

NEW LABOUR NEW LINKS - 1998

This discussion paper was prepared by **Matthew Taylor**, Assistant General Secretary of the Labour Party (now Director of IPPR), and **John Cruddas**, Deputy Political Secretary to the Prime Minister. It was discussed at a Unions 21 seminar which looked at how trade unionists can effectively involve themselves in the newly reshaped policy making structures of the Labour Party. The paper outlines the principles which lie behind Labour's new policy making processes, it describes how these processes are encouraging new levels and forms of participation and, finally, examines the opportunity Partnership in Power offers trade unionists.

The principles

"Lord, give me the strength to change the things I can change, the humility to leave alone those I cannot and the wisdom to know the difference between the two". The Prayer of Serenity begs the keys to personal fulfilment. It also provides a pretty good guide to the objectives for a decision making process, particularly one seeking to encourage participation and provide democratic accountability.

Labour's traditional way of making policy had many faults but perhaps the most fundamental was its dishonesty - it encouraged members to believe they had powers which were in reality illusory while failing to give them the role and influence to which they were entitled. Formally, the system meant every policy decision would be made as a result of debates over composites and motions at conference. The reality was that over the decades Labour leaders have with varying degrees of explicitness ignored problematic conference decisions. Furthermore, conference decisions were not the rational outcome of informed debate nor did they reflect the considered views of Labour members rather they resulted from behind the scenes deals between key power brokers.

While the system focused on set piece adversarial debates at conference, real policy discussion in which members could bring to bear their experiences and insights on issues local and national remained unfocused and irrelevant. Labour's Director of Policy would receive two or three resolutions a week, which had been earnestly drawn up and debated by constituencies, branches and affiliated organisations. But if these were received in the nine months of the year outside the conference process they went nowhere, were seen by no one and had minimal impact.

The starting point for the Partnership in Power reforms agreed by conference in 1997 and now in their second year of implementation was the need for a system which was honest about the Party's role when in Government. This means being clear that the Party has two important rights but should not pretend it has a third. The first right is for the Party to determine the framework of values and priorities for Labour's next manifesto - this is done through the rolling programme. The second right is for the views of Party members to be taken into account by the Party in Government - this is done through dialogue between ministers, NEC members, trade unionist and grass roots activists in the eight policy commissions. But Partnership in Power, as well as bestowing rights and making them a reality also makes clear that it is not the right of the Party to act as an internal opposition to its own Government.

If the Party has concerns about Government policy these can be and are addressed year-round through informed dialogue with ministers in the policy commissions rather than being stored up for set piece battles at Party conference. If conference feels that this dialogue fails to reflect the concerns of the Party it has the right to refer back policy commission reports. But conference does not have the right to gainsay Government decisions. This is a Labour Government, implementing a manifesto voted on by the members and as the Government it must govern in the interest of the whole country not just those of the Party.

Instead of debate at party conference resulting simply from resolutions submitted in the preceding three months, it now focuses on a rolling programme in which every area of policy is discussed at all levels of the party over a two year period. Instead of feedback on current Government policy coming in the form of unwieldy resolutions pieced together at composite meetings, conference now reviews a comprehensive process of discussion that takes place year round in the policy commissions. Instead of conference being the only site for policy making with the attendant myth that the Party could make final decisions on the basis of card votes following hurried set piece debates, conference becomes the apex of a broad and deep process of policy making and dialogue.

To give one example, through the Partnership in Power process, the Government's current housing policies will be the subject of year round dialogue between ministers and elected representatives of all parts of the Party. Labour's future priorities for housing will emerge from a two-year process of policy development in the rolling programme. In contrast, the last debate on housing held at Party conference under the old arrangements lasted seven minutes - the total formal input of Party members.

Participation

Among the illusions fostered by the old system was that of mass participation. The reality was that only a tiny proportion of Party members ever got involved in the policy making process. The main opportunity for members to influence decisions was through conference mandating meetings at which bemused members would be expected to mandate delegates on over 600 resolutions none of which would actually appear on the conference floor. Outside the conference process what policy discussion did take place was usually confined to 10 minute debates at the end of branch or GC meetings around a resolution which a member had scribbled down on the way to the meeting.

The building block of the new policy making structure is the policy forum. At the centre stands the National Policy Forum (NPF) - a 175 strong body representing all parts of the Party. The NPF provides its members with the opportunity to join in-depth discussions about policy with colleagues from across the Labour movement and with the relevant ministers. The NPF's processes based on informed dialogue and the search for consensus has proved highly successful with many Forum members judging the last event, at Warwick University in May, the best yet. But even though the forum does draw in all parts of the Party it has been subject to the criticism that it does little to engage the wider membership. This criticism is being addressed in two ways. Firstly, through improving the lines of communication between Forum members and those they represent - many regional constituency representatives now provide regular reports to their constituencies. But secondly, a more far reaching response to the need to link the NPF to the rest of the Party has been the development of local policy forums.

Local policy forums differ from traditional Party policy making structures in a number of ways. They are all-member meetings rather than delegate bodies. Their debates are structured and informed by documents and presentations. The forums are integrated with the national process of policy development - this year up to 6,000 grass roots members discussed the draft policy documents prior to them being debated at conference. Those attending local policy forums are asked to complete feedback forms and the response is overwhelmingly positive, with new members in particular reporting that the chance to participate in informed policy discussion was the reason they joined the Party.

The standards we set for policy forums, whether organised from the centre or locally are very high and so are the costs of getting it right. We have found that crucial to the success of Forums is an all-member mailing, good facilities, good materials and enthusiastic participation by Labour's elected representatives. The proof of the success of local forums is that more and more constituencies are choosing to move away from policy debate at delegate committee meetings and instead to establish regular forums.

But not everyone is a fan of the new forum process. The most often repeated criticism is that Forums do not actually make decisions, that they are little more than a talking shop. The response to this returns to the key criterion of honesty. The claim, implicit in the old system, that resolutions approved by a majority vote amongst 20 people in a constituency committee meeting would influence Government policy was not only dishonest, but ultimately dis-empowering for activists who would eventually become clear about the political realities. Partnership in Power provides a process where ideas emerge and develop over time gradually building support in the Party - where what matters is not the capacity to manipulate set piece votes but rather to shape

opinion in the Party and more widely. It is this debate-shaping potential of Forums, which has led some constituencies to invite community groups and even business interests into Forum meetings, both to get their input but also to show how Labour seeks to speak for the whole community. The Forum process is neither simple nor linear it is evolutionary, iterative and plural in other words it reflects the reality of power and influence in a democracy.

The opportunity for trade unionists

Many of the most enthusiastic supporters of Partnership in Power and the National Policy Forum process come from the senior ranks of the trade union movement. The challenge is to spread that support more widely, for grassroots trade union activists to see the potential in Partnership in Power. This potential takes two forms.

First, is the shift in culture away from a model of influence based on resolutions and caucuses towards one based on influence and networks. This means Labour trade unionists seeking to shape opinion across the Party by, for example, participating in local policy forums reflecting on what is happening in the workplace, the way the Labour Government is making a difference to public services. Of course, trade unions will still try to shape the outcomes of the National Policy Forum and Party conference, but encouraging members to shape opinion locally by participating in local forums will ensure that the national lobby can be seen to reflect local level needs and priorities.

The second area of potential relates to unions' own democratic processes. It is up to trade unionists to choose their own routes to modernise decision making, but the principles embodied in Partnership in Power are a good starting point:

- the processes and structures of decision making should embody realistic and appropriate rights for members
- decision making should be seen as evolutionary starting with new ideas and leading to new consensus rather than a repetitive zero-sum battle to win set piece debates
- the onus should be on grass roots participation with a recognition that this will only be achieved by providing a high quality experience for members.

Checklist for a successful local policy forum

- All member direct mailing
- Early circulation of background papers
- Participation of elected representatives
- Well-structured
- Good location for both plenaries and break-out groups
- Refreshments
- Trained facilitators and notetakers
- Not too many platform speeches

- Rapid feed-back to participants after the event

The rolling programme

Year One

- National Policy Forum sets terms of reference
- Policy commission produces draft first year agenda setting paper
- National Policy Forum discusses and approves
- Consultation throughout the Party
- Debate at Party conference

Year Two

- Policy Commission produces draft final policy statement
- National Policy Forum discusses and approves
- Consultation throughout the Party
- Debate and final decision by Conference