LABOUR LEFT

Briefing

NEC REPORT

OFF MESSAGE!



Liz Davies

September's meeting of the National Executive Committee was held the week before Labour Party Conference, and Conference dominated the agenda.

The Prime Minister emphasised that Conference should be used as a mid-term showcase, to publicise the Government's achievements, and to show that if the Tories were in government, there would be no such things as the minimum wage, Fairness at Work or the Working Time Directive. He was insistent that the Government was committed to "getting the economy right" and that targets on literacy, hospital building, transport and other public services would depend on continuing a policy of economic prudence. He made no reference whatsoever to an alleged war-chest! As his whole concept of Conference was as a media opportunity for the Government, there was no mention of the debates likely to happen at Conference, or the opportunity for delegates to make policy.

Liz Davies asked him how the arms sales to Indonesia over the last two and a half years could be justified under an ethical foreign policy, especially given the evidence that British arms had contributed to the terror and genocide in East Timor. She also asked if the Government would support an immediate freeze on all investment and loans to Indonesia and if the Prime Minister would agree that the invitation to the Indonesian Ambassador to attend Labour Party Conference would be withdrawn.

In reply, the Prime Minister said that to cancel the arms sales would have resulted in a bill of hundreds of millions of pounds, that there was no evidence that British arms had been used in East Timor, and that the killings had been carried out by the militias and not by the Indonesian military. He failed to reply to the question on investment and announced that the invitation to the Indonesian Ambassador had already been withdrawn. Later in the meeting, the General Secretary also said that the invitation to the Indonesian Ambassador to attend Conference had been withdrawn. She claimed that the invitation had been approved in July with no opposition at the NEC – in fact the Grassroots Alliance had objected at the meeting (which was in May) and had been told that the signs of democracy in Indonesia needed encouragement.

Pete Willsman asked the Prime Minister if he agreed that PFI for the health service was disastrous and cost the public purse more. The Prime Minister did not specifically reply, but did say that people's memories were incredibly short and issues such as the passport debacle would soon blow over.

Mark Seddon said that there was a worry in the Labour Party that the Government would continue to stick to previous spending limits, and that he thought that the electorate was quite receptive to an argument for greater public spending as against more tax cuts. In his reply, the Prime Minister repeated that public services would depend on prudent management of the economy.

The GMB representative complained about attacks by the Government on public sector workers, particularly the Prime Minister's reported comments about the scars on his back from dealing with public sector workers. He replied that he had not actually talked about public sector workers – he was talking about reforming the public services.

The NEC refused a request by Ron Davies to put forward for selection to Westminster whilst retaining his seat in the Welsh Assembly.

Pete Willsman, Mark Seddon and Liz Davies voted against a paper on Parliamentary selections which reported that the selection panel had approved some candidates and rejected others.

Various constitutional amendments to Conference were put before the NEC, for the NEC to consider its recommendation to Conference. They included an amendment from Calder Valley CLP to bring back a commitment to public ownership into Clause IV and amendments from at least ten CLPs calling for the restriction on the ability of the NEC to refuse to endorse properly selected Parliamentary candidates – following the 1995 Leeds North East case. Labour Party officers had recommended that these amendments be rejected by Conference. All the amendments were taken en bloc and the officers' recommendations approved with Liz Davies, Mark Seddon and Pete Willsman voting against. Pete Willsman moved that Cathy Jamieson be an Assistant Chair at Conference instead of Michael Cashman – his proposal was defeated with the usual three suspects voting in favour of Cathy. Cathy had sent her apologies to the NEC. There was a brief discussion over the number of contemporary resolutions that Conference Arrangements Committee was likely to allow – the subtext being that if only four were allowed (as last year) the motion opposing privatisation of the Post Office was unlikely to be prioritised. The General Secretary insisted to the NEC that it was a rule that only four could be taken – despite that rule not being written in the Rule Book. In fact, Conference Arrangements Committee recommended that five contemporary resolutions be taken.

The NEC concluded with a presentation from the Welsh General Secretary on the Welsh Labour Party.

Liz Davies & Christine Shawcroft

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October NEC

NECs aren't usually held this soon after Annual Conference, so this one was extraordinary in most senses of the word. The main business was arrangements for the selection of Labour's candidates for the London Mayor. This could have been discussed beforehand and put in a report to Conference, but we don't want unseemly rows in front of the TV cameras, so it's best to keep it behind closed doors.

The papers was tabled at the meeting. It was introduced by Margaret McDonagh, but when Vernon Hince asked if members wanted to have ten minutes to read it before we moved into the discussion, there were cries all around the table of, "No, let's just agree it now!" Hince did not put it straight to the vote, however, so Grassroots Alliance members were able to make points against the paper.

Christine Shawcroft spoke in support of the London Region policy in favour of an OMOV ballot, which had been supported overwhelmingly by affiliated unions. Mark Seddon expressed concerns about the drop in the vote in Wales after the electoral college was brought in to defeat Rhodri Morgan. Liz Davies supported the twin track approach for self-nominations and affiliate nominations, with the holder of ten nominations being automatically on the shortlist. This is also the policy of the Transport and General Workers Union, and something Margaret Prosser supported when she was running for Deputy General Secretary of the T&G: but oddly she seems to have changed her mind and supported the paper.

Dennis Skinner made the point that selection systems are changed according to the desired result and that there has been no consistency. Many of the speakers waxed lyrical about self-nomination, and how well this had worked in the selection of candidates for the Greater London Assembly! The paper was carried, 21 votes to 4.

A report on NEC Committees and meeting cycles was then taken. Many NEC members are on two committees, but only one member is not on any (apart from the Women's Committee, which all women NEC members are on automatically): Christine Shawcroft. Christine volunteered (self nominated?) to go on the Party Development Committee, which is smaller than other Committees, but was turned down. She seems to have done something to upset them.

Grassroots tangle with Conference platform

The NEC had planned for Conference to be a showcase rally (see overleaf). The National Policy Forum had done its duty and there were no amendments on any of the Policy Forum documents before delegates. Conference Arrangements Committee weeded out the controversial motions and transplanted them in the Policy Commissions. However, the grassroots would not lie down on two issues which will be key for the year ahead: pensions and PFI.

The first upset came during the debate on the Policy Forum welfare reform document, which was in its final year. After a series of tame speeches, delegates began to call for Barbara Castle to speak. When the Chair, Vernon Hince, stated he would only take one more speaker, Castle went to the rostrum without being called, to great applause. Hince refrained from stopping her, a wise decision which probably saved his life. But when he asked Castle to wind up, delegates started to boo him. The main objection to index linking pensions is that this policy would be the Trojan horse which would let the Tories in at the next General Election – which is not an argument but an insult to our intelligence. The document was passed, but the mood of Conference had irrevocably changed.

Conference later debated the Policy Forum document on economic policy, which was in its first year of consultation. Clare Wadey from Brighton Pavilion CLP spoke up for us all by raising a point of order, quoting from material agreed at the 1997 Conference which state that paragraphs of documents can be referred back. The Chair did not agree, but Clare stuck to her point and when the vote was taken the economic policy document was lost. The vote was later reversed on the grounds that first year documents are essentially for noting, and therefore no vote is really needed, but let's vote again anyway because there were a lot of abstentions.

At the economic policy seminar on Thursday morning, most of the contributions were about PFI or pensions. Therefore, although the passing of the welfare reform document is supposed to end discussion on welfare, if pensions are part of economic policy, we can talk about them again next year, can't we?

There is also a great deal to play for in the ongoing debate on PFI. The leadership denies that PFI schools and hospitals are more expensive, but there are countless examples, case histories, and figures



Christine Shawcroft

to prove that it is more expensive. One of the key arguments which ensured we won the minimum wage was that is was more expensive not to have one.

Party members at Policy Forums are opting for improved welfare provision and against PFI, but the weight of these opinions is not being felt because the Policy Forum is not under an obligation to account for what it has done with CLP submissions. If your Policy Forum makes a submission on a National Policy Forum document, please send a copy to Liz or Christine, so we can help keep track of Party members' feelings on these matters.

The NEC is meeting on the following dates. Contact Liz or Christine if there is an issue you would like them to raise. 23 Nov, 25 Jan, 28 March, 23 May, 25 July, 19 September.

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This bulletin is written by Liz Davies and Christine Shawcroft who were elected (in an OMOV ballot!) to the Constituency Section of the Labour Party National Executive Committee for the year 1999/2000. They were supported by the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance.

To keep in touch with the news from the NEC, the Policy Forum and the Women's Organisation, subscribe to the monthly magazine *Labour Left Briefing*. Send your name, address and cheque to *LLB* for £14 (UK) to PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU.

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