
CAMPAIGN

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for labour party democracy

Leadership — Let Conference Decide

“New Labour” policies are costing us dear. In the June council elections the party lost 490 seats ending up with a share of the votes of 26%, trailing 1% behind LibDems and 10% behind the Tories. Despite Livingstone’s readmission into the party, Labour’s representation in the London Assembly was further reduced from 9 to 7 and, as a result, the Mayor’s problems may increase. In the election to the European Parliament our share of the vote fell from 28 to 22.5%. In the opinion polls the Prime Minister’s popularity is plummeting. Party membership now is probably only half that of 1997. The loss of the ‘safe’ Brent East seat last September foreshadowed a major shift of support away from Labour. Yet instead of setting alarm bells ringing, it was glibly dismissed not just by members of the government, but also by many Labour activists, as no more than the “usual” mid-term blues. There are signs, that the latest electoral setbacks will be treated in the same way.

Clutching at straws

Possibly Labour will to some extent recover from its present unpopularity. Precedents of unpopular governments reviving are being bandied around. The reason why things are not even worse is the lack of credibility of the two main opposition parties. However, it would be foolish to rely on Michael Howard and Charles Kennedy to rescue an unpopular Labour government. After all, there are other precedents. Harold Wilson’s government returned in 1966 with an overall majority of 97, found itself in 1970, much to Wilson’s and the pollsters’ surprise, replaced by Edward Heath’s government with a majority of 25. In 1992 a Conservative government would have almost certainly been defeated had not John Major replaced an unpopular Thatcher.

No longer an asset

The Prime Minister’s negative personal poll rating far exceeds Labour’s present low one. He is blamed for our involvement in Iraq. It was his belief that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, and his hints that he had compelling evidence of this, which persuaded the majority of Labour MPs to give him their support. Given the chance, Dr Blick’s inspectors could have established that the WMD were non-existent: there was no need for a war.

The Indictment

Iraq, however, is not the sole reason for Blair’s and Labour’s unpopularity. The 2001 election was largely won on the voters’ expectation that the 1997 promises on the domestic front would be honoured in the second term. The outcome of the elections indicates that people feel that this has not happened. This feeling was reflected at recent Annual Conferences when resolutions critical of the role of private companies in the public services were carried against the leadership’s advice and a leadership-sponsored resolution in favour of foundation hospitals was defeated.

Still frightened to rock the boat?

However, Labour Conferences generally have been extremely supportive of the government. If the way CLP delegates vote at Conference is anything to go by, most of the active members have accepted their exclusion from playing any part in Labour policy making. At the last year’s Conference a proposed rule change to ensure that CLPs be given the right to get four “contemporary” motions debated was carried due to the support of trade union delegates. Only one third of CLP delegates voted for it. Yet most unions have also accepted the constraints

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which have also been imposed on them by the *Partnership in Power* rule changes, rushed through the 1997 Conference in the wake of Labour's victory. Eighteen years of Tory rule produced an atmosphere of despair in which members came to believe the "New Labour" story that democracy produces disunity and that this makes Labour unelectable.

Dawning realisation

But the delusion that withdrawal from politics is the necessary price of victory is disappearing. For several years party members have obediently restricted themselves to "on-message"-speak. Despite this, the possibility of a Labour defeat has become a reality. Concentrating power in the hands of the Party Leader has led to mistakes which would have been avoided had democratic rights not been severely curtailed. Members are beginning to see, rather late, that our leader has become an electoral liability. Leaders of two major unions have now publicly stated that the government's policies are failing working people. But even this dawning realisation may be long drawn out, as demonstrated at the recent UNISON conference. On the one hand the conference called for a "radical manifesto", on the other it rejected the means by which such a manifesto could become a reality: it defeated a motion calling on the Prime Minister to resign. The Prime Minister has a record of ignoring the Conference decisions of his own party. He is unlikely to be swayed by mere appeals from affiliated organizations.

What is to be done?

But Party members can deal with the leadership problem. Not all the democratic rights provided by the Labour Party constitution have disappeared. Conference has the power to initiate a leadership election by invoking Section 4B.2d (ii) of the National Rules of the Labour Party. This reads as follows:

"When the PLP is in government and the leader and/or deputy leader are prime minister and/or in the Cabi-

net, an election shall proceed only if requested by a majority of party conference on a card vote."

A CLP or an affiliated organization can use a contemporary or an emergency motion to ask Conference to activate the above provision. Under Section A Conference rule 2 3C2.3

"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 [Conference Arrangements Committee] shall determine whether the motions meet these criteria and submit all issues received to a priorities ballot at the start of conference..."

For a subject to meet the conditions specified in this rule CLPs and affiliated organizations must ensure that their contemporary motion demanding that the rule 4B.2d (ii) be activated must refer to an event relevant to the motion's demand. In addition the event must have occurred after the last NPF meeting (ie after 25 July) and before the closing date for contemporary motions. Only if this were the case would the Conference Arrangements Committee consider motions on this topic as eligible for a priorities ballot. To be considered by Conference a composite resolution based on these motions would need to have significant support if it is to be chosen for debate.

Never a right time

There is on-going speculation in the media, at Westminster and in the Party about whether Tony Blair will resign. If he were to resign the NEC would ask the PLP for nominations, then there could be either a leadership contest or, if he were the sole nominee, his leadership would just be reaffirmed. If he chose not to resign and the present uncertainty continues, it could only be ended by a Conference decision to hold a leadership election. Either way it is time time Conference reasserted its sovereignty.

Members should not allow themselves to be swayed by the argument that this is not the right time because the next election will be held next May. In fact the election can be held any time before June 2006.

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Hain-ous crimes

Currently the party leadership is reviewing the *Partnership in Power* policy making framework. Peter Hain in his pamphlet *“The Future Party”* (Catalyst Paper 9) rejects the vision of the Party *“as a cartel, dominated by an elite”*. He does identify a belief among members that the policy forum system was intended to neuter rather than empower the membership.

However the reforms he suggests fail to address the question of the leadership’s monopoly of policymaking. And he doesn’t confront the problems which led to the government’s disastrous policies.

Top Down

The first is the lack of direct input into policymaking. It is a “top-down”, not a “bottom-up” process. CLPs and affiliated organisations only have the right to make suggestions (“submissions”) to the National Policy Forum (NPF). Hain proposes that *“where feasible, all major issues should be referred to the NPF for consultation”*.

He seems to be suggesting that such consultation should be a political practice not a binding rule. But consulting the NPF is no substitute for decision-making by members. Instead of “consultation” and so-called consensus we need to have votes.

Accepting the status quo

Hain accepts the New Labour framework of policymaking. He fails to consider the proposal currently gaining momentum, that CLPs and the unions should have the right to submit amendments to NPF documents directly to Conference.

He advocates reducing the minimum number of votes required to adopt a “minority position” on the NPF from 35 to 25 (which would be an improvement). But policy initiative would still be in the hands of an elite, not the grassroots.

Why should CLPs and affiliated organisations rely on an NPF minority to present Conference with policy choices when they are perfectly able to formulate them themselves?

Other Hain “reforms” are trifling — e.g. he recommends an “audit trail” so that policy proposals accepted by the NPF can be more clearly credited to CLPs and unions who made them. Direct input would in fact be more participatory and would remove the need for an “audit trail”.

Who’s accountable?

The second problem with policy-making is that there is no accountability in the Party these days. Labour’s leaders are not bound by the NPF-Conference decisions. The complicated NPF system hides the reality that Labour’s policies don’t emanate from Party Conference or the NPF, but from Downing Street. Conference policies not to the

leadership’s liking — as on PFI, foundation hospitals and pensions — are disregarded as contrary to the Messianic wisdom of our Prime Minister.

Lessons from the past

Hain does not confront the problem of the over-mighty leader. Previous Labour Prime Ministers saw their function mainly as that of a broker. They sought to develop tolerance between members who broadly shared the same aims even though they may have differed about the means. Differences were settled by agreement to abide by majority decisions. There were also important institutional constraints.

The leadership was obliged to incorporate into the Party programme Conference decisions passed by a two-thirds majority.

Today the misnamed Partnership in Power procedures largely prevent alternative policies from reaching the Conference floor, giving the Prime Minister a free hand as the leader of a faction.

The solution is cutting the leader down to size, by making conference decisions more binding and replacing personal rule with a collective team accountable to democratically elected Party representatives.

Lip service to the link

Finally, Hain discusses the relationship with the unions. He pontificates that *“we must make it crystal clear that any proposal to extend public funding of political parties is not a backdoor route to ending the link with the trade unions”*. Nevertheless he recommends *“extending public funding to finance the grassroots organisation of parties, policy development and political education and training”*.

He proposes that campaign work would remain funded by individual and union donations. However, once the principle of state funding is conceded, it is likely to be extended to the financing of election campaigns. This would make the Party less dependant on the unions, less accountable to them, and therefore even less likely to improve the lot of working people.

Hain justifies this with the mystifying argument that *“without adequate financial resources, the links between political parties and wider civil society begin to break down”*. In fact it’s state funding which will insulate the Party from society: we will never increase the accountability of Labour’s representatives to individual or affiliated members if the Party is no longer reliant on them.

A fraud?

In sum, Hain’s pamphlet is a con. He tries to fool us with proposals that only pretend to undermine the leadership’s monopoly on policymaking but which would in reality preserve it.

Labour Party Conference 2004

Support constitutional amendments submitted by CLPs

Last year quite a number of CLPs chose a proposal for a rule change as their one Conference motion. Under present procedures proposed rule changes are published the year they are submitted but debated and voted on the following year.

Of those coming up this year the most important is the proposal that as an alternative to submitting a contemporary motion or a rule change, CLPs and affiliated organizations should be allowed to submit one amendment to the material set out in the final stage of the National Policy Forum documents.

This proposal was submitted last year by several CLPs, and, if carried would significantly increase the CLPs' and affiliated organisations' right to an input into Labour's rolling programme.

This would go some way to deal with the restrictions on the individual and affiliated members say imposed by the *Partnership in Power* rule changes introduced in 1997.

Alternative views lose out

Most policy proposals are decided at the National Policy Forum where CLPs and affiliated organizations are under-represented. In theory support from about 35 NPF delegates (out of 176) for a minority position is needed for this to be presented to annual conference. The fact that the NPF has so far produced hardly any such "minority positions" reflects the unrepresentative composition of the NPF.

It's hard to get support for amending the party's constitution. However, after years of campaigning last year's Conference voted for a rule change which now enables at least eight subjects, chosen by CLPs and affiliated organizations, to be debated by Conference. Previously only four or exceptionally five were allowed.

This change was won in the face of determined opposition from the leadership.

We reproduce (right) the full text of the proposed rule change.

We hope your CLP's or union's delegation will support it.

Direct amendments at conference to NPF documents

Proposed Draft Constitutional Amendment

The Labour Party Rule Book 2003, Section A, Chapter 3 – Party Conference, Subsection 3C Procedural rules for party conference, Conference rule 2 – Agenda

Paragraph 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

Add at end: "In a year when conference is considering the final stage documents from the National Policy Forum, and as an alternative to submitting either a motion (as defined in this subsection) or a constitutional amendment, CLPs and affiliated organizations may submit, for debate and voting at Conference, one amendment to the material set out in the final stage document."

Please note that the reference to the proposed rule change (3C2.3) is taken from a rule book of a previous year but remains the same. The text of the paragraph was amended in the current (2004) rule book.

Visit the CLPD website at www.clpd.org.uk

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