

SAVE THE LABOUR PARTY

Has Labour a future without the Party on the Ground?

An STLP Paper
By Dr Gaye Johnston

The views in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of STLP or its members

Dr Gaye Johnston is a founder member of Save the Labour Party. She was elected to its national committee in an all members' postal ballot and is currently its National Secretary. She is also Political Education Officer for Hyndburn Constituency Labour Party

Gaye holds a PhD in politics and public services management and also gained an MA and social work qualifications. She works as a Principal Lecturer and leads an MSc programme in Health and Social Services Management at St Martin's University College, Lancaster. She is also a visiting lecturer in Health Management at the University of Helsinki Medical School.

Gaye was a Labour Parliamentary Candidate in three marginal constituencies during the 1970s and 1980s: Cleveland and Whitby, Langbaugh and Swindon. She is also a former Labour Councillor and Vice-Chair of the Housing Committee in Darlington. Her partner, Terry Johnston, is a former full-time Labour Party organiser and was agent for the Darlington by-election victory in 1983.

HAS LABOUR A FUTURE WITHOUT THE PARTY ON THE GROUND?

1. Introduction

There has been a growing chorus of voices from the Labour grassroots and trades unions calling for the reclamation of the Labour Party for its affiliated and individual members. There are bodies such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, Labour Reform and Scottish Campaign for Socialism. Latterly, Save the Labour Party (STLP), Welsh Labour Grassroots, and the newly launched Labour Representation Committee have joined them. Meanwhile the Party has continued to lose many members. At the end of December 2003 Labour membership stood at 214,952, more than 30,000 down on the previous December (Woodcock, 2004). This figure accords with the results of a survey done by Save the Labour Party in December 2003, as applied to official (year old) data released by Party Headquarters. Both show that individual membership was at its lowest since the 407,000 recorded at the peak of New Labour's popularity in 1997. Woodcock also reported that the National Executive Committee (NEC) was briefed on 29/6/04 that the total membership had fallen further to around 208,000 early this year.

In the last year there have been internal consultations instigated by Party HQ about the future of the Labour party relating to the "21st Century Party" document and the Partnership In Power constitutional changes. There will be an in camera review of the latter in the near future. Peter Hain M.P. Leader of the House of Commons recently wrote a pamphlet, published by the left-wing think tank Catalyst, (Hain, 2004) which proposes the shape of the future of the Labour Party. This is a well researched document which includes some refreshingly honest insights about the contemporary state of the Party on the ground, but many of the remedies proposed merely tinker with the shortcomings of the current methods of operation and are unlikely to provide sufficiently radical remedies for the problems diagnosed. These need deeper consideration.

Political Parties can be seen to have three component parts (Mair, 1994) the Party in Office (comprising Government and Parliament), the Party Central Office (and related administration) and the Party on the Ground (the individual and affiliated membership outside the first two entities). **The Labour Party's most pressing**

contemporary problem is that whilst the first two are, to a large extent, flourishing the latter is in severe decline. But each of these sections of the Party needs the other in order to be viable. The Party on the Ground is declining because it is not receiving an appreciable share of the resources from the other two. Their view of the situation seems to be that the Party on the Ground is expected to do all the giving and virtually none of the taking. It is therefore not surprising that people have left the Party in droves and that participation in local meetings, and most policy forums and conferences is very low.

The paper will be divided into five further sections. Section 2 will contain a diagnosis of the problems currently besetting the Party. Section 3 will discuss some of the common aims, which could be accepted by all sections of the Party for its future conduct. Section 4 will look at the requirements of the Party in Office (Government, Parliaments and Central office). Section 5 will examine the requirements of Party members if they are to be recruited, retained and re-activated and Section 6 will draw conclusions and present some proposals for the future survival of the Party as a whole.

2. The Hollowing Out of the Party on the Ground

The Labour Party on the Ground has been in serious decline. A major indicator of this decline is the massive loss of individual membership. In 1997 the Party membership stood at 407,000. We now know that since Tony Blair was appointed Prime Minister, Labour has lost nearly 50% of its members. According to a Labour Party spokesman it fell further in the first half of 2004, but has recently stabilised. Party HQ attributes this to efforts lead by Deputy Leader John Prescott to encourage members who had failed to renew their subscription to actually pay up. The most recent losses appear to reflect protest against the war in Iraq.

STLP sought statements from people who have left the Party. By far the most common reason for quitting was the nature of Government policies especially the war in Iraq. For example:

“ I am an ex-parachutist in the 6th Airborne Division and know about killing. I simply can't believe that Mr Blair can so lie and connive to kill human beings. Honest Tony has become a macabre joke among my friends of all political persuasions.”

And another leaver said:

“The Iraq war seemed to me to be profoundly immoral, so I began to look for a new political home”.

Other policies were also cited as being decisive for instance:

"Labour Government (Tory) policies that produced many indirect taxes instead of the more just (and moral) increase in income tax"

" The treatment of pensioners---- a means testing nightmare rather than an adequate level of pensions with the claw back, through taxation, from those who are better off."

The second most common reason was the New Labour Leadership:

"Spin---- or downright lies as policy. The words "I reject" instead of reasoned argument" and

" [By] leaving the Party I hoped that my departure, and that of others I knew, would have some impact on the Leadership and that lessons would be learned."

Mention was also made of the Labour Party having ceased to be a democratic Party.

STLP has continued to monitor membership trends. There are signs of a slight increase in the three months to the end of March. What remains uncertain is the impact of the Iraq War on Labour's membership. There are two key dates - the actual level of fully paid-up membership as at the end of 2003, and the end of June 2004. It is not until then that people who failed to renew their membership at the beginning of 2004 can no longer be counted as members. The slight increase asserted by the General Secretary (Letter from Matt Carter to STLP 25/5/04) is very recent, small-scale and the trend may not continue. This trend may be partly due to a letter from the Leader to lapsed members urging them to re-join. However it is probably due also to recent campaigns by Labour Against the War, STLP, the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups and some trades unions, to persuade people to re-join in order to help to reclaim the Party from within. Evidence is given for this latter point by two testimonies received by STLP. This evidence also shows that those who have rejoined may not stay if things do not improve.

Someone who left in 2000:

" -to some extent I felt guilty that I was not in the Party trying to influence a change of policy- I decided to re-join in December 2003 and to try again to work from the inside.---- I am not encouraged by what I find."

Another who left and returned during 2004 said:

“ I decided to return to the Labour Party--- there certainly seems to be nothing in the way of an acceptable and viable alternative for democratic socialists. Since the Labour Party is our only possible political home we must do whatever we can to make it the broadly based democratic organisation that this country needs”.

What has happened to the Party on the Ground since 1997 gives grave cause for concern. It is bound to impair campaigning in elections and may partly explain why the turnout in the 2001 General Election (59%) was the lowest since that in 1918. Research conducted by Whiteley and Seyd (2000) on the 1997 general election campaign showed campaigning on the ground made a significant difference. One of their conclusions was an estimate that if no local campaigning had been done in the 1997 general election campaign then Labour's majority would have been 33 instead of 178. The Guardian (12/4/04 p.1) reported that Ian McCartney, the Party Chair, had "raised the problem of lack of local campaigners at national Party strategy meetings". In his pamphlet, from which some of the data in this paper is drawn, Peter Hain (Hain, 2004) estimates that only about 10% of Party members are active in campaigning on a regular basis. What remains uncertain is the impact of Labour being back in government, and local councillors now being paid regularly on what might be described as the size of the payroll vote - members whose livelihood depends on being a party member.

Loss of members must have severely impaired the ability of the Party to raise funds through them. Income from members is legitimate, compared with the dubious nature of the income obtained from some private sources (as in the Ecclestone and Powderjacket cases). Decline of funding from members (and trades unions) may be one of the driving forces currently inclining the government to seek a major extension of state funding for political parties. That could well marginalise and further disempower both individual members and the trades unions and other affiliated bodies.

Participation in local Party meetings and Annual Conference has also slumped.

Branch meetings are often inquorate and attendance at CLP General Management Committees has reduced. Hain (2004) quotes several testimonies from Party members evidencing this problem.

Under the Partnership in Power changes party conference has lost most of its policy-making power and become little more than a

political rally. Webb (1994, p.119) asserted that: "The [Labour] Party constitution confirms the sovereignty of Conference".

However after the enactment of the Partnership in Power changes Ann Black (1998, p.26) contended that, as a consequence:

" Conference becomes a showcase for party and government, with ministerial speeches, question- and- answer sessions, workshops, votes on portmanteau documents, all of which will be overwhelmingly carried, and a few carefully chosen resolutions. There will be videos and there will be balloons."

Fewer CLPs are sending delegates to Conference. The Party Central Office refused to release figures (response from David Triesman, then General Secretary to a question from Christine Shawcroft at a National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting in November 2003). However after pressure they later revealed that 518 delegates from 499 constituencies did attend.

Partnership in Power, with all its local and national effects, has drastically reduced the participation of ordinary Labour Party members in policy-making with consequent demoralisation. Hain (2004, p. 23) accepts that:

" – as a point of principle members must be involved in policy-making. But, in reality, many of them feel marginalised, and the Partnership in Power framework is losing credibility".

A strong Party membership is vital in order to legitimise public perceptions. Research in Sweden (Pierre and Widfeldt, 1994) showed parties continue to rely on credible membership levels to maintain at least the *image* of a mass party and as proof that they are seen as viable channels for political representation.

Loss of individual membership and activity is only one aspect of the hollowing out of the Party. The composition of the membership seems to be unrepresentative of our society as a whole and even of Labour voters. In a more recent study Seyd and Whiteley (2002) found that 60% of Party members were male and a high percentage were graduates aged over 40. The obvious implication being that women, young people and those without a higher education were under-represented. So much for Ralph Milliband's aspiration (Milliband, 1972) that Labour should become the hegemonic party to provide the all-embracing ideological and cultural home for the domestic working class.

Some of this is not new. Ken Livingstone (1990) deplored prevalent male chauvinism in the Party and blamed both successive Party leaders and the rank and file male membership alike. Despite the increased number of Labour women MPs since 1997 there is evidence that women's active membership of the Party on the Ground has decreased. Two women who attended the National Women's conference held in Manchester in March 2004 reported at a fringe meeting that only 70 women were present.

In respect of young people, it is a *sine qua non* that if they continue to be under-represented in the Party, to the extent found by Seyd and Whitley (2002), in 40 years' time the Party on the ground will be all but dead. Hain (2004 p.33) quotes a young Party member as saying:

" I think as far as younger people are concerned, a lot of younger people have become much more politicised, which is good in lots of ways, but they don't see it as relevant to be joining a political party"

The majority of them see little point in voting either. Less than 40% of 18-25 year olds voted in the 2001 general election (House of Commons Library, 2003). This is likely to be reflected in disinclination to join a party. Some tabloids reported at the time that a higher percentage of this age group voted in Channel 4's Big Brother TV programme than voted in the general election! The introduction of top- up fees, against which the National Union Students has campaigned, will hardly have encouraged young people in higher education to vote Labour or to join the Party

Hain (2004) did not mention the Party membership of ethnic minority groups. Ken Livingstone (1990p.112) criticised the Party's unwelcoming attitude to black members and their interests and lamented that the Leadership, in the 1980s, conducted

:

" - an unrelenting, wasteful and thoroughly divisive war against the black sections."

The author has been an active Labour Party member, and/or campaigned, in numerous elections in several North West towns with significant ethnic minority populations (up to 8.3%) since 1988. Her impression is of an under-representation of ethnic minority members in the active and armchair party membership. Whatever the situation up to the end of 2002, it is a safe bet that many Muslims will have left the Party since then. Research by Miller and Hussain (2004) showed Muslim support for Labour was as high as 73% in the 2001 general election but fell back to 27% in

the Scottish Parliament elections in 2003. The loss of the Brent by-election in September 2003 has also been attributed to the defection of local Muslims. In the June 2004 local elections in Accrington's Central Ward (previously a safe Labour seat), a Muslim Labour councillor lost to a Muslim Tory candidate who was fighting on an anti-Iraq war platform!

Perhaps worst of all the Party is not representative of Labour voters. Webb (1994) pointed out that in Britain as a whole a decreasing proportion of party supporters are party members and at that time the Labour Party was losing both members and voters.

In the general election of 2001, only one in 40 Labour voters were Party members contrasted with 1 in 15 in 1951 (Richards, 2003). There is also the issue of the trades unions. Webb (1994 p.110,) opined that throughout the history of the Labour Party it had been dominated by "coalitions of union and parliamentary elites." – No longer- Hain (2004, p.40) conceded that:

" In government, Labour has tended to treat the unions as 'embarrassing relatives', at best maintaining a cool distance and at worst seeming to pick deliberate fights. We have also often failed to consult the unions on key areas of policy".

Many trades unions have either reduced their contributions to the Labour Party, or at the behest of their Conferences, are considering doing so. The RMT, one of our founding unions, has been expelled from the Labour Party as it permitted some of its Scottish branches to affiliate to the Scottish Socialists. The FBU has also left. Many trades' unionists are concerned that an extension of state funding for political parties would further diminish their influence and participation. This is clearly an unhappy state of affairs for the whole Party.

We appear again to have reached a situation that was described by (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992p.202) as a "de-energized party" in which there are a number of indicators of a decline in activism including an increased number of inquorate branch meetings and a fall in the number of resolutions tabled at annual conference. However because of the draconian restrictions permitting only a tiny number of contemporary and emergency resolutions this is no longer a valid test but the number of CLPs represented at Conference would be. The existence of a serious contemporary problem with the Labour Party – particularly the Party on the Ground - is well evidenced.

3. What everyone in the Labour Party (should) want

There is probably little argument that all those Labour members in the Party in Government, the Party Central Office and the Party on the Ground would want certain basic outputs and outcomes from the Party's future operations.

These would surely include a resounding victory for Labour in all future elections especially the next general election. We do not want to return to the situation described by Ann Black (1998 p.25)

"Past Labour Conferences have provided a week long spectacle for the media and, through them, the nation. At worst they have been ugly, divisive and damaging; at best, cliff-hanging suspense with the Leader coming through victorious in the final act"

However, most members of the Party on the Ground would probably wish to see more accountability and transparency on the part of the leadership and the Parliamentary Party. This will need to be assured through mature, and well-informed debate.

Most people in all sections of the Party probably desire "traditional Labour values in a modern setting". They want a growing and active party membership and trades union participation on the basis of real involvement in policy-making and democratic structures within the Party. This would enhance the effectiveness of Party campaigning. For example, a postal vote campaign run by the affiliated trades unions in the 2001 election made trades unionists more likely to turn out and to vote Labour when they did so (Ludlam et al, 2002).

A mass membership, even the one million or more individuals members as desired by the party leadership from Neil Kinnock onwards (Webb, 1994) would give the Party added legitimacy (Pierre and Widfeldt, 1994) and would probably make its composition more reflective of the electorate and in touch with its views.

Finally it is to be hoped that all sections of the Party would want there to be a clear, qualitative and ideological difference between the values and programme of our Party and that of other UK parties –particularly the Conservative Party.

It seems a reasonable assumption that all sections of the Party would want to see a continuation of what have clearly been successful policies and achievements of the Labour Government

since 1997. Amongst these must be included the successful management of the economy (now the fourth largest in the world) which has, eventually, permitted much increased spending on public services in the mode advocated by Tony Crosland (Crosland, 1982). The other great achievement has been the attainment of full employment since the millennium. Neil Kinnock (1986 p.37) said that:

“A society in which a high level of unemployment is the normal state of affairs is a society without true freedom or fairness...The reduction of the level of unemployment is the pre-dominant aim of the Labour Party and will be the over-riding aim of the next Labour Government.”

The national minimum wage has been universally welcomed within the Party and has not led to the loss of jobs predicted, in advance of its introduction, by big business. Measures have been introduced to address poverty in working families through the working families tax credit and the child tax credit. Children’s welfare has also been addressed through baby bonds and Sure Start. Most people also welcome a commendable record in international development, which has included a 93% increase in the overseas aid budget since the 1997 general election (Labour e-News 3/6/04).

But some of these achievements have been made at a heavy cost - notably the Chancellor’s adherence to the Tory spending plans for three years after 1997. Private Finance Initiatives were instigated by the Tories and carried on under New Labour. Taxpayers pay the price for subsidising big business. Together with Best Value exercises in local government, they have often worsened the pay and conditions of service of many former public sector workers (Sanchdev, 2004). The National Minimum wage has always been set too low and there is a controversial lower rate for young people-the very group that Labour needs to cultivate. Despite the high rate of employment many people find themselves in low paid and insecure service jobs and the UK has the longest average weekly working hours in Europe. Arguably the family tax credits encourage employers to pay low wages.

What we need is a coherent new set of explicit democratic socialist values, which underpin a strategic policy plan (Johnson and Scholes, 1993), which sets out our overall vision and priorities to take the Labour Party and Government into the next decade.

It is clearly difficult to have such a set of values when there is a deliberate attempt, on the part of the Leadership, to avoid all ideology at all costs and to rule by pragmatism.

Leadership is supposed to be about the having the “helicopter factor” - the ability to rise above the particulars of a situation and perceive it in its relationship to the overall environment (Handy, 1998). Yet the function of the New Labour Governments seems to have been to try to administer and manage the existing public services effectively rather than to lead and develop new policies and services. It has followed in Margaret Thatcher’s footsteps in expanding managerialism, viz: the introduction of private sector management methods into the public sector (Clarke and Newman, 1997) and has increased wholesale privatisation (as in the case of the National Air Traffic Control System) and partial privatisation (as in the introduction of some privately run diagnostic and treatment centres in to the NHS).

The time now seems right for the whole Party to adopt the vision of a more egalitarian and well-integrated society, in a more just and peaceful world, built on a base of strong and accountable public services and economic, social security and fiscal policies which meet the real needs of all.

The measures discussed in this section should be relatively uncontroversial and are presented as a pre-requisite for a discussion of the respective interests and needs of the three sections of the Party.

4. The needs of the Party in Office and of Party Central Office

Before proceeding with this discussion it is necessary to demonstrate that the Party HQ is primarily the instrument of the Party in Office and that their needs and interests virtually coincide. A clear contemporary example is the appointment of a Party Chair by Tony Blair, inside the Cabinet. This officer owes his position, and the creation of it, entirely to the Leader’s personal patronage. The decision to create and how to fill this post, in its present form, has been with the acquiescence of the Party in central office and the total exclusion of the Party on the ground. We can assume that the interests of the Party in office and the Party in central office in Labour today are virtually synonymous.

What the Party in office wants and needs above all is to remain in government, nationally, locally and in Europe. This is what the Party on the ground also wants. But there is conflict relating to how it should be achieved. The protagonists of the New Labour project have seen the way to obtain and retain office as being through tight, centralised control of the policy-making process and to keep it entirely out of the media spotlight. This has been aligned to the

disenfranchisement of the Party on the ground, which has lost the right to participate in meaningful or transparent policy-making processes.

If it is to remain in office the Party needs good media relations. This is an increasingly tricky assignment in view of the 24 hour TV and radio news coverage, sophistication of the media and the natural pre-disposition of some popular newspapers and news channels to be hostile to the Labour Party. The response of the Party in office should not have been to muzzle the Party on the ground to the extent of removing virtually all its rights in policy-making - lest dissident opinions leak out.

The Party in Office, or rather its Leadership, wants to ensure that its elected representatives, particularly in Parliament, are supportive of, as well as compliant towards the wishes of the Leadership and unlikely to criticise it publicly or vote against its wishes. In one of his Endpiece columns in the Guardian during 2003 Roy Hattersley observed that candidates are now selected because of their "compliance rather than their ability".

Since the mid-1990s the Party in office has manipulated candidate selections in a variety of ways. The most insidious is the un-level playing field syndrome in which one or two candidates favoured by the Party are supplied by the Party HQ with the contact details of all the local Party members about a year ahead of the selection process. This gives them a massive head start in a One Member One Vote (OMOV) selection involving all the Party members and as a result they are often selected. The remaining candidates are not given these details until the actual selection commences and should they obtain them, e.g. from an officer of the local Party, they are officially warned that if they use them they will be disqualified. Of course this unfair practice is not sanctioned by the Party rules. The author was involved as an aspiring candidate, in several selection processes between the mid- 1990s and 2001 in Northern England in which this system was deployed.

During selection of candidates on the regional lists for the European elections in 1999, the selection of those who stood and their ranking on the regional lists was done entirely by a committee convened by Party Central office.

Since the early 1990s the Party in Office/Central Office has had the right to choose the shortlist in parliamentary by-elections through an NEC by-election panel, thus excluding credible, but non-favoured candidates. This has left those they favoured and those they thought could not win. The author was involved in by-election

selection in Yorkshire in 1996 where this misfired and a non-favoured candidate was chosen, but usually the favoured succeed.

Despite a very large parliamentary majority in 1997 and 2001 from which ministers can be chosen the Leadership, on behalf of the Party in office, has increasingly appointed ministers who are not MPs but members of the House of Lords. This has enabled the Leadership to have further options of tame people who have not necessarily done much for the Party as a whole nor been schooled in its norms and values and have not been elected. Past examples include Baroness Amos, Lord MacDonald and Lord Falconer, in his capacity as Minister for the Millennium Dome. The latter never stood for Parliament and once shared a flat with Tony Blair.

Obviously the Party in Office has a right to expect that MPs and other elected representatives will adhere to a code of conduct and not vote against the whip except in clear cases of conscience. The code of behaviour is bound to be stricter in respect of ministers. Equally the Party in office has a right to expect that those who gain elected office should be capable of commanding respect and of enhancing the reputation of the Party and of the conduct of politicians generally. The Party on the Ground has also lost many of its former rights to participate in Party governance. Obviously the Party in Office wishes the Party as a whole to be governed in accordance with its wishes. But this is not necessarily in the interests of the Party as a whole. One example has been the downgrading of the powers of the NEC, which is now effectively excluded from contributing to policy-making. There have been repeated attempts to curb the powers of constituency General Committees by limiting their frequency of meetings and replacing them with non-representative all members meetings

The Party in Office needs income from the Party on the Ground. Members are not the Party's main source of income, but they are an uncontroversial one as far as the public is concerned. An opinion poll conducted for the Electoral Commission in 2003 showed that the public is unhappy about Party funding emanating both from business and private donations and from the trades unions. They were also not in favour of state funding. As Mair (1994p.14) observed:

"Even though membership fees may no longer constitute the main source of party revenue, they nevertheless remain important, and the loss of this income would almost certainly weaken the parties. For this reason alone membership appears to remain an asset."

The Party in Office currently seems to be moving in the direction of increasing state funding. This may not be appealing to the

electorate and could rebound in the ballot box. Further, the funding would go to currently impoverished smaller and minority parties, including the Liberal Democrats, UKIP and BNP. It would give them additional campaigning advantages, which Labour would have to offset from part of its state subventions.

State funding would identify the Party more closely with the state on which it would be then be heavily dependent for income and give it less accountability to civil society (Mair, 1994) let alone to the Party on the Ground including the trades unions.

The Party in Office needs a mass membership on the ground in order to give it a credible image and political legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Pierre and Widfeldt, 1994).

What the Party in Office probably needs most from the Party on the Ground is their efforts in campaigning and mobilising voters during election campaigns. The effectiveness of this operation is demonstrated, in a UK context, in Seyd and Whiteley's (1992 and 2000) research projects and is affirmed by Peter Hain (2004).

5. What the Party on the Ground needs

The Party on the Ground consists largely of voluntary workers who give extensively of their leisure time and money to work for the Party. People joining the Labour Party want to contribute to policy-making, hold elected offices at some level and to be given an equal opportunity to be selected as a candidate or representative and/or to have a real say in choosing candidates.

When Party members are not allowed to achieve their personal goals (in policy-making, meaningful participation or office), when the Leadership de-values them and ignores their views and rights and when the work itself comes to seem worthless because they have no real say and the Party has departed from the principles that attracted them to joining in the first place, then they withdraw their labour and membership.

The Party on the Ground needs to recover what it has lost since the mid-1990s in terms of the opportunities to debate policies in depth, and to have an effective say in policy-making. As Hain (1994) notes if members are unable to see where any contributions they have made (e.g. at local policy forums) have disappeared to then they are bound to think that they have participated in a meaningless and ineffectual symbolic exercise.

Policy forums may provide an opportunity for an interesting academic debate but there is no evidence that their conclusions are heeded

Hain bewails poor attendance at, and disenchantment with, local Branch and General Committee meetings. He attributes this to tedious discussions of business and to arcane and obscure procedures. These may need reform but at least they used to be inter-mixed with debates on policy resolutions. These debates now seldom take place. They have lost their point because they are unlikely to get to any significant policy making process.

Party Conferences at Regional or Sectional level (e.g. for Women) are no longer allowed to vote on resolutions. Thus opportunities for real participation in policy debates have been denied to members in their local groupings. Not surprisingly some regions (e.g. Yorkshire and Humberside) no longer hold a regional conference and attendance at some of the sectional conferences is very low (section 2 above).

In broad terms the National Policy Forum does not debate contemporary policies, but only those that are destined for the next general election manifesto. Policies concerning Foundation Hospitals and Top up fees were rushed through into Party policy documents through the leadership bypassing the NPF.

Conference has little say in relation to policy papers from the NPF. It can only act if the NPF decides to give it a choice. A minority report from the NPF requires 35 votes (just under 20% of its membership) if it is to go forward to Conference. At the end of NPF debates on amendments to the Leadership position proposers get three minutes to speak and ministers get three minutes to reply but the vote on the amendment is taken and announced before these speeches. It is small wonder that some of the constituency places often remain unfilled (Sturgeon and Hurley, 2001).

Even after last year's increase only eight resolutions submitted by the trades unions or constituency parties can be debated at party conference. Those concerning policy can only be contemporary i.e. relating to an event, which takes place in the six weeks leading up to Conference or emergency- even more recently and crisis focused. A high proportion of the delegates each year are first timers and all are pressurised to attend a briefing organised by their Regional Party Office in advance of Conference. Experience suggests that they are influenced very easily by Party Office interests. What the members need is real opportunities to debate on, and influence current and future policies for the Party in Office.

The 2004 local election results have shown that many people in traditional Labour areas are now seeing the Liberal Democrats as the progressive alternative. There is now a vast gap between the policy aspirations of New Labour and those people of many shades of opinion who have joined the Party. It is not the function of this paper to set out an alternative policy programme but clearly the war in Iraq has been a disaster. The Party in Office needs to find an effective settlement through the United Nations and we also need to distance ourselves from the war policy - some may think that that can only be done through a change of Leader.

In 1994 Webb's research in the UK led him to believe that:

" The area of Party activity in which the individual membership have the greatest scope for influence is almost certainly that of candidate selection. In the major parties, the process of selecting candidates for national parliamentary contests has traditionally been dominated by the local party --- moreover, in the case of Labour, the powers of constituency members have actually increased over the past decade or more. Since 1981 all Labour candidates have been subject to mandatory re-selection between general elections." (Webb, 1994 p.120)

Re-selection did increase the accountability and focus the minds of MPs on their responsibility to their local Constituency Labour Party. Since 1997 there have only been one or two actual de-selections so that the probable impact on MPs has greatly diminished. This is partly due to the fact that the "trigger mechanism" procedure makes de-selection more difficult. However, it is also the case that one member one vote (OMOV) may make it easier for sitting MPs to contact and talk round inactive members who are not fully appraised of their poor performance and may be persuaded to opt for postal votes so that they do not hear other candidates at the hustings

At least members continue to have a vote in the election of the Leader and Deputy Leader. However in future it should be easier for all sections of the Party to call Leadership elections if the need arises. Elections to the NEC should be at agreed fixed intervals. Last year's were postponed. The Party must be governed in a transparent manner that is above reproach. The whole Party should also participate in the election of the Party Chair.

It is really vital that efforts are made to step up recruitment of women, younger people and members of ethnic minorities. They have to be given some inspiration and influence in order to

persuade them to join and improved policies to benefit these groups should help. However, some of Peter Hain's suggestions here would be of positive benefit. These include helping people to understand meetings and procedures, organising more social activities for members and running joint events with interest and community groups. Women are much more likely to participate in meetings and campaigning if they can have assistance with childcare.

6. The Way Forward

If the Labour Party is to remain a functioning and credible political party, the relationship between the Party on the Ground and the Party in Office has to be re-engineered. The hallmark of a successful 21st century mainstream political party will be a constructive relationship in government between leadership, head office and members. Members will be at the forefront of reaching out into their communities, enabling common interests to be reflected back into local, regional, national and international policy making.

For a party that swept to power in 1997 on a slogan of education, education, education, the nature of that relationship is clear. It must be one of equals. The challenge for the Party in Office is to recognise the constitutional implications not just for the Party itself, but the country as a whole. The goodwill in the Party on the ground, which welled up so-readily to secure a landslide in 1997, has gone.

Rebuilding it will take time. But it needs to start now if the Party is to secure a viable future.

There are a number of critical tests facing Labour in the run-up to the next General Election.

- 1. How does the Party account for itself?** One of the consequences of Labour's efforts to clean up party politics was the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission, appointed by Parliament. Political parties are no longer just accountable to their members, but to the wider public. The deadline for so-called large political parties to file their Statement of Accounts for 2003 with the newly formed Electoral Commission is 7 July. Disclosure is required not just of party finances, but membership and corporate governance arrangements too. Save the Labour Party has challenged the Party Office to put the draft on the June NEC agenda, and called for publication to members at the same time as the Statement is filed with the Electoral Commission, i.e. no later than 7 July.

2. **Will the Party adopt a manifesto for the next General Election that will command widespread support among activists, as well as supporters and floating voters?**

Signs of recognition of the importance of opportunities for participation in policy-making from the Party on the ground are evident in Peter Hain (2004 pp.30-32). But his suggestions address the future, not the present. In a joint letter to the Guardian, representatives of STLP, Labour Reform, the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, the Campaign for Socialism wrote,

"Peter Hain's bid is sadly too little, too late to ensure Labour goes into the next election with a democratic socialist manifesto backed by party members." Guardian, March 12.

Radical changes in practice at the forthcoming National Policy Forum on 24/25 July will be required to win over increasingly sceptical members. Requests from constituency representatives on the National Executive Committee for open and transparent proceedings at the NPF need to be conceded. The names and contact details of NPF delegates have to be made available to party members to enable mandating and accountability to be established. The NEC agreed a review of Partnership in Power in principle back in January. At the time of writing no official information has been made available to members by the Party Office about terms of references, timescales or membership of the review panels.

3. **Will the 2004 Party Conference be remembered for rekindling interest in mass membership, or what could prove a further blow to activism when the Party in Office is at its most vulnerable?**

Labour lost an opportunity in 2003 to embark on an independent Inquiry into the state of the Party when the Conference Arrangements Committee ruled out of order motions based on a model proposed by Save the Labour Party. No one is seeking a return to the former mode of blood letting in front of the media at Conference, widely seen as contributing to Labour's 18-years in the political wilderness from 1979 to 1997. There is a strong case for improving the governance of the Labour Party by incorporating a formal AGM into the proceedings. This arises from the legislation Labour itself introduced to establish the Electoral Commission, namely the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000. A rule change

would be needed to achieve this. But the NEC still has the power to propose such a reform if it is so minded. More important are going to be the policy debates arising from the National Policy Forum deliberations in July and the opportunity for up to eight separate debates arising from motions (four each) tabled by Trade Unions and Constituency Labour Parties. With a general election supposedly looming in May 2005, immense pressure is going to be felt by the vast majority of delegates to remain loyal to Labour. Whether the platform will understand the distinction between loyalty to Labour and Labour values, as opposed to loyalty to the current style of leadership remains to be seen. The outcome of those debates will be crucial to whether Labour is once again going to be able to attract members and encourage greater activism.

4. **Can rebuilding the Party on the Ground wait until after the next general election?** Recent election results, signal all too clearly the risks to Labour's 3rd term from the absence of eager Party activists on the ground. By-elections can be carried sometimes with campaigns staffed by the payroll vote of elected, but paid, representatives and salaried party officials. But as anyone who has been an election agent knows you need at least 20, preferably 30-40 activists to run a full polling day operation in a local government ward. That adds up to at least 200 in just one parliamentary constituency. Evidence cited above suggests active local parties are vital to 'win hearts and minds'. Election practice increasingly embraces postal voting as a means of increasing voter participation. Advice to Labour agents was that postal votes would benefit Labour more. The outcome of the June 2004 elections supports the contention about turnout. But there was little sign that any particular mainstream political party enjoyed the benefits. Reviving a culture of active party political discussion is a longer-term project in its own right. But in order to restart that process the Party in Office needs the Party on the ground. For the next general election that process, as suggested above, has to be clearly consolidated at Annual Conference in September 2004. A programme of political education is needed right through until the next election to encourage Branch Labour Parties to engage with communities at the ward level. Restoring delegate conferences for local government, women and Young Labour in 2005 ahead of a general election campaign could usefully reinforce this. This would be seen as a bold act of political

maturity by Labour keen to win a 3rd term free of the control freaks that blighted Labour during its 2nd term in office.

5. How can members be encouraged to feel they matter?

This is a challenge for all political parties, not just Labour. But addressing this is not an option for Labour. "*The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party*", as every member's Party card proclaims. To treat members as though they do not matter raises the question of whether Labour is fit to govern the country. The current NEC review of Partnership in Power has to produce some credible answers linking initiatives such as the Big Conversation and policy forums to policy-making itself. Labour ought to be confident that open and accountable democratic policymaking will not only appeal to members, but to the majority of the electorate as well. Recognition that the Party in Office needs a vast increase in the number of people willing to support its policies in elections has to feature prominently in the Leader's speech to Conference. In terms of Party governance, ideally there should be a commitment to fixed term elections for all positions including Leader and Party Chair. Peter Hain's (2004) suggestions about briefing documents on party procedures, more social events for Party members (which can also be used to raise funds) and holding joint meetings, on topics of mutual interest, with single issue and community groups, are welcome. They would make local Parties more user-friendly in social as well as political terms. Another measure that would encourage young and other people who have special interests in single political issues into the Party would be to again open up the Party to affiliation. Many of the delegates of such bodies would be likely to have specialist expertise and this would improve the quality of debates. Support from the Leadership for an independent Commission on Party Renewal chaired by an eminent Labour Party member endorsed by conference to report after the next election could help restore confidence. Among its recommendations could be a Charter of Party Members' Rights.

6. A role for state funding? The report from the Electoral Commission (EC) on the State Funding of Political Parties is expected before the parliamentary Summer Recess. This was seen initially as posing a possible threat to the link between the trade union movement and the Labour Party. But the Labour Party itself in its submissions to the EC hearings rebutted this thinking. STLP members are opposed to any

increase in state funding. This reflects questions about the political legitimacy of existing levels of state support for political parties. In a recent exchange of correspondence with STLP, EC chairman Sam Younger acknowledged that more work needed to be done into the grassroots organisation of mainstream political parties. There was a serious risk it was argued that support for increased state funding would lead to further alienation between the Party in Office and the Party on the Ground. This could leave the Party in Office without democratic legitimacy and possibly without activists.

- 7. Reviving political activism – responsibilities as well as rights?** This section is unashamedly about what the Party in Office and the Party Central Office needs to give to the Party on the Ground if the latter is not to perish. In return it is reasonable that members of the Party on the Ground will be encouraged to rejoin or remain in the Party. With the right leadership, members are more likely to want to participate more fully in fund raising, campaigning, recruitment and local administration, as well as real policy-making, selecting candidates and winning elections.

In the run up to the next General Election most media attention will be on policy. But for those interested in the future of Labour as a mainstream political party the questions above are the ones that all members of the Party and astute commentators will need to keep in mind. If the Party in Office heeds the warning and seizes the opportunity, Labour will have started to lay a sound foundation for an ongoing role at the forefront of progressive politics in the United Kingdom in the 21st century.

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