

LABOUR PARTY NATIONAL POLICY FORUM
14-15 July 2007

Report to Socialist Societies from Jacky Peacock and Simon Wright

Comment

The documents were sent out two days before the event and in paper form only which, in 2007, when all other communication about the NPF is electronic, looks like deliberately preventing us from distributing and consulting the people we are trying to represent at the NPF. Jacky and Simon were put into the same group but when we objected, there was a strange panic among staff and repeated refusals as “the groups have been worked out very carefully and balanced” which was absurd. We kept arguing and finally were allowed to move.

Opening Plenary

Ian McCartney MP said farewell to the NPF as he was stepping down as chair, presumably as a result of losing ministerial position. He proposed Pat McFadden MP as the new chair, there were no other nominations. This happened very fast with no discussion or debate.

Gordon Brown spoke well and relaxed away from the lectern. Spoke broadly about challenges faced, climate change, terrorism and rising aspirations about public services. Seemed to be clear that the Blair reform agenda remains his too – not just providing a safety net but modern services provided where and when people want them. To meet these, new politics with communities consulted, with the right to recall decisions. Two-thirds of students will have a grant, new terms of repaying loans including the right to take a holiday from repayment of tuition fees. Educational Maintenance Allowances to extend throughout college. Need a massive housing building programme as in the 1920s/30s and the 1940s/50s. Lord Darzi has joined Labour and taken the whip to review the NHS. Investment in under 5s will come to be seen as Blair legacy. 10 year strategy for youth services using unclaimed assets from financial institutions. All children in world can go to school and will be announcing moves to eradicate terrible diseases, TB, malaria, diphtheria. We in the UK should lead the way to eradicate diseases by building health systems. British workers movements ended slavery and child Labour and built the NHS in the UK.

In response to questions, said the 14 new manifesto groups would link with the NPF and ending conference resolutions would allow proper debate by NPF on issues raised by conference. In Iraq, pointed out there are now 5000 British troops instead of 55000.

Harriet Harman identified some priorities: flexible working including for carers of older relatives, women trafficked into the sex industry in the UK and women in prison. Said one important way to integrate BME communities is to target

the women. Harriet demonstrated her commitment to the NPF process by staying for the whole weekend and participating in all the seminars.

Party reform plenary

Harriet Harman gave the speech justifying the reforms, saying the deputy leadership elections had created a mandate for reform. The perception of the present system is a fudge at the NPF, a row at conference and the government ignoring the proposals. What Gordon Brown is proposing is that Conference directs the NPF on controversial issues such as nuclear power; the NPF deliberates and if no answers are produced within a year, Conference re-directs the NPF. This new system would allow serious engagement with issues as had happened with the genuine dialogue over council housing, with housing now rising to the top of the agenda. Harriet stressed that Party members must be made more aware of the timescales of debates and when to send in submissions. There should be a policy forum in every local community. The process would culminate with OMOV. No questions were taken during the plenary (Pat McFadden quickly asked if people agreed with this and no-one dissented).

Simon: in the seminar I was in, there was quite a lively debate. I argued that contemporary resolutions were a useful pressure valve for party members and, in the case of LGBT Labour, had successfully changed government policy. Also that to abolish them at this stage hardly fitted with the new openness that Gordon Brown is claiming. Generally the idea of an all member ballot on the manifesto was dismissed as expensive, pointless and likely to lead to embarrassment. No-one could understand the point of 12 additional NPF members elected at conference. I made the points about proper schedule of NPF meetings and electronic papers properly in advance.

Jacky: The main concern in my seminar was the resource implications of the proposed reforms and more questions were asked than answered. Since the major cuts in Party staff there were no longer the resources to analyse all the current submissions so what will happen if we succeed in encouraging a load more? Could one of the left Think Tanks take on this task? What has happened to the TU-led Policy Forums? Could ministerial special advisers do more to help with the process? The Joint Policy Committee is seen as dominated by the TUs and ministers – TU leaders and ministers can attend meetings in London at short notice – not so easy for constituency or Socialist Society reps. Some people were sceptical about the extra 12 Conference delegates to the NPF. No-one thought they should serve one year only and no-one was clear what their specific role would be and how Conference would know who to vote for. On OMOV, the main concern was the cost. Would TUs ballot their members? The deputy leadership elections cost one TU a quarter of a million – aren't there better ways to spend that sort of money? Would members be able to vote on separate sections of the NPF Report or would it be all or nothing? A low turnout could be counter-productive. I suggested that maybe members should just be encouraged to log on to the website to register support.

Summary of points made at the Policy discussions

Crime, Justice, Citizenship and Equalities

Once more there is no mention in this document about civil justice, despite the controversial reforms currently being introduced that could see serious cuts in access to legal help by those qualifying for legal aid. Measures to combat crime and anti-social behaviour should address all violence against women, not just domestic violence. Actions to address the underlying causes of crime should include health interventions, and local authorities need resourcing to do more on alternatives to prison. We need a broad strategy for crime prevention.

Education and Skills

There was concern about the sustainability of academy schools – how can we ensure that they are still doing what they were intended to do in 10 years' time? Among the challenges for the future in the document we added: how do we ensure each child has the best education at the most appropriate school? How do we get more school governors? How do we, given the decline in school rolls, continue to offer a wide curriculum?

Prosperity and Work

We should try to raise the profile of social enterprises to encourage participation. We should stress economic engagement in terms of equality of opportunity. The importance of occupational pensions is stressed, yet publicly funded voluntary organisations are not given budgets to include employer contributions. Local authority initiatives such as Welfare to Work schemes should be mentioned. Take up of tax credits should be increased and fines for employers paying below the national minimum wage should be increased. There was no consensus for the proposal to abolish the lower national minimum wage for young people and it was seen as running counter to moves to encourage young people to remain in education.

Health

This document came in for the most criticism as it was seen as an NHS document rather than health. It skates over the difficulties re the independent sector and there is little on social care, especially for adults. Having managed to alienate every single person working for the NHS the challenge was to get them back on board. We have to listen to them, and we must reverse the message that the Government thinks the private sector is the answer to everything. Future health challenges should include alcohol, anger management and dementia.

Creating Sustainable Communities

We have to ensure that all new technologies are sustainable. We have to balance the debate on aviation and the environment with a recognition of its role in regeneration and employment – Luton airport for example is the area's largest employer. Overcrowded homes should be at the top of the housing agenda given the knock on effects on health, relationship breakdown, crime, and education. Private rented housing must be radically improved if it is to play its part in relieving the pressure on social housing. There should be

more intermediate renting and measures to bring a professional and a consumer oriented approach to renting. The arts are a key means of celebrating our diversity – there should be more in the document about grass roots cultural activities and more on sport.

Britain and the World

As so often, this document attracted the least discussion, perhaps because many of us feel insufficiently knowledgeable on foreign affairs. There was a discussion about when it is appropriate for us to intervene in other countries, e.g. Darfur, but this didn't result in any amendments to the document.

General Impression

There was certainly a feeling that change was in the air, perhaps a feeling of relief too that Gordon Brown put on such a confident performance, no doubt buoyed by the opinion polls. As will be noted from the seminar discussions on the proposed reforms to the Party consultation process, there was more support for the notion of change than for the practical changes on offer. What remains to be seen is whether this feeling of change will be enough to regenerate the Party and increase our membership. We need to consider as Socialist Societies, the part we can play in that process.