

Socialist Societies  
Report on National Policy Forum  
Saturday 1 December 2007

This NPF was called before the Abrahams funding issue became news. However it was the dominant issue for the first part of the meeting, both with and without the press.

Gordon Brown's speech started off with confronting the allegations. He repeated his comments from the beginning of the week, but then moved on to the need for full reform of party funding. Said that the Hayden Phillips proposals have to be the basis for the reform. Spending limits must apply in constituencies and year-round.

He summarised the action plan as 1) address the immediate situation; 2) lead the debate on cleaning up politics and reform of Party funding; 3) take the debate to the other Parties, and challenge their malpractice for example, Ashcroft and the use of third party agencies such as the Midlands Industrial Council.

He moved the speech on to outline what was a strong vision of opportunity for all children, contrasting with Conservative policies. He linked the new school leaving age, expansion of educational maintenance allowances, modern apprenticeships, investment in education, youth centres and Sure Starts as a package of measures to ensure that every child matters and that all children of whatever background should have opportunity.

Once the press had left, he expressed sympathy for Peter Watt who, in all aspects apart from this one case, had been an exemplary General Secretary. When questioned by an angry NPF member, he said he too was furious and incensed that this issue of party funding had re-arisen when everybody thought it had been sorted and we thought we could put the previous investigation behind us. Party members were asking for clear information and better communication to members.

*Simon Wright:* I attended the session on climate change and the one on Remploy designed to respond to the contemporary resolutions. The climate change session was, I felt, an example of the worst kind of NPF session. Instead of the Policy Commission reporting to the wider NPF and some sustained policy debate on the issues, it was a meet-the-minister session in a way which was unhelpful. An introductory session from Hilary Benn was followed by contributions from nearly every member present and a very fast set of responses at the end from Hilary Benn; something he is very good at but which there are many opportunities for. I spoke with the chair afterwards to say that I thought an NPF session should allow a sustained focus on several issues for the NPF to explore. For example, Heathrow expansion was raised but instead of allowing a few contributions on this, the discussion moved more quickly to other issues and Hilary Benn was able to respond unchallenged at the end. Other important issues raised included the climate

change meeting in Bali, how to improve the UK's poor record on renewable energy and localised energy generation.

The Remploi session was perhaps the opposite; although the issue had moved on a great deal since Conference, with the government announcing reduced factory closures and looking at the wider context of using government procurement, training and mainstream employment for people with disabilities, the meeting was dominated by the trade union rep most closely involved in this and was largely a dialogue between him and the minister, Anne Maguire.

*Jacky Peacock:* My first discussion session was with Yvette Cooper and was meant to be looking at the remitted Conference resolution on housing. There was a general feeling that the Affordable Housing Sub-Group of the Sustainable Communities Commission had done a good job, and we were pleased to learn that it will continue, in order to consider a broader range of housing policies. Relevant comments included that we needed a '5<sup>th</sup> option' – co-operative housing, and more shared ownership products, and to look at how Homebuy could be opened up. In general, though, the session was seen as an opportunity for people to raise housing issues they felt strongly about, and there was therefore a degree of frustration that the Minister had to leave after the first fifteen minutes so was not around to hear people's lobbying points. While the issues raised were interesting, it left me wondering what the point of the session was.

By contrast, the session on manufacturing with Pat McFadden stuck to the issues of employment rights and agency workers as raised in the contemporary issues referred by Conference, and agreed to restrict the debate to the remaining areas of difference between the movers and the Commission. There's a real dilemma around agency workers as they are frequently paid less and do not have the same employment rights as permanent workers. However, for many it is a good route into permanent work. The number of inspectors who enforce the national minimum wage is to be doubled, which sounded good until we heard that there were only 12 of them now, so even with 24, what impact would they have on the 1.4m agency workers? The Unions are arguing that agency workers should have equal treatment from Day 1; and there is no agreement on what we mean by equal treatment, e.g holidays and access to a Pension Scheme. There was particular concern about migrant workers from the EU accession countries where exploitation includes pay deductions for travel and equipment and hot-bedding.

At the final session of this one-day NPF, Matthew Seward, Labour Party officer leading NPF set out the process for next year. It was very welcome that for once the next meeting of the NPF has been scheduled well in advance. Less welcome that there will not be another meeting until late July and then at a time when many people were planning holidays.

Ed Miliband gave the closing speech, focusing on the fact that, although many things will have been achieved by the time we fight an election, to rest on these laurels will mean we are still fighting the 1997 election when the world

has moved on. In the run up we must shout our achievements and expose the dividing lines between us and the Tories on education and housing. We need to have narratives of change and take risks by acknowledging where we have failed.

One of the things that came out of the recent Socialist Societies meeting with Ed Milliband was the potential value of Socialist Society meetings with Ministerial Special Advisers. To that end, Dianne introduced us to the officer at No 10 with responsibility for Special Advisers. He has undertaken to talk to them about how this might be organised and get back to us.

Two developments in your representation at the NPF. Thanks to Dianne negotiating a place on the Joint Policy Commission (the body that runs the NPF), Jacky is now representing us there. As Bill Thomas remains unwell, Simon will temporarily replace him on the Crime, Justice and Citizenship Policy Commission.

Simon Wright  
Jacky Peacock  
DECEMBER 2007