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Britain

Transforming Labour

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It's difficult to convey the exhilaration felt by those present at Labour Party conference 2017; #Lab17. Some of the electric atmosphere seems to have reached those following through the media, but let's see if I can illuminate the picture further.

The context was the General election campaign in which Labour under Corbyn confounded many by its impressive showing. On conference floor, as well as in many of the myriad of fringe meetings, speaker after speaker used the manifesto as a visual aid as well as to quote. This was mirrored by conference's staging – for the many not the few was the slogan of the moment, finishing many speeches and always visible.

But other words were prominent such as transforming and transformation; eloquently summing up both what Corbyn has already achieved and his ongoing vision both for the party itself and for the country.

This was Corbyn's third conference as leader, but the first where that leadership was not being undermined by the right in the party. It's not that all the critics have been silenced – but that they are more isolated than they have been for decades.

Key moments included John McDonnell's speech with its promise not only to refuse to sign any new PFI contracts but to bring existing ones back in-house, and then Corbyn's speech in which he talked of system change on three occasions, most sharply in saying of the horror of Grenfell:

It stands for a failed and broken system which Labour must and will replace.

A series of votes for internal party positions gives one snapshot of the balance of forces.

Before conference, Seema Chadwani and Billy Hayes were elected to the Conference arrangements Committee (CAC). Chadwani topped the poll with almost double the votes of her nearest rival, while Hayes got only a few thousand less. At Women's' Conference, Teresa Clarke and Jean Crocker took almost 80 per cent of the votes for Women's CAC with their pledge to make Women's Conference truly democratic. Emina Ibrahim and Anna Dyer took 35% of the votes each while incumbent Rose Burley could scrape only 16% And at the NEC during conference, UNITE's Jennie Formby was elected unopposed as Vice Chair.

The left might have reasonably expected to win most of those contests but the scale of the victory was sweet.

The shape of conference is still largely determined by the legacy of Blair's 'reforms'. The bulk of time is structured around the report from the National Policy Forum – a flabby body created to undermine conference sovereignty. Over recent years, the different sections were introduced by members of the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet, a few members got to speak and then the thing was agreed virtually unanimously.

Israel and Palestine

One part of the NPF report that was met with dismay by many before conference was the section relating to Israel

and Palestine which was, as Ariel Pardess argued here, a retreat from the manifesto. So it was pleasing, if a little mysterious, that in the first Conference Arrangements Committee report, this was reversed by adding the section from the manifesto.

This was followed by a standing ovation by conference when Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi's spoke [1] to welcome the correction, going on to talk about the legacy of the Balfour declaration, 100 years ago and concluding: We Brits need to take responsibility for the on-going Palestinian tragedy dating from Balfour's pledge.

And conference was brought to its feet again on the same subject by Jeremy Corbyn, in his leader's speech:

And let's give real support to end the oppression of the Palestinian people, the 50-year occupation and illegal settlement expansion and move to a genuine two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Not all of us cheering agree with Corbyn on the question of a two-state solution, but it was a breakthrough in that, though the Labour leader is a long term patron of the Palestine Solidarity campaign, since he was elected leader he has not spoken out on the question of justice for the Palestinian people.

Distortions over antisemitism

As has been well chronicled [2], one of the most persistent direction of attacks on Jeremy Corbyn since was first elected Labour leader in September 2015, has been to conflate support for the struggle of the Palestinians with antisemitism. Such an offensive is part of an international attack on the Palestine solidarity movement but it's also an attack on Corbyn because of his record.

Antisemitism like all forms of racism, and all forms of prejudice against the oppressed, should have no place in the Labour movement. But what has been at stake within the Labour Party is by and large something else: the weaponisation of antisemitism to attack the left.

The advocates of this approach have been not only been the overtly conservative forces within the Jewish community as a whole, but an organisation affiliated to the Labour Party itself, the misnamed Jewish Labour Movement (JLM). You can be a full member of the JLM without being Jewish, but not without being a Zionist.

As the battle has got more intensive, many Jews in the Labour Party decided that it was time to call a halt to this organisation claiming to speak for all Jews – and so Jewish Voice for Labour was launched over the summer. JVL is not an anti-Zionist group, as its chair Jenny Manson explains here, but in taking no position on the question, is challenging the JLM's claim to speak for all Jews in Labour.

The new group held its triumphant public launch during Labour Party conference, with over 300 people packed in to a Brighton ballroom. The atmosphere was electric despite the crush, and people listened attentively to the platform speakers. Excitement grew still further when two union General Secretaries, UNITE's Len McCluskey and ASLEF's Tosh McDonald spoke to pledge support.

One of the issues at stake at #Lab17, still to be debated at the time of this fringe meeting was whether Labour should adopt a rule change relating to allegedly discriminatory or offensive behaviour by members. Sounds straightforward? Unfortunately not.

This discussion went through different phases. A rule change was drafted by the JLM, an alternative was put forward by Hastings and Rye CLP. At the pre-conference NEC, the NEC started discussing its own proposals, and apparently part way through the meeting was presented with a further draft (which appears to have been agreed between Chakrabati and the JLM) which was then agreed unanimously.

Heated debate ensued. The JLM claimed their proposal had been agreed – while in fact what the NEC agreed was significantly different. Some left members of the NEC claimed that the JLM proposal been rejected. That wasn't true either – significant ambiguities that come from the JLM proposal remained in what was agreed – in particular reference to codes of conduct which don't actually exist, as Glyn Seeker explains here. And there was concern that the JLM had been discussed with, while Hastings and Rye's alternative proposal had been cold shouldered.

Momentum, without any consultation, backed the NEC proposal. Huge pressure was put on Hastings and Rye to remit their proposal.

The rule change was being debated at conference the morning after the JVL launch. People were anxious to know what was planned, but things were moving too fast for the Hastings and Rye delegate to be able to say. But she made up for any frustration by her powerful speech from the rostrum the next day. She remitted the motion, but clearly explained the dangers with the NEC's wording.

The launch of JVL and the reception for pro-Palestinian speakers transformed an extremely unfavourable situation into a better one. But the JLM and their allies have not gone away, or been decisively defeated as is shown by the summary expulsion of veteran anti-zionist Moshe Machover less than a week after conference ended.

Assertive conference

Team Corbyn have rightly concentrated on developing policies to defeat the Tories at elections rather than on internal party rules. The misnamed McDonnell amendment – which proposed lowering the percentage of the Parliamentary Labour Party any challenger would need to back them originated before Corbyn's first successful leadership bid. Despite opposition from Labour First and Progress, it was overwhelmingly passed in an amended form put forward by the NEC; the threshold will now be 10% of the PLP rather than the 15% Corbyn had to achieve.

Last year a rule change was passed which allowed conference to refer back a section of the NPF report without rejecting the whole thing. No one predicted how extensively it would be used at #Lab17.

Three reference backs were agreed – on welfare, on education and on health. Each successful move came from the left, but wasn't organised. Individual delegates pointed out weaknesses in the report which would not arm the party to be a clear anti-austerity voice. First was welfare, rather a surprise as the delegates focus; that Labour needed to oppose all Tory cuts to benefits hadn't been previously raised from the rostrum. On education the delegate's point was that all schools needed to be brought under local authority control. On health, the NHS should not be the preferred provider but the only provider and all profits are excess profits. Thus conference sharpened policy on key areas.

One reference back was defeated, that proposed by the right on Brexit.

Contemporary motions

Another chunk of conference discusses ‘contemporary motions’. CLP and affiliates can submit motions which must deal with matters not covered by the NPF report. Delegates vote in a priority ballot as to which topics should be covered, though composite motions have not yet been agreed. Then those that have submitted motions on the chosen subject composite and conference gets to discuss the motions on up to eight topics.

The time available is squashed not only by the usually unfocused time spent discussing the NPF in plenary but by a series of policy seminars which take up about another entire day of conference time – a conference that only runs these days for just over 4 days.

The left again showed its strength when the CLPs overwhelmingly prioritized the topics supported by both CLPD and Momentum: Health, Housing, Rail and Social Care. The unions were pushing Workers rights, public sector pay, Grenfell and Growth and Investment.

There was controversy about this because this didn’t include the question of free movement. Two motions on this question were subsumed in a topic called Brexit by CAC, where the majority of the motions were from the right. It’s extremely unlikely that progressive policy on migration would have got into a composite authored essentially by Progress and Labour First supporters. A standalone composite on free movement was unlikely to be agreed. It’s unfortunate, but Corbyn’s speech reiterated his opposition to racism and the scapegoating of migrants. Organisations like the Labour Campaign for Free Movement can continue to play an important role in ensuring that defence of free movement remains an essential part of Labour’s approach to Brexit.

Composite meetings demonstrate what has and hasn’t changed in the last 3 years. I heard detailed reports of the meetings on health and on housing where party staff turned up with bland drafts composite which just said the manifesto was wonderful. The point of contemporary resolutions is to develop or to change existing party policy. But delegates were having none of it and ensured the composites put to conference reflected the proposals that crafted at the grassroots, reflecting campaigns.

Then one of the sharpest demands from the Housing composite made it into the leader’s speech. The motion, overwhelmingly carried by conference says:

Support full ‘binding – ballot rights for estate residents in any ongoing and future regeneration projects. This would follow a comprehensive programme which fully involves residents and their representatives in understanding the economic, social and environmental consequences of any proposals.

Corbyn used the example of Grenfell to explain how the term regeneration has been misused:

Too often what it really means is forced gentrification and social cleansing, as private developers move in and tenants and leaseholders are moved out.

But then he continued:

But we need to go further, as conference decided yesterday... councils will have to win a ballot of existing tenants and leaseholders before any redevelopment scheme can take place.

Apart from the leader's support for conference sovereignty, this is a shot across the bows to the hated Haringey Development Scheme, being pushed through by the Labour council leadership against the opposition of the local community, tenants groups, unions, and both CLPs and MPs. And while the scheme in that London Borough is particularly vile, other Labour councils have acted in ways that completely contravene this approach.

Deepening democracy

One of the irritating things about conference 2016 was the behaviour of conference chairs. The most notorious example was the refusal to take card votes called for by delegates – as had been custom and practice even before Corbyn's election. It didn't look good at #Lab17 when a question to the first conference arrangement committee report was ignored by the Chair of CAC – and when further pushed the chair of conference gave an indecipherable response.

But things have moved. Card votes were taken at appropriate times and the new practice of taking CLP delegates separately from affiliates when the first hand vote is too close to call made things more transparent and easier to understand. Claudia Webbe definitely won the prize for the best conference chair ever, being very responsive to the mood on the floor. She particularly dealt with the difficulty that delegates wishing to move reference back have no procedure through which they can make this clear – so it's a lottery as to whether they get called. She said they should let her know and would be called. Excellent – but it's why conference needs its own standing orders to ensure consistency whoever is in the chair.

That isn't to say that everything was perfect. The way most delegates get to speak is problematic. Many stand on chairs (not possible for all – and dangerous for those that do) or waving a variety of large props for lengthy periods. The chair can't see across the whole swathe of delegates – especially those at the back. It discriminates against most disabled people – and is frustrating for everyone. Maybe it's time for electronic indicators – which could also be used to vote, and thus create more time for contributions from delegates.

The most important thing to come out of the pre-conference NEC was the democracy review which will take submissions from individuals and party bodies over the months ahead. It's encouraging to know that they have already been in touch with CLP's who remitted their rule changes. The left needs to take this seriously. We need extensive discussion about what changes are needed not only in terms of conference but across the party as a whole. Seeds of such ideas already exist in many, from the proposals to give women's conference full authority and democracy advocated by Labour Women Leading, and the rule change, which was remitted, to replace Local Campaign Forums with strengthened Local Government committees, through which local parties can exert real influence over those supposedly representing them in council chambers.

Developing far reaching submissions to the democracy review needs to be an important focus for the left over the months ahead, along with taking out the message of the last manifesto, further strengthened and developed by #Lab17, to the communities we live and work in. As the Tory conference further underlines the depth of the government's crisis, Labour is right to say "Bring it on". A year ago there was much speculation about how long Jeremy Corbyn would last as Labour leader, today the focus is when he will be in No 10.

[1] A full transcript of Naomi's speech can be found towards the end of this [post](#) .

[2] For example [here](#).