

Democratic Renewal for Labour: a practical proposal

An elected chair to start a renewal process

THERE is widespread concern at the poor state of the Labour Party's grassroots organisation. With a general election perhaps likely next year the Conservatives now boast that their membership is greater than those of Labour and the Liberal Democrats combined. Labour suffers from two critical problems. Its membership has halved over the past six years since the peak of 407,000 in 1997. Worse, the remaining members and union activists are increasingly reluctant to work for a Government they have difficulty in identifying with.

The National Executive Committee has the constitutional responsibility to maintain the party throughout the country. There is growing concern that, not only does the NEC fail to discharge its responsibilities, it is also not able to secure the information to enable it to do so. It was reported in the spring that the NEC had yet to receive Labour's membership figure for December 2003.

Anyone who enquired about the current membership figure was given the December 2002 total. This was 248,294, already well down on the 265,000 members Labour had when Tony Blair became leader. Apparently, the NEC was not to be told the current figure because it would be leaked to the press. The crisis at the grassroots forced the truth into the open. The Guardian reported on August 3rd that the membership was 190,000. Problems are not confined to the disastrous decline in membership. Groups such as Labour Reform and Save the Labour Party receive increasing reports of iniquitous meetings and activities being neglected, and union members reluctant to work for Labour. It is reported that there is a lack of candidates for local elections. The difficulties in securing the membership figures tells its own story of a party machine failing to do its job and an NEC unable to control it.

The leadership's strategy appears to be to keep the lid on the situation, hoping that enough members will work in the General Election to deliver victory. This gamble could go disastrously wrong, though we urge party members to work hard for victory. However it is clear from the European elections and by-elections that elections are proving increasingly difficult to fight. It is vital to work for Labour to win the next election, but the long term future of the Party is not secured even by a Labour victory, if there are fundamental problems.

Any attempt to rely on loyalty to cover over serious problems will fail. A better approach would be to admit there are problems, engage in an honest debate and enact remedial measures to tackle the disillusionment and cynicism in Labour's ranks. Currently there are two chairs, a situation which is untenable and demands reform by creating one chair, democratically elected.

HOWEVER, to do this would mean confronting the underlying failures of the party leadership, in particular the inability of the NEC to discharge its responsibilities to maintain the Party grassroots and provide strategic direction.

Strategic direction has been handed over to the leader, while maintaining the grassroots cannot be dealt with by an NEC now only meeting bi-monthly and whose Chair has no power. In consequence, party members have no effective representation on these key matters.

The need is for a post holder elected by and responsible to ordinary members with the specific task of asserting their interests. At the moment, neither of the existing chairs has this as their remit. There is a constitutionally-valid position of chairing the NEC. There is also a chair chosen by the leader. This appointment has no constitutional standing but considerable power — especially over the National Policy Forum which this chair does. The leader has created this post without approval from the Party, setting it up even though the NEC has a chair, and the post has no constitutional basis.

This position is controlled by patronage and the lack of democratic credentials have rendered it ineffective in handling Labour's membership crisis. It is time to re-assert democratic principles and elect the party chair by a process involving party members or their elected representatives.

The NEC argues that rules allow party committees to elect their own chairs. The NEC cannot rely on rules which allow a largely honorific chair without power. The rapid rotation of chairs further weakens the position in the face of the non-elected chair. The NEC chair has no real authority or standing in the Party.

Electing the chair will not, by itself, resolve Labour's grassroots crisis. It would, however, be a clear indication that the party has accepted that it has serious problems in maintaining its constituency base and that it will act to respond. While the post would need to focus as a priority on organisational and financial issues, it would have a clear democratic message: that Labour's membership will have a representative with a mandate to deal with their concerns.

Tribune 14th May 2004 said
"...it is time to re-assert democratic principles and elect the chair by a process open to scrutiny and controlled by members or their elected representatives..."

The 2004 Conference will give a chance to do just this. A rule change to create a single position of chair and to have it elected by members is to be voted on. This is a key moment at which the decline of the membership can be rolled back and democratic principle put back into Labour's affairs.

New Labour copied the Tories in having a Party Chair chosen by the leader. The patronage system weakens the party while the existing system of running the NEC does not work. The NEC chair lacks the democratic clout to be effective.

The Rule Change is Clause VII/1B Chair/Vchair "Insert: 'There shall be a chair and vice chair of the party elected by delegates at the party conference each year by electoral college. CLPs have 50% of the votes and affiliated organisations shall have 50% of the votes...'"

All delegates are asked to Support the Manchester Central rule change. More details on the campaign for an elected chair from OS, P0 Box 2028, Stafford ST16 3WA or www.savethelabourparty.org

