



- STLP Newsletter for CLP/BLP officers

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Voting win for Labour grassroots

A move to give grassroots Labour members more control over the party's policy-making has been successful. Nearly 67% of delegates backed changes to allow every member to vote on who sits on the National Policy Forum.

The move - which could lead to pressure for more left-wing policies - was opposed by the party leadership.

Conference chair Cath Speight had said it was not the time for "piecemeal" changes to party structures and efforts should be focused on the election. But campaigners had insisted it would not spark a return to the "bad old days of internal strife" and would increase democracy inside the party, arguing the old process gave the party leadership too much control.

Labour's annual conference in Brighton voted on the "one member one vote" move on Wednesday with two members of Save the Labour Party - which has been campaigning at conference for OMOV for the last three years - giving speeches in support. The results were announced on Thursday morning. At the moment 55 members - more than a quarter of the forum which will meet ahead of the next election to decide the party's manifesto - are drawn from constituency Labour parties. They have been chosen at the annual conference by the conference floor so the party hierarchy has some control over who gets appointed. It also meant the 20% of party branches which do not send delegates to conference do not get a say.

Eleven constituency Labour parties called for a postal ballot with every member taking part and the unions had said they would not use their block votes against it. Such a change could lead to more left-wing members of the party being elected to the forum.

The party's ruling National Executive Committee urged delegates on Wednesday to reject the changes, arguing it was not opposed in principle but would examine them as part of a wider review of internal democracy next year. But Islington North delegate Cat Smith told the conference that the old system was leaving a lot of ordinary members disenfranchised.

Ann Black, a member of Labour's National Executive Committee, told a Campaign for Labour Party Democracy news sheet: "The change would not take the party back to the bad old days of internal strife, as some have suggested. That has not happened on the NEC, where I and my colleagues are elected by one-member-one vote, nor in Scotland, where their successful policy forum is already elected through an all-member ballot."

This rule change is a major achievement for the grass-roots members of the Labour Party who for years have been unable to vote for their own choice of NPF representative and in effect hands a major democratic process back to the membership.

Save the Labour Party, Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, Compass and Labour Youth joined together to get this rule change supported by the delegates to conference and their achievements needs to be recognised as an example of how the many can win the argument over the few.

Debate of Party Rule Changes at Conference 2009-why we had no real alternative to remitting some proposals.

In addition to the famous victory securing OMOV for the National Policy Forum (see above) several other rule changes crucial to improving Party democracy were raised and debated at Conference.

These were the establishment of a Charter of Member's rights to guarantee the rights of Labour Party members. In summary these rights included a more significant role for grass roots members in Party policy making and Party governance, a free choice of candidates for public office using equal opportunities procedures and a role in selecting Labour members of the House of Lords (or successor chamber), more and more regular

information about the Party's ordinary finances and a right to free speech and to complain of any injustice, within the Party's rules.

Despite what the then NEC Chair Cath Speight said to Conference these rights go way beyond what is in the current Party rules. The proposal for a Charter came from the Report of the Independent Labour Commission on Party and Parliamentary Democracy set up at the instigation of STLP (read this report at www.labourcommission.org.uk).

A second proposed rule change called for the number of Constituency Labour Party representatives on the NEC to be increased from six to eight - the additional two places being allocated to Scotland and Wales respectively. The advantage would obviously have been to increase CLP representation on the NEC by 25% and guarantee representation to two Celtic nations.

A third proposed rule change fell at the first fence. It was to provide for a Labour Party Code of Ethics. This would establish principles and standards of behaviour to be followed by everyone in the Labour Party; Leaders, elected representatives, party staff and Party members. It would be drawn up by the NEC after consultation throughout the Party and enforced by an independent Party Ombudsperson.

This also came from a recommendation of the Labour Commission. This rule change could not go forward because the proposing CLP (South Ribble) could not afford to send a delegate to Conference - a sad comment on the state of Party equal opportunities)

When the proposers got to Conference we discovered that we did not have enough support to get these rule changes carried - unlike OMOV for the National Policy Forum which had massive promised support (thankfully). If we had put the other two rule changes to the vote we would have lost. The consequence of losing is that the rule change cannot be put forward again for 3 years. Through remitting we can put it in again next year. Other good news is that we have secured a promise of trade's union support next time if we re-draft the Charter of Member's rights to include the rights of affiliated trade's union members-this we plan to do.

At Last an NEC Chair who is fully committed to Party Democracy

Conference 2009 saw the election of Ann Black to being Chair of the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC). Ann is supported by the Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance (CLGA) to which STLP belongs. Indeed Ann was put forward to the CLGA panel after winning a ballot of STLP members to be one of STLP's two nominees in 2008.

She previously represented Labour Reform which has since merged with STLP. Ann has a very long and excellent track record in championing internal democracy within the Party and in being a model of fairness and accountability. Many congratulations Ann!

The Wind is changing in the Party

This year's conference was marked by a wind of change in the Party.

Meetings organised by the Party democracy lobby were packed with standing room only and many more people were turned away or standing outside the door. This was true of both the Delegates Briefing and Reception organised by the Grass Roots Umbrella Network (which includes STLP and is chaired by Tom Davidson of the STLP Committee) and by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy's (CLPD's) fringe meetings chaired by Gaye Johnston (who is both Vice Chair of STLP and Chair of CLPD).

In addition to the victory on OMOV for the NPF STLP's Gaye Johnston and Gary Heather, whilst they did not win seats on the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC), came good seconds to the leadership supported candidates and polled 5% more votes than Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance candidates have ever done in CAC elections previously. This despite overt lobbying by Party staff for the leadership candidates.

A Victory for our Beleaguered Postmen and Women

An emergency resolution from the Communication Workers' Union calling on the Government to demand the declaration by the Trustees of the actual amount of the Royal Mail's current pension deficit (rumoured to be £10 billion). It then clad upon the Government, a sole shareholder in Royal Mail, to take responsibility for the deficit and to resolve related problems with all staff and customers immediately after Conference. In a rare move the NEC recommended acceptance of this resolution and it was then carried unanimously.

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