls on the Government to withdraw the sections of the Health and Social Care Bill that establish Foundation Hospital Trusts.

lead in unequivocally rejecting the whole divisive concept. A good number of “contemporary” motions will greatly help to achieve this.

This Newsletter contains our suggestions for contemporary resolutions to the 2003 Conference. CLPs can submit one contemporary resolution. provided they haven’t already submitted a constitutional amendment this year. Contemporary resolutions must be on subjects not “substantively addressed in the NPF or NEC Reports”, or refer to **events occurring between the beginning of August and the closing date for contemporary resolutions which would make the motion more “contemporary”**

● See pages 4 and 5 for other suggested contemporary resolutions

False Assumptions: 2003 National Policy Forum Consultation

This year's National Policy Forum (NPF) consultative documents circulated to CLPs include papers on "The Best Education for All", "Justice, Security and Community" and "Britain in the Global Economy". They will be discussed, but not voted on, at this year's Conference. The final policy decisions will be taken at 2004 Conference after comments from CLPs, affiliated organizations, local forums as well as those made at this year's Conference have been considered. There will be two sessions of the NPF before the 2004 Conference where the recommended text can be amended, provided any amendment gains the support of about 35 delegates.

Like last year the documents have a number of drawbacks. One is that the consultation does not include some contentious policy issues like Foundation Hospitals, University Top Up Fees or Britain's support for the United States National Missile Defence System. The documents urge members to respond to set questions which assume agreement both with the text and the way the questions are phrased. Delegates to the NPF should therefore be encouraged to submit amendments whenever they disagree. This means that responses may have to start by questioning the questions.

Many of the objectives in the documents are desirable. But when we consider education, pensions, transport, system of justice or environment the discussion will inevitably impinge on our ability and willingness to pay. The comparison of Britain with other advanced industrial countries shows that the proportion of national income we spend on public expenditure is less than in theirs. In 2001 the EU average level of public expenditure was 44.5% of GDP, the United Kingdom lagged behind at only 38.3% (Source OECD). But in this respect even a comparison with the Tory government is unfavourable. From 1979 to 1996 public spending, as a share of GDP, averaged 44%. From 1997 election the level of public spending as a share of GDP fell each year for the first three years and only rose to 39.2% in 2001. (Source: Institute of Fiscal Studies).

To reach the proportion of national

income spent on public expenditure in 1997 requires increased taxation. This unpalatable truth is studiously evaded. The Tories successfully peddled the fiction that it was possible to improve the infrastructure and existing social services while reducing public expenditure and the level of direct taxation. Over 18 years of Tory rule the standard rate of income tax was cut by approximately one third (from 34% to 23 %) and the top rate halved (from 83% to 40%).

The most significant effect of these changes, however, was not an overall reduction in tax, it was the redistribution of taxation from higher to lower income groups, with regressive indirect taxes replacing progressive direct ones. Nevertheless the reductions in direct taxation together with the privatization of national assets and the opening up of public services to private enterprise meant neglect of infrastructure and essential public services.

Unfortunately just as the electorate woke up to the damage the Tories were causing, the new Labour leadership became convinced that unless the Party's traditional goals were jettisoned, Labour would be condemned to permanent opposition. Hence the "New Labour" leadership continued with Tory policies under a new flag. It decided to stick to Tory spending limits and to oppose progressive taxation. Instead of capitalising on the growing Tory unpopularity and exposing the Tory talk on tax for the fraud that it was, "New Labour" adopted it. Labour thus missed the opportunity provided by its victories in 1997 and 2001 to reverse the trend towards inequality. The consultative documents make the same erroneous assumptions. This at a time when it is becoming obvious that "New Labour's" policies are failing, and when labour movements' dissatisfaction is finding expression in leadership's defeats at annual conference.

● "Britain in the Global Economy"

This document begins with the question "Are we right to borrow for investment in public services so long as debt is at a stable and prudent level?"

The question begs other questions. Any debt means paying interest. Hence borrowing is generally more expensive than paying out of funds raised by taxation. Given the long period of underinvestment in essential industries and public services, (something which predates Tory rule), it wouldn't be realistic to attempt to raise the necessary funds by taxation alone. In the circumstances, if the long term decline is to be reversed, there is nothing wrong with borrowing to invest in public services. Borrowing, however, should be undertaken by the conventional route (governments can borrow cheaply on the open market).

The "New Labour" government is undertaking huge borrowing to improve public services but does so through the PFI. Experience shows that unless workers' pay and conditions are reduced, private finance initiatives turn out to be more costly and less effective than public investment. A fully funded public sector is better able to provide quality universal services at a reasonable cost. PFIs and PPPs add unnecessary cost, remove accountability, deplete public resources and mortgage the future of public services. They have often resulted in industrial action by pressurised workforces. The current emphasis in the NHS on consumer choice and local financial autonomy (e.g. Foundation Hospitals and patient shopping) is not compatible with maintaining universal standards, since resources will flow to facilities in wealthier areas and be sought after by middle class patients to the detriment of the less privileged.

The extent, of borrowing however, should be determined by the ability to repay. Any borrowing however needs to be balanced by progressive taxation including the reintroduction of much higher rates of tax for those living on well above average incomes. The problem here is not economic but political. Cuts in income tax may have been popular, but they detached the electorate from economic realities. So long as there was a rise in the value of stocks and shares, the shortfall of funds available for public services, pensions, health service and infrastructure could be, to some extent at least, made up by borrowing. This made the general decline in public services less obvious. With the recession, the collapse of share values and stagnation the chickens are coming

home to roost. Instead of repeating Tory mantras Labour should come clean and explain that improvements in public services cannot be achieved without increased taxation.

● “The best education for all”

This document which covers all stages of education points out that ‘a socio-economic gap is evident as early as 22 months and widens as the child progresses through the education service’. But it fails to acknowledge that far more investment is required than the government is promising. This was exemplified in the schools funding crisis earlier this year, causing schools to lose and not replace teachers.

As regards higher education, instead of putting in extra resources to make universities open to all, regardless of ability to pay, the government is shifting the funding burden further onto students by introducing ‘top-up’ fees of £3,000 a year, further hindering access to higher education.

One of the most worrying aspects of the document is the hostility to comprehensive education. The document states that ‘We must continue to...move away from a ‘one size fits all model’’. It proposes the ‘radical expansion of the specialist schools programme’ – described as ‘the embodiment of a ‘comprehensive-plus’ vision for all schools’ – claiming that City Academies are ‘pioneering a new approach’, when in reality they are a way of introducing the private sector into the education system. The division of education into vocational and academic routes is also flagged up.

The document’s claim that ‘there is now a pay structure that allows good teachers to stay in the classroom’ fails to address the continued chronic shortage of teachers. The assertion that ‘Labour in government is developing the roles of support staff to free up teacher’s time’ is a euphemism for using unskilled staff in place of properly trained teachers. It is important that Teaching Assistants should have a proper career structure, with decent pay and conditions. However, this should not be used to cover up the problem of teacher shortages.

Suggested answers to questions:

Achieving the best for every child

5. How can we encourage every school to develop its own specialism?

6. How can we ensure the principles

and strengths of the comprehensive system are reflected in a more diverse system?

These questions should be used to assert the principle of comprehensive education and oppose the fragmentation of the educational system into specialist schools which cloak such questionable developments as faith schools and which are smuggling back selection.

The education service: delivering a new approach

12. How can we help teachers and support staff develop their careers and continue to raise their professionalism?

Improve teachers’ terms and conditions. Develop support staff but do not allow this to be a cheap option to cover gaps in teachers.

Developing skills and learning

16. How can universities and schools increase the number from poor backgrounds applying and getting into university?

17. How can the cost of paying for high quality university education be shared among the beneficiaries?

Maintenance grants should be restored to a level on which it is possible to live. The beneficiaries of higher education are the whole of society, and therefore improvements should be financed by general taxation. Tuition fees should be abolished.

Other

18. What major challenges, other than those already identified here will we face in meeting the ambition of a world class education for all? How should we respond?

The introduction of the Educational Maintenance Allowances for further education has been a positive development. However, at present only 30% qualify – they should be made universal.

There should be a moratorium and independent review of the use of the private finance initiative in the education sector.

● “Justice, security and community”

This document deals with crime, asylum and immigration. It is vital to urge the adoption of a humane immigration and asylum policy. This is important in itself as well as to counter growing

racism: the recent election of 17 BNP councillors took place against a backdrop of draconian asylum legislation and anti-asylum seeker rhetoric from government, opposition and media. The document repeats the ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ mantra, but far more emphasis is placed on the first element. It proposes more rapid arrest-to-sentencing times and tougher action on persistent offending. You may wish to challenge the Home Secretary’s recent proposals threatening to limit jury trials.

A section on ‘Partnerships against Crime’ states that faith in the police has improved ‘partly because of better community policing and reforms stemming from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report’. However, the document fails to spell out exactly what has been done to implement the report and the emphasis is on the community, rather than the police, doing more to improve relations.

A section on ‘A fair and just asylum, immigration and nationality system’ contains assertions that ‘the government is working strenuously to resolve conflict and strife’ internationally, which ring hollow following the invasion of Iraq. The document reaffirms ‘our fundamental moral obligation to offer refuge to those who are genuinely fleeing war or persecution’, yet goes on to praise the 2002 asylum legislation, which further eroded asylum rights.

Suggested answers to questions

Partnerships against crime

4. What more can we do to improve policing?

There needs to be a renewed commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Robust measures are required to further tackle institutional racism in the police and criminal justice system. Since the Inquiry there has been deterioration in some areas: for example, the disproportionate use of stop and search under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act has increased – African Caribbeans are now eight times more likely to be stopped, compared to five times more likely at the time of the report.

Criminal Justice

13. What further ways are there of ensuring that people have more confidence in the justice system?

Continued on page 4

The right to trial by jury should remain a fundamental principle of the criminal justice system and should not be limited.

A fair and just asylum, immigration and nationality system

17. Have we got the principles of our immigration policy right?

18. Have we got the principles of our asylum policy right?

No. Current policies are based on the idea that Britain derives little benefit, and incurs much cost, from the arrival

of what is, in reality, a relatively small number of people. The underlying principle of policy on asylum and immigration should reflect the positive benefits that this migration contributes to Britain. A Home Office study in 2001 showed that there was a net contribution to the economy from migrants of £2.5 billion a year. As our population ages, the economy requires further such immigration so that there are sufficient workers to support the retired population.

Current policy on asylum leads to the demonisation and segregation of asylum seekers, and false claims that

asylum seekers are to blame for overstretched public services. A government that can mistakenly claim that asylum seekers are ‘swamping’ Britain can only help contribute to the legitimacy of the BNP.

Instead of the current policies, there should be an end to detention of asylum seekers; no segregation of their children from mainstream schools; and a restoration of their benefits. The government should reaffirm its commitment to the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees and scrap its proposals that would mean those fleeing from persecution and wars cannot seek asylum in Britain.

Contemporary resolutions

● Freedom of Speech

Conference notes the establishment of the Hutton Inquiry and the continuing debate about the justification for Britain’s participation in the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Conference recognizes that a wide variety of views continues to be held by Labour Party members on the legality and/or morality and/or wisdom both of the original invasion and also of the ongoing occupation. Since human lives are involved, such views may be held very strongly.

Conference believes that the Labour Party is large enough to accommodate this variety of views and therefore regrets that disciplinary

action against one Party member, George Galloway, appears to have been initiated on the basis of his outspoken opposition to the war.

Conference believes that, unless his suspension is speedily lifted, this will be unfair not just to him as an individual but also to all those Party members who may or may not wish to vote for or against him being their parliamentary candidate. Above all, this suspension inhibits freedom of speech in the Party and of members to express views not shared by the leadership.

Conference therefore calls for the restoration of George Galloway’s membership rights.

● State funding of political parties

“Conference notes that the Electoral Commission is carrying out a review into the issues surrounding the funding of political parties. It is concerned that this review could lead to proposals for the state funding of political parties. This would undermine rank and file influence and allow the leadership to act even more independently of the Party.

State funding is often advocated as a way of stopping wealthy individuals from purportedly buying favours through lavish contributions to party funds. There is indeed a case for “capping” such donations. But there is a world of difference between these donations and funds made up of affiliation fees paid by union members, membership subscriptions and small donations from individual members.

A blanket formula on capping donations without regard to their origin amounts to a thinly disguised attempt to make the parliamentary leadership independent of the party to which they owe their position. It would deprive affiliated

trade unionists of the influence they have in the policy making process. Voluntary funding from democratically elected affiliated organisations would be replaced by reliance on subsidies squeezed from the taxpayer. Funding and democratic accountability go hand in hand and we are opposed to measures which would reduce the role of members solely to that of foot-soldiers at election times.

The Electoral Commission’s consultation must not lead to the destruction of the Labour’s democratic structures.

To this end Conference:

- a) Opposes an extension of state-funding.
- b) Supports the continued affiliation of trade unions, and the socialist societies, with their capacity to finance the Party to the extent decided by these organisations.
- c) Supports greater liaison between the Party and these organisations, together with their participation in the decision making process at every level of the Party.
- d) Submits the above position to the Electoral Commission consultation.”

Contemporary resolutions

● Public Service Reform

Conference welcomes Labour's sustained new investment in Public Services. The 2001 General Election gave the Government a clear mandate to reverse years of neglect which had left public services battered and demoralized. However Conference notes the recent debates on the Public Services at the TUC Conference, and urges the Government to take the fullest account of the grave concerns expressed about the future of our Public Services.

Conference is alarmed at the Government's increasing determination to apply market principles to public services – principles which Labour had strongly opposed when in opposition, and which Labour members and supporters continue to oppose. Further, Conference notes the growing list of costly private sector failures.

Conference calls on the Government to acknowledge that the provision of public services such as health and education is fundamentally different from the provision of other goods and services in the economy. Conference welcomes signs that the Government is beginning to recognise this. In an analysis of PFI produced in July, the Treasury accepted that the Private Finance Initiative has consistently failed in public sector Information Technology projects and said that it will no longer be used. Conference believes that the wider ranging independent review called for by last year's Conference would have reached the same conclusion on other services subjected to the PFI and other forms of private-sector involvement in our public services.

Conference therefore now calls on the Government:

- * to reject privatization and the continued preference for subjecting our public services to private financing and private management
- * to develop a revised model of public service reform based on sustained investment, effective co-operation and collaboration, and the sharing of good practice.
- * To strengthen workforce protection and introduce a Fair Wages Clause
- * To resist pressure under GATS to subject UK Public Services to global competition

● Iraq

Conference notes:-

- 1) that months after the invasion of Iraq no weapons of mass destruction have been found that would confirm Iraq posed the serious and imminent threat that was claimed as the principal justification for British involvement in the invasion;
- 2) that information revealed to the Hutton Inquiry that the intelligence on the basis of which the government decided to go to war could not be relied upon;
- 3) that the United Nations is not directing Iraq's post war reconstruction which is instead under the control of the occupying forces of the US and Britain;
- 4) that there is growing evidence that the US and British occupation of Iraq is not supported by the people of Iraq and that both US and British forces are continuing to suffer casualties;
- 5) that two members of the Cabinet resigned over issues relating to the invasion. Conference calls for an end to British participation in the occupation of Iraq.

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Vote for rule changes

Several organisations chose to submit to the 2002 Conference constitutional amendments instead of resolutions on contemporary issues. These will be taken at this year's Conference as the NEC takes one year to decide whether to endorse them. Below we give the arguments in their favour and reproduce the amendments and the section of the rule book to which they refer. As all the proposed changes we list would give CLPs more say it is important that CLP delegates should be mandated to support them.

Let conference decide Labour's policies

At present each CLP and union is allowed to send direct to Conference "one motion on a topic which is either not substantively addressed in the reports to conference of either the National Policy Forum or the NEC or has arisen since the publication of those reports" (Conference rule 2 – Agenda 3C2.3). About 300 CLPs and unions normally choose to do so. Yet only 4-5 subjects ever reach the Conference floor. The choice of subjects is determined by the priorities ballot at the start of conference. In this, CLPs are disadvantaged. The subjects of their motions encompass a much wider field than those submitted by major unions who tend to vote as a block. As a result subjects chosen by CLPs are never discussed unless supported by the unions. Last year, following pressure from CLPs and some unions at this unjust situation, the Conference Arrangements Committee introduced a minor change. This allowed the CLPs to choose one extra issue, provided that at least 50 percent of CLPs vote for it. Evidence from recent years shows that this high threshold would not normally be achieved. The only way to give more say to Conference delegates and redress the injustice to CLPs is to support rule changes proposed by East Devon, Islington North, Faversham&Mid Kent, Stourbridge, Orpington and Mid-Bedfordshire CLPs. All of these are identical in content but their wording varies slightly. Below we reproduce the proposed rule change as submitted by East Devon, Islington North and Faversham&Mid Kent CLPs.

The National rules of the Labour Party Section A 3C Procedural rules for party conference

CONFERENCE RULE 2 – AGENDA

3C2.3 reads as follows:

All affiliated organizations and CLPs may submit one motion on a topic which is either not substantively addressed in the reports to conference of either the NPF or the NEC or which has arisen since the publication of those reports. The CAC shall determine whether the motions meet these criteria and submit all issues received to a priorities ballot at the start of conference. Motions must be in writing, on one subject only, or be in the form of a constitutional amendment and must be received by the General secretary at the offices of the party by the closing date determined by the NEC.

Amendment Line 8 After "conference" insert:

"The ballot will be divided into two sections: one section for CLPs and one section for trade unions and other affiliated organizations. At least the first four priorities selected by CLPs will be time-tabled for debate, as will at least the first four priorities selected by trade unions and other affiliated organisations.

More Grassroots Reps

This rule change will increase the number of the CLP seats from 6 to 10 (of which 5 must be women). At Annual Conference CLPs have voting parity with the trade unions. But on the NEC the unions have twelve seats and the CLPs only six. Until 1997 the CLPs had seven seats, but the "modernisation reforms" of that year, whilst increasing the size of the NEC, reduced CLPs' representation by one seat. The long-term aim should be parity with the unions. The rule change proposed by **Erith and Thamesmead and Leominster CLPs** would be a significant step in that direction. This proposed rule change is reprinted below.

The National Rules of the Labour Party Section A 4C Procedural rules for elections for national committees

4C.2 ELECTION OF THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

4C.2a (iii) reads as follows:

Division III (CLPs) shall consist of six members, at least three of whom shall be women, to be nominated by their own CLP and at least two other CLPs. The ballot for these places shall be conducted among all eligible individual members of the party by means of a national one-member-one-vote postal ballot conducted to guidelines laid down by the NEC.

Amendment

Line 1: Delete six and insert ten

Line 2: Delete three and insert five

Candidates supported by Grassroots Alliance

Conference Arrangements Committee CLP-Section:

George McManus East Yorkshire CLP **Alice Mahon MP** Halifax CLP

General Section:

John Aitkin TGWU, **George McManus** East Yorkshire CLP, **Alice Mahon MP** Halifax CLP

National Policy Forum

Northern Region: **Kath Sainsbury**, Stockton South CLP

Yorkshire Region: **George McManus**, East Yorkshire CLP
Martha Hanson, East Yorkshire CLP

East Midlands Region: **Garry Ransford**, Bolsover CLP
Helen Skinner, Broxtowe CLP

West Midlands Region: **David Williams**, Selly Oak CLP
London Region: **Dorothy Macedo**, Finchley and Golders Green CLP

South East Region: **Carol Hayton**, Mole Valley CLP

Mick Moriarty, Esher and Walton CLP

South West Region: **Judith Sluglett**, Bristol West CLP

Wales: **John Lewis**, Swansea West CLP

Keep CLP seats for rank and file

In 1997 Conference agreed to debar MPs and MEPs from the Constituency section of the NEC. From then onwards the six CLP seats were to be reserved for rank and file members. The architects of this proposal didn't anticipate the situation where a rank and file member was elected who then became an MP or an MEP. This anomalous situation occurred in 1999-2000 with the case of Michael Cashman who was elected an MEP only a few weeks after being elected as a rank and file representative to the NEC. Thus whilst an MEP he continued for some eleven months to occupy a seat allocated to grassroots. Since last year the period of tenure of NEC members has been extended to two years. Thus parliamentarians who are theoretically debarred from the constituency places could nevertheless represent CLPs for nearly two years. Once again the New Labour modernizers have demonstrated their deep concern to see grassroots members represented. The rule change proposal from **East Yorkshire and Oxford East** would remove this anomaly. Below we reproduce the proposed rule change.

The National Rules of the Labour Party Section A 4C Procedural rules for election for national committees

4C.2A ELECTION OF THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

4C.2e reads as follows:

The term of office in each of the five NEC divisions shall be two years

Amendment

Insert new Rule 4c.2e and re-sequence existing Rule 4c.2e to 4C.2f

4C.2e Eligibility to stand for or to occupy a seat in Division III shall lapse if a candidate or a member becomes an MP or an MEP before or during their term of office and more than six months of that term remains. The resulting vacancy shall be filled according to the provisions of clause 4C.2d

For your information

Clause 4C.2d reads as follows:

Any vacancy which occurs among members of the NEC between annual sessions of party conference shall be filled by the NEC co-opting the highest unsuccessful nominee in the division concerned (subject to the rules on maintaining at least 50% representation for women) as shown in the results of the election to for the NEC declared at the annual session of party conference immediately preceding the vacancy.

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Christine Shawcroft (NEC) Reports Back, June 2003

The main issues at the June NEC were Iraq, and the suspension of George Galloway. Normally any resolution on suspended members would have been automatically referred to the Disputes Panel/NEC Organisation Committee. But to our surprise, the Final Agenda had "Administrative Suspension of George Galloway" as the first item on the General Secretary's Report.

When Tony Blair gave his report, I asked him about Iraqi weapons. I pointed out that the September dossier's claims about weapons sites proved unfounded and that the February dossier had contained information from a PhD thesis about Iraq's weapons capabilities before the First Gulf War. Wouldn't it be best to hold an Inquiry?

Mr Blair replied that the September dossier was accurate. I interrupted that I hadn't said it was inaccurate, merely that the Government had admitted that when the sites it detailed had been inspected, nothing had been found. He went on to say that the information in the February dossier taken from the PhD thesis wasn't about weapons, but about organisations which should have been credited to the thesis as a source. As far as I am aware this is not so.



Mark Seddon asked about Clare Short's claim that the decision to go to war had been made in August or September 2002. He asked again about the Inquiry, saying that Thatcher had had one into the Falklands, and Iraq is more important. Mr

Blair replied that Short's claim is the opposite of the truth. Bush had made it clear that if Saddam Hussein co-operated over weapons, there would be no military action. The Falklands Inquiry had been held because the Foreign Secretary resigned over the invasion – the Inquiry was about how the islands had come to be invaded by a foreign power. We all need to wait for the Select Committee's report.

When we got to the suspension, I said that I'd had many messages of support for George Galloway from individuals, GCs and unions. I stated that a high profile suspension like this, as well as hints about action against John McDonnell, was sending a message that dissent in the Party will not be tolerated.

Rules and conscience

John Prescott and Ian McCartney both tried to say that we couldn't discuss the matter, as it was before the Disputes Panel. Diana Holland insisted that it was an agreed Agenda item, and that was the way she was going to proceed. Then Jeremy Beecham moved Next Business which was carried with only four against - me, Mark, Ann Black, and Steve Pickering (GMB). Dennis Skinner is still convalescing.

Continued page 8

We had to wait for the end of the Agenda, and the Disputes Panel Minutes. Mark then moved Reference Back of the Minutes on the Administrative Suspension. Ann pointed out that the Disputes Panel had merely noted General Secretary's action. The Org Sub then noted their Minutes. She made reference to representing the constituencies which elected her. Prescott interjected that she wasn't there to represent anybody, she's there to follow her conscience, which says a lot about his view of representative democracy and the state of his conscience.

I said that the NEC should be able to discuss it, as this was clearly a special case (like the Livingstone ap-

plication to rejoin) and added that I was opposed to the suspension. Prescott said, "What, before you've heard any evidence?!" I wait to see what kind of "evidence" can be put for or against a charge of bringing the Party into disrepute.

The Chair said we could vote against the Minutes to register opposition to the suspension: We got three votes.

I now intend to write to Mr Triesman asking him to suspend Tony Blair whilst he investigates my complaint that Mr Blair has brought the Party into disrepute over Iraq, and I suggest everybody else does the same.

Ann Black (NEC) Reports Back, 22 July 2003

Tony Blair and John Prescott couldn't attend, so Ian McCartney took questions. He assured us that the prime minister did not "sex up" the Iraq briefings. The BBC allegations were false, and those attacked had every right to defend themselves. We should not try to pre-empt the Hutton enquiry. The Chair Diana Holland expressed condolences on behalf of the NEC to Dr David Kelly's family.

Some members hoped that a single issue, however contentious, would not presage an all-out assault on BBC independence. But Dennis Skinner argued that the media were all too ready to act as the official opposition, and journalists were worse than politicians. In any case, MPs' votes were not influenced by the 45-minute claim. Personally he had felt that copying George Bush by scapegoating Saddam Hussein for September 11 was no reason to send people to their deaths.

Guantanamo Bay

Mark Seddon was concerned about the next war, with George Bush set to rip up agreements with North Korea, and I again raised the plight of the Guantanamo Bay captives, unprotected by any laws on the planet. Ian McCartney said that Tony Blair was trying to get a fair hearing for the British men, but did not mention the captives from other countries. He also drew attention to 300,000 bodies discovered in Iraq's mass graves.

Moving Ahead

Ian stressed that in the run-up to conference, the focus should shift back to fundamental values: strong leadership, economic stability, support for hard-working families, record investment in public services and engagement in Europe. A milestone will be the by-election in Brent East. Christine Shawcroft asked about local involvement in the selection. She was assured that constituency officers were fully involved in composing the long-list and drawing up questions for shortlisting, though the constitution did not allow them a vote.

Outsiders?

On 7 July the Disputes Panel agreed by 6 votes to 4 to refer George Galloway's case to the National Constitutional Committee. I voted against, in line with feedback from members, but it is now out of the hands of the NEC. The hearing will be in October, and

the NCC decision will be final. Looking to next May, many activists are campaigning for Ken Livingstone's re-election as mayor, and I said it was hard to tell members in Oxford, Glasgow or elsewhere that they must not vote Green, Socialist Alliance or Independent, when an entire region was ignoring the rulebook. Ian McCartney admitted that support for non-Labour candidates caused difficulties. Referenda on regional government were also generating problems, with some anti-devolution Labour MPs joining Tories in calling for a No vote.

Election looming

Ian is already planning the next general election, and every constituency will soon be offered a visiting MP to talk, and to listen. New candidates are being interviewed for the parliamentary panel, ready for selection in the autumn. The NEC agreed all-women shortlists for Blaenau Gwent and Swansea East, with an open selection in Bridgend. Further vacancies will be considered in line with policy that all late-retiring MPs should be replaced by women save in exceptional circumstances.

Positive action in local government is getting a mixed reception on the ground. The NEC's principles are intended to be applied flexibly, so a council area would be expected to have women as one-third of its candidates overall, rather than requiring one woman in every ward.

Changing the rules

Two rule changes for Conference provoked lively debate. The first concerned the make-up of the Clause V meeting which agrees the general election manifesto. At one time this consisted of the NEC plus the Cabinet, but recently it has included the Parliamentary Committee, elected by backbenchers. This arrangement would be formalised, with the addition of any National Policy Forum officers not already present. Some union and constituency representatives were unhappy because their influence would be further diluted by MPs.

The second was a proposal to allow people in Northern Ireland to join the party. This has always been rejected in the past because of conflicts with our sister party the SDLP, but an upcoming court case alleging racial discrimination leaves us, in the eyes of our lawyers, with no choice. However there is no

intention to organise or to stand candidates there.

Please contact

Questions and comments are welcome, and I am happy for this to be circulated to members as a personal account, not an official record.

This and past reports are available at <http://www.annblack.com/> Ann Black, 88 Howard Street, Oxford OX4 3BE, 01865-722230, ann.black@unisonfree.net

● Fuller version available on request from CLPD, 10 Park Drive, London NW11 7SH.

Labour Party
Annual Conference 2003 Bournemouth

CLPD - Labour Reform Fringe Meeting
Conference Assessment
– the Way Ahead
Thursday 2nd October
12.30 - 2.00pm
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Bournemouth International Hotel
6 Priory Road, West Cliff

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Ann Black (Labour Reform)
Billy Hayes (CWU)
Gaye Johnston, (Save The Labour Party)
Mark Seddon (Editor, Tribune)
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