

Report from NPF meeting, 14-15 July 2007, Hayes

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First off, apologies to London CLP members for not issuing a request for submissions as per usual, but I received the agenda for the forum and draft documents with 1 day to consult (which I did using Facebook – new technology at its finest). I have repeatedly raised this problem and called for documents to be sent out a month in advance in order to allow input from members and constituencies.

Thank you for your nominations!

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank the 32 CLPs who have nominated me for re-election to the NPF, and all those who have invited me to report back and listen to members' views. As always, I'm more than happy to report back in person to CLP meetings, or to help facilitate and organise local policy forums – just get in touch.

The July policy forum was held in Hayes, and focussed on reviewing the second-stage policy documents, as well as discussing the reforms to the party proposed by Gordon Brown.

By-election Campaigning – Labour victory in Ealing Southall!

You may now have heard that we had a great result in the Ealing Southall by-election, achieving a 5,070 majority and keeping the Tories in 3rd place. It was a fantastic effort with activists from across London heading there to help fend off a vicious Tory campaign.

A large number of NPF members descended upon Southall to help out in the by-election campaign on the Saturday, though it took a surprising one and a half hours to transport us there from Hayes. After this experience, only Pat McFadden, an Amicus representative and myself made it back to campaign again on the Sunday.

***** For fellow by-election junkies, if you fancy joining me for a trip to Tower Hamlets, our comrades in Shadwell need help to give George Galloway and his Respect mob a run for their money and try to take a seat back in this local by-election on 9th August. Give me a call on 07740-337235 or email alon@alon.org.uk if you're able to help out. *****

Opening Plenary with Gordon Brown and Harriet Harman

Gordon Brown gave a keynote speech to the NPF, outlining the priorities and challenges to be addressed. He drew attention to the announcement by John Denham on making grants available to two-thirds of students in higher education and the extension of the Education Maintenance Allowance as an example of how it is our duty to “remove every barrier which makes it difficult for people to make the choices to go to college or university”.

He addressed housing policy, signalling that we must shift a gear to make much more housing for rent and for ownership available, comparable to the large house building programmes of previous Labour governments and “to give a bigger role for local authorities than they've had before”.

On the NHS, Brown referred to the review currently being conducted by Lord Ara Darzi and focussed on how to make health services more readily available with greater flexibility to individual needs, such as GP opening hours and access to prescriptions.

Points were raised on various issues, including how the new manifesto policy committee chairs within the PLP fit in with the NPF process, and the brevity of Iraq's mention in the relevant policy forum document.

Harriet Harman was asked to address what she saw as the policy priorities for women. She outlined issues around Work and Families, women as both victims and perpetrators of crime, and engagement with BAME women as key topics and called for input and ideas on developing these themes.

Change of NPF Chair

Ian McCartney, who has served as chair and previously vice-chair of the NPF since its formation, gave a farewell speech, standing down as chair. Ian was a fantastic advocate for the NPF and I believe was sincere in wanting to improve its accountability and work to members. Pat McFadden was chosen to succeed him as chair of the NPF.

Second-stage policy documents

The six second-stage policy documents (1 per policy commission) were reviewed, and will now be disseminated to local policy forums for feedback. Unfortunately, most representatives had not had a chance to read the documents due to their late distribution.

We split into six groups and went through each document in turn, with less than 45 minutes to discuss each of the six documents, in order to make time for campaigning.

Below are bullet points covering points I raised or major areas of interest or contention in each session. These are not meant to cover the entire discussion, and it is best to refer to the actual document when available.

Education and Skills

- The accountability of academies was widely agreed to be a major problem, and the question of donors being given undue say even though the school remains vastly public funded
- I asked for a challenge to allow every child to have access to a good school should be added
- The necessity and amount of pre-GCSE testing was raised

Crime, Justice, Citizenship and Equalities

- A section devoted to domestic violence and 'honour' killings was requested
- Call to include skilling and raising ambition to help reduce re-offending
- I asked to balance calls for the migration system to "benefit Britain" with being fair to migrants
- I raised the shocking way the Home Office has been known to deal with asylum seekers here because of their sexual orientation, being quizzed about whether they liked Madonna, and raising the question of a fairer appeals process

Creating Sustainable Communities

- I requested that trade waste and the use of the private sector to skew Landfill Allowance be raised
- I questioned the wording that said the private sector will cover "their full share of long-term waste management costs" for nuclear power, wondering whether this was the entire amount or just the full amount of 'their share'
- I asked to add a point to address how we entice or compel private landlords to improve energy efficiency (e.g. install insulation) of rented out properties

Health

- Call for public health and well-being to be more central to the document
- Ann Keen said we need to look at bringing NHS staff back on board and to address the perception of the private sector is preferred to the public sector
- I asked for a point on looking into how NHS and private dentistry fit together and how to make choices simpler for patients

Prosperity and Work

- Call for debate on tougher penalties for employers who pay below the minimum wage (currently just a £200 fine per underpaid worker)
- I called for a point of discussion around the age differentials in the minimum wage for young people, especially given the odd (and complicated) consequences due to last the age discrimination laws. This was rebutted by Pat McFadden, saying it would send mixed signals if it was included as a point of discussion in the document
- I requested a discussion point on non-statutory local 'Living Wages', such as the London Living Wage framework. Angela Eagle agreed that this is a good campaigning tool, so long as the distinction to the statutory minimum wage is well

made. However, other members decided it would be too confusing to include this in the document

Britain and the World

- Call for wider section on Iraq
- I asked to mention the points Gordon Brown made about Britain helping improving economic growth within the Palestinian Territories
- I called for a point to be added on how we use our bilateral relationships to raise human rights abuses and promote women's and LGBT rights
- I asked for the challenge that called for us to "promote the benefits of free trade" to be reworded to ensure it is not construed as forcing liberalisation of markets but to promote fairer trade agreements

Party Reform discussions

Harriet Harman spoke to the proposals set out by Gordon Brown, and explained how she wanted to return members' trust to the policy-making system. She described the view of party members I often encounter, that the NPF fudges a debate, then we get a big bust up at annual conference, following by the government ignoring the conference decision.

Instead, Harman called for conference to guide the NPF, the NPF should then take action, and the following conference can then revisit its decision. Housing policy was cited as an example of this, with a housing sub-group formed to try to push ahead a consensus after repeated conference fights. I think the thinking behind this is sensible, but we need to make sure that we don't replace the fudge/bust up/ignore cycle with a cycle of fudge, and that we improve accountability in the process.

We split into four groups and discussed the seven proposals, with Harriet Harman and Ed Miliband going between the sessions. Due to limited time, we focussed on the more controversial suggestions.

Proposal 2 – The role of the NPF

- I called for the draft agenda and documents to be sent to representatives a month in advance, allowing sufficient time to send out request for feedback from CLPs
- To improve accountability, I suggested that NPF reps from each region/section were provided with the submissions from the organisations they represent. At the moment, only the commissions see submissions – and so accountability is lost

Proposal 3 – The role of the JPC

- I was bemused that the consultation document never spelt what this acronym stood for (Joint Policy Committee – not commission), especially given that in my experience, most members have never heard of it or its role. At the session, two members of the JPC said they weren't sure what the role of the JPC was either.

- I called for far better accountability of JPC, and more transparency on the composition of its membership
- Others wanted to review its composition, with complaints made that it was too dominated by government and trade union reps

Proposal 4 – Twelve new representatives

- There was uncertainty about the need for these extra 12 representatives as set out, given that at present all CLP, trade union and socialist society representatives are elected by their respective delegates at conference already
- Some called for their term to be two years, in line with the rest of the NPF. Others wanted them to be elected specifically to convey the wishes of conference for that year
- I raised the problem of most members having no idea who their NPF representatives were, and that these representatives are likely to be just as (if not even more) disconnected, and that it would be better to consider electing CLP NPF members via an OMOV ballot alongside the NEC ballot

Proposal 5 – Contemporary Issues to replace Contemporary Resolutions

- I have received varied feedback on this so far (8 responses with 24 hours isn't too bad!), with a balance between focussing on wishing to keep the accountability of the resolutions process and those focussed on changing the current system
- I explained that while most would agree the current method is not working, conference resolutions have become the focus of policy-making because of the lack of accountability of the NPF, and this must be addressed
- I also gave the example of the LGBT Labour resolution I drafted on the Sexual Orientation regulation, which was successfully prioritised and constructively altered government policy, and that we must make sure these opportunities remain in the future
- Questions were raised as what was meant by "issues", would conference just vote on titles (i.e. "Housing" vs "Education" vs "Parking charges") or if not, what form would they be and who would own their text
- I asked what was happening with the last changes to Partnership in Power, which allow CLPs to put forward amendments to the policy documents, which are then voted on at the NPF
- Others asked how 'minority positions' (where 20% of the NPF support an alternative text) would fit in, and there was agreement that these should remain

Proposal 6 – One Member One Vote (OMOV) vote on final documents

- Harriet Harman referred to the 1996 vote on the 'Road to the Manifesto' document and asked for views on how it went. Most thought an OMOV vote was needed then to demonstrate the Party's adoption of a new direction, but that is not the case now
- I asked to clarify what would happen if say, the Britain and the World document was rejected – would that mean no foreign policy in the manifesto?
- Most were not adverse to the idea, but wondered if the money could be better spent
- I questioned whether affiliate members were to be included in the ballot. If not, this would send a very worrying signal, but if so, the cost of balloting must be met

If you have any questions about this report or would like me to report back to your meeting, please email me at npf@alon.org.uk or call me on 07740 337235.

Alon Or-bach, 20th July 2007