

Extending and Renewing Party Democracy
SOCIALIST SOCIETIES SUBMISSION
September 2007

1. The Socialist Societies represent 14 affiliated societies, most of which are highly involved in policy development, and which group together practitioners, experts, users, funders of services, together with academics, elected politicians, lay activists and various specialists. Such a grouping has naturally been very supportive of all attempts to improve the party's policy making processes, as this is central to many of our preoccupations.
2. The Socialist Societies therefore welcome the priority given by Gordon Brown to looking to improve the current process, and are delighted to have the opportunity to submit these responses.
3. Firstly, however, we would urge that any final proposals are "reality-tested" to ensure that the party internally has the financial and staffing resources (and the voluntary party similarly has the wherewithal and capacity) to respond to any new system. A brilliant designed system on paper will lead to more tears if it is impossible to translate into reality. Serious thought is therefore needed to matters of timing, personnel and lay involvement before finalising any changes.
4. Secondly, the paper as drafted would give a much needed boost to political education as well as to policy development. However, it will be important not to confuse the two, and to ensure that clear objectives are given to the various activities, so that the desired outcomes of all of them are identifiable. The welcome desire to ensure the party is actively involved with its local community might improve recruitment, engagement, enthusiasm and "buy-in", but may not of itself lead to "upward transmission" of policy ideas (especially if policy development is steaming ahead at national level in advance of feedbacks from local fora).
5. Thirdly, where consultation has taken place within PiP in recent years, it has often been viewed as an exhortation for 'support' rather than for genuine 'engagement', or it had been too diffused to galvanise people into participating. Such consultation exercises have contributed to the image of 'government by focus group'. "Being heard" is a major demand from socialist societies and CLPs, rather than "being talked at".
6. Fourthly, NPF documents are currently very weighted towards what the government is already doing, with very little about the new challenges ahead and the possible range of new responses to such challenges. This makes them hard to debate. More meaningful documents, setting out the issues and canvassing the potential policies, would encourage local debate. The documents are also very cumbersome and sometimes too lengthy, which means very few members have time to

even see – much less read – them. Some good journalistic editing would make them more accessible.

7. The societies welcome 'dialogue' with local party units, NPF, JPC and other organs of the party, but feel that this grossly under-values the potential contribution of socialist societies, where many members feel more comfortable. This has impacted on the Socialist Societies in particular who should be seen as a major resource in the processes of attracting members, advising on policy and commenting on proposals, but in the main have not been regarded in this way. Their representation on the NPF is testimony to this. It should be greater.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSALS:

Proposal 1: Greater support for local Policy Forums and greater consultation, engagement and involvement of part members in policy discussions

8. Whilst this aim is much to be welcomed, it will be vital for there to be adequate and meaningful feedback. Members need to know why their ideas have (or have not) been accepted. There needs to be an undertaking to explain the rationale for decisions that have been taken – perhaps including the reasons for the rejection of alternative views.
9. The first test of how the party is going to respond to members greater engagement will be in its the response to this Consultation. It will therefore be vital that the party that does set out all the arguments and ideas received together with the rationale as to why some were accepted and others rejected.

Proposal 2: Strengthened NPF

10. The need for better feedback is pressing. But it must be both meaningful and timely. This will be very staff intensive and it is important not to promise more than can be delivered. Even facilitating members to exchange ideas with each other is no substitute for feedback from the centre, as members want to know what the government/ national party is doing with their ideas.
11. The proposals to improve feedback, establish a work plan and dialogue with ministers are positive but this process should be as open as possible. At present draft documents and discussions seems to be kept secret, with the first members that know of such documents and discussions is when they read about them in the newspapers. This is counter productive. Members have difficulty briefing their elected NPF representatives as they do not see the documents under discussion.

Proposal 3: Enhanced Role for the JPC

12. Whilst this is welcome, the JPC is currently VERY unrepresentative of the party. There is NO socialist society representative at all on it, and only three CLP reps. This contrasts with 11 trade union nominees and 14 elected members. The JPC does need to be properly representative of the WHOLE party, especially the lay membership, if party activists are to feel it does listen to them. The NEC's representation on the JPC is particularly unbalanced, comprising 6 from the trade union section, 1 from the MPs/MEPs section – and *none* from everyone else (CLPs, young Labour, socialist societies).

Proposal 4: increased NPF membership

13. Unless these are to widen the membership of the NPF (rather than just “more of the same”), we can see no justification for an additional 12 members. At present, the 40,000 members of the socialist societies have only 3 members on the NPF and only ONE seat on a Policy Commission (despite our central interest in policy). Any additional places (though we are unconvinced of the need for these) should rebalance the Forum to include 2 further socialist society seats.

Proposal 6: OMOV ballot

14. We feel very strongly that adequate consultation between NPF and the membership on each policy document needs to be organised and that this should include an open discussion of policy alternatives. The results of deliberation, giving reasons for adopting particular policies rather than others should also be made available.

15. Regarding the OMOV ballot, most of the societies feel that this will be expensive and will prove nothing. There could be a low turnout, which would be disheartening. A 99% poll in favour will look like the old Soviet days. A 70% poll in favour would emphasise considerable minority opposition to the programme, almost on the eve of an election (and could follow a campaign by a sector of the movement hostile to just one part of the package). It might be better to have a large “sign up to support” campaign, where any party member could sign up to “This is the manifesto I want for our country”.

Proposal 7

16. We welcome this but urge that the Socialist Societies are also given “support” and are incorporated into the policy process as discrete entities in their own right. At the very least, the Socialist Societies

Executive should have a designated role within the PiP consultation process.

17. Policy making has much to gain from input by a wider constituency than the party, especially users, decision makers, academics and commentators and would reflect the party's commitment to the communities and people we serve. Nevertheless, this will only work so long as it is serious dialogue and participants can see either where they have made a difference or why their viewpoint did not finally get accepted. Such engagement also needs to be in accordance with our deeply held principles, so that we can benefit from advice and help from those who share our basic objectives in finding better ways of meeting these. The affiliated socialist societies could play a useful role in setting up such wider soundings, perhaps on a (regional) specialism rather than locality basis. Done well, this process could improve policy making and help revitalise local party politics. However, it can be resource intensive and will have to be meaningful in order to retain credibility.

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Fabian Society
National Union of Labour & Socialist Clubs
Society of Labour Lawyers
Labour Students
The Jewish Labour Movement
Socialist Educational Association
Socialist Health Association
Christian Socialist Movement
Labour Housing Group
SERA (Socialist Environmental & Resources Association)
Labour Party Irish Society
Scientists for Labour
Labour Campaign for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Rights
Labour Party Disabled Members Group