



The Future Party

By Peter Hain

The Right Honourable Peter Hain is
Leader of the House of Commons,
Secretary of State for Wales and MP
for Neath.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those people who provided advice and comments during the writing of this pamphlet.

I am also very grateful to the grassroots party members who participated in a series of focus groups I conducted, and whose views are quoted throughout the pamphlet. Furthermore, I would like to thank those people who contributed to Catalyst's research on party reform, which form an important part of the background to the writing of this pamphlet.

Finally, I am especially grateful to my researcher Matthew Burchell and my other staff and colleagues for their work on this pamphlet.



Contents

	Foreword by Rt Hon Ian McCartney MP	3
I	Introduction	4
	What kind of party do we want?	4
	A strong democracy, a strong party.	4
	Building the Future Party.	5
2	Reviving involvement, building support	7
	A strong grassroots party	7
	The state of the membership.	8
	The need for local reform.	9
	Diversifying local activity	12
	Unions and local parties	13
	Effective communication	14
	Reaching out to the local community	16
	A national Labour Supporters Network.	16
	Harnessing new technology	18
	Representative candidates.	19
	Should we introduce primaries?	20
	Conclusion – reviving involvement, building support.	22
3	Reconnecting the party with policy-making	23
	Party members and policy	23
	Renewal in government.	23
	Improving policy-making	24
	Issues that matter to members.	25
	Stimulating discussion.	27
	Strengthening party conference	28
	Independent policy working groups.	29
	The missing audit trail	30
	Conclusion – reconnecting the party with policy-making.	32
4	Re-engaging with young people	33
	Attracting new blood.	33
	A single youth section	34
	Resources	35
	Autonomy and accountability.	36
	Conclusion – re-engaging with young people.	38



5	Reconnecting with the unions	39
	The link with the unions	39
	The union link under pressure	39
	Where next?	40
	The unions and the Future Party	41
	The unions and public funding of political parties	42
	Conclusion – reconnecting with the unions	44
6	Conclusion	45
	Recommendations	46
	Notes	50
	Publications	52
	Subscriptions	54



Foreword

By Rt Hon Ian McCartney MP

Nearly ten years ago, Hazel Blears and I joined a number of Labour Party colleagues in trying to develop a better way of engaging Labour Party members, trade unionists and the wider local community in the way the Labour Party develops its policies. Our aim was to ensure that there are engaged, vibrant, campaigning, local parties that represent the party on the doorstep; while also ensuring that members have a strong voice in the party's decision-making structures.

Those ideas were discussed in the *Building a Healthy Party* and *21st Century Party* papers in 1997 and 1999/2000. Last year the party published *21st Century Party – the next steps*, which looks at many examples of excellent practice in engaging Party members, affiliates and community activists in local Labour Parties.

This is a key challenge for the future of the Labour Party, and politics in general. All political parties have struggled to keep up with changes in our electorate, and politicians often seem out of touch. People are turned off by politics and politicians risk finding themselves marooned on a political island, where they talk to each other in a language which only they understand.

The challenges we face as a party also apply to the wider labour movement. Trade unions represent just under a third of the workforce. I know that the new generation of union leaders are determined that the union movement reached out to the majority of workers that are outside our movement, in particular in the private sector where union density is at its lowest. Once those workers are in union membership, we need to develop a strategy to bring new trade unionists into membership and activism in the Labour Party.

The excellent work that has been developed by party and union activists at a grass roots level over the past decade – along with the many ideas in this excellent pamphlet – should all feed in to the review of Partnership in Power that I announced last year, and will report to the party after Conference 2004. Partnership in Power has received record submissions this year, meaning tens of thousands of Party members have helped to shape our policies for a third term. The Big Conversation has been a significant innovation that we have brought to the way we do our politics. This is light years ahead of the way any other political party develops its policy, but it does not mean we stop listening to good ideas or improving our processes.

Nearly seven years into government, we have now governed for longer than any other Labour government in over 100 years of proud history. Yet while we should all draw pride from that achievement, it does highlight a historic fact: In its first 100 years, Labour was a natural party of opposition, governing only for short periods before the Tories returned to power. Our challenge is to transform the Labour Party into a natural party of government. A modern, vibrant, campaigning party – active both at a national and a local level.

I look forward to working with Peter, other ministerial colleagues, local party activists and all members on developing the Labour Party as a party of the community, in the community and for the community.

The Right Honourable Ian McCartney MP is Labour Party Chair and Chair of Labour's National Policy Forum.



Introduction

What kind of party do we want?

Since the Labour Party was first established over a century ago, the political environment in which it operates has been transformed. The advent of the modern mass media has created challenges and opportunities that could not have been imagined by our founders – hundreds of TV and radio stations, 24-hour rolling news and the birth of the internet, as well as a vibrant print media. And changes to society have transformed the way that we relate to one another – with changing patterns of work and family life, rising prosperity, increased geographical and social mobility, more privatised lifestyles and new modes of communication.

Some argue that these changes, especially new forms of communication, have fundamentally altered the role of political parties – perhaps even rendered them obsolete. The political parties of the future, they claim, will be able to engage directly with the electorate, and will not need the kind of cumbersome membership structure and unwieldy local organisation that was developed for a bygone age. Instead, they will rely on looser, more organic networks, connected electronically and centred around a small, strong and fleet-footed political leadership. The role of party members, if they are to have a role at all, would be marginal, while party leaders would be free to shift around with the prevailing political mood.

But a key reason why trust in political parties has declined is because political parties are perceived by the electorate as a cartel, dominated by an elite which excludes challenging new ideas from discussion.¹ This is a prescription for still further disillusionment and eroding democracy.

So this is a vision that I totally reject – not only because I believe the analysis is wrong, but because it would be harmful to democracy. Parties don't just need members for door knocking, telephone canvassing or leaflet delivery. For Labour especially, our mass membership provides a crucial link between the party leadership and the people we serve. Our members are rooted in their local communities in a way that a political elite can never be. A politics dependant upon a wholly professionalised, media-driven elite cannot deliver the change needed to create a more fair and equal society to which socialists aspire and for which the Labour Party was founded.

For Labour it is therefore imperative to address these issues, by posing fundamental questions about the kind of party we want to build in the future, and how we re-engage with our own members and with the wider electorate.

A strong democracy, a strong party

It might be stating the obvious to say a strong democracy requires strong political parties. But widespread disaffection from party politics requires we must assert and argue the case. Parties are the essential means by which voters exercise electoral choice, providing voters with alternate visions for the future of society. They aggregate issues and enable



priorities to be determined and choices made in a way that single issue politics does not and cannot. They mobilise and respond to public opinion, enabling people to directly influence policy direction. And they supply the candidates who run for public office, providing political leadership and accountability.

But despite this, confidence in political parties is low – only 15 per cent of the public trust them.² Turnout in elections is in decline, with only 59 per cent of people voting at the last general election. And political parties are seeing their membership bases shrinking, with all three main parties registering a significant drop in the last ten years.³ Political parties must face up to the problem of public disenchantment if we are to avoid a crisis of democratic legitimacy.

For Labour this is especially important. Ours is a mission to transform society. We depend for our support upon enthusiasm, commitment and determination in a way that parties essentially defending the status quo of an unequal unjust society do not. We are nothing if we do not have an active and engaged membership.

This is even more important for Labour in government. The decline in membership, in activism and the fall in Labour MP's morale coupled with more frequent back bench rebellions, demonstrate an unhealthy fragility in the government's party base, and a worrying disconnect between government policy and the grass roots. Frustratingly this has come when we have been more successful in power than any previous Labour government.

Our task now is to strengthen Labour's mass membership, not weaken it – which means empowering not downgrading back bench MPs, councillors and members. The future party must be broad-based, with a participatory culture engaging an active membership. This was the thinking behind our drive to recruit new members during the 1990s, and reforms such as the introduction of the National Policy Forum (NPF). But we must go further, and think more radically than before.

The 21st Century Party initiative, launched by the Labour Party in 1999 with a further consultation published last year, is an attempt to do this. It examines a range of radical reforms for revitalising the party, some of which have already been piloted. This pamphlet is a contribution to that debate, and it draws upon consultations with party members across the country, some of their views being directly quoted.

Building the Future Party

If the party is to be strong in the future, we need to ask why it is that people join the party in the first place, and what it is that keeps them engaged. What role do members expect to play when they join? What are the obstacles to a broader membership and how do we remove them? And how do we ensure that members remain motivated and continue to sustain the party?

Answering these questions will go a long way towards solving the party's well known problems – the drop in membership, attendance at meetings and grassroots activism, and negative perceptions among both our own members and the wider electorate, who see the party's internal politics as over-centralised and disciplinarian.



People join Labour fundamentally because they share the party's broad vision of a better society. By joining, they hope both to contribute to the effort to deliver that vision and to help shape the policies that build towards it. So we need to create a party where members are given the chance to become involved in a wide variety of ways, a party that is outward-looking and where members have the opportunity to debate policies and exercise influence, but a party in which they still feel at home even if they do not win the argument.

The party's current structures do not provide this. There are two key areas where I believe we need to make fundamental reforms.

Firstly, we must seek to revive grassroots activism, broadening our base and reforming the workings of local parties. We should acknowledge that members have a wide range of different interests, and local party structures should enable members to pursue those interests, offering a variety of policy forums, campaigns, political education, social activity and community work. And we should look to broaden our base to encompass a much wider cross-section of society.

Secondly, members need a more meaningful opportunity to comment on policy development – not just expected to knock on doors in the rain without being given anything in return. As a matter of principle, therefore, members should be consulted on all major policy decisions where it is feasible to do so. The government would not have had anything like as much difficulty on student fees and foundation hospitals had this occurred, because Ministers would have had the opportunity to listen to membership concerns and members would have had the opportunity to better understand governmental imperatives.

There are two further areas where I believe we need to take action if we are to be strong in the future: the role of young people in the party, and our link with the unions.

Many young people express serious disenchantment with mainstream politics, and unless we address this, we risk losing an entire generation of voters. This would not only cut off our supply of new blood. It would also damage our legitimacy and prevent us from realising our political mission.

And we must positively recognise the importance of trade unions to a healthy Labour Party. Trade unions gave birth to the party and remain an essential connection with working people. They also continue to deliver important organisational and financial resources.

This is not just a matter for party aficionados. If we do not address this agenda – and soon – at stake is winning another term of office and the ability of Labour to become this century's "natural party of government" that the Tories were for the last one.



2 Reviving involvement, building support

A strong grassroots party


Historically, Labour's strength has been in its origins as a bottom-up, membership-based movement. Unlike the Conservatives and the Liberals, which started off exclusively as parliamentary caucuses and only developed grassroots organisations out of political necessity following the extension of the franchise, Labour grew out of the trade union movement and was established specifically as a political voice for working people. We have always been rooted in the communities that elected us – and while we must always adapt to changing circumstances, it is essential to remain a bottom-up party.

Of course huge social and technological changes have transformed the way our party campaigns and operates in the century since it was first established - vast changes in the media, the decline of traditional Labour networks, falling union membership, shifting career patterns, increased geographical mobility and, above all, the decline of big, heavy industry, largely unionised and with organic links to immediately surrounding communities. The decline of community itself, with families and individuals spending more time entertaining themselves at home rather than out in clubs or pubs, has also undermined Labour's traditional culture. The result has been the modern media campaign, where politicians communicate primarily with the public through the national media – the so-called “air war” – while the “ground war”, old-style grassroots organisation, is seen as being of lesser importance.

But even in this age of mass media and digital communications, the importance to the Labour Party of a strong membership base is undiminished. We depend on our members not just for organisation during elections, but also to fight as candidates, to campaign for our policies, to engage with local civil society, and as a source of ideas and legitimacy. Without an active and engaged membership at a local level, it is impossible for our party to flourish.

Our opponents provide a sobering case study of what can happen if the importance of a strong membership is neglected. A key factor in the decline of the Conservative Party was its ageing membership, its inability to recruit new members and a hollowing out of the party at a local level as a result of heavy local election defeats during the 1980s and 1990s. The recent decision by Tory donor Michael Ashcroft to designate a £2 million donation exclusively for local party development provides a clear indication that the Conservatives have learnt this lesson.

Furthermore, the grassroots “ground war” could be making a comeback as a crucial pillar of a successful election campaign, particularly in an era of electoral volatility and low turnouts. Research conducted by Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd following the 1997 general election has shown that grassroots campaigning does make a real and potentially decisive difference to electoral outcomes – for example, they estimated that, if Labour activists had done no local campaigning at all in 1997, our majority would only have been 33 instead of 178.⁴



And in the United States, where low turnout has long been an enduring electoral phenomenon, we have seen a growing trend in recent campaigns towards elections being won and lost less on the ability of a candidate to appeal to voters through the media, and more on that candidate's skill at mobilising their supporters at a local level.⁵ This could be a foretaste of future election campaigning in the United Kingdom.

We therefore need to bring about a revival in local participation in the Labour Party. We need to reform local party structures and look for new ways to enable people, both members and supporters, to get involved in the party locally. We also need to secure a much broader base than we have at present. This chapter sets a number of ways of achieving this.

The state of the membership

Since 1997, the party has seen a significant decline in membership. Although 1997 represented a high water mark amidst a yearning for change, and rose as high as 400,000, it is now under 250,000.⁶ This decline is mirrored by the experience of political parties across most of the rest of Europe – but it has, nevertheless, been sharp.⁷

The social characteristics of our members also differ markedly from society as a whole. More than 60 per cent of Labour Party members are male and a disproportionate number are middle class graduates and aged over 40.⁸ This picture is exaggerated further if you look only at activists rather than the membership as a whole. Furthermore, only a tiny proportion of our overall base of supporters actually ends up joining the party. In 2001, 10.7 million people voted Labour, meaning that only 1 in 40 Labour voters were party members; in 1951, the figure was 1 in 15.⁹

This suggests that the base of the party is becoming narrower, and only a small proportion of members – probably about 10 per cent – are active on a regular basis. Many of those people have one or more other community commitments, such as serving as a school governor. We therefore need to find ways of reversing the decline in membership and offering people new ways of expressing their support for the party. There is also widespread anecdotal evidence that fewer people attend local party meetings than in previous years; that few of the familiar faces at party meetings belong to members under the age of forty; and that it is increasingly difficult to persuade people to participate in party activity.

Inevitably, disagreements over policy, particularly highly contentious issues such as the military action in Iraq, have played a part in creating the problems we face. Likewise, divisive internal disputes have led to a breakdown of trust among party members – for example, the battle in 2000 over Ken Livingstone's campaign for the London mayoral candidacy.

But there are other factors at play too. Some members find party meetings boring. They believe that meetings focus too often on the wrong things and are excessively driven by process rather than the policies which inspired them to join. Local party structures can appear complicated and bureaucratic. Party activity can be too inward-looking, with links to the community neglected. This spurs calls for reform.



Views of members – the state of the membership

"The members are getting older, we don't seem to be able to attract younger members, and a lot of the middle aged and older members have lost interest."

"Only about 10 per cent of our membership is active and we only offer them one form of activity – branch meetings, CLP and process. And people don't necessarily join the party just to attend branch meetings."

"I really don't think we've had a great deal of success in getting new members. We've lost quite a lot for one reason or another. Certainly the circumstances recently have not been at all helpful for membership."

"Most of us have been school governors or something, and we know that in each area there's going to be a little group of really, really hard working people, who are going to be on the governors, running the scouts and everything. And they get so overcommitted."

The need for local reform

It is imperative that the Labour Party reforms at a local level. We need to revive party membership and activism, to encourage more members to attend meetings, to have more debate on policy, to devote more time and resources to campaigning, and to engage with local civil society. If we are successful, the outcome will be a more energetic, outward-looking and forward-thinking local organisation. If we are not, we risk both an erosion of our mass membership and serious electoral consequences, locally and nationally.

This does not imply wholesale adoption of a centrally prescribed model for reform. The process of reform must come from the bottom-up. Indeed, a welcome characteristic of the 21st Century Party initiative is its emphasis on local flexibility. Certain solutions will not be appropriate everywhere. It is important that we learn from different experiences around the country if we are to discover which solutions work best.

Views of members – local party structures

"We're left with these funny structures – branch structures, GC structures – which have been there since the First World War."

Key elements of local parties date back to the First World War. The local branch structure was modelled on the organisational architecture of the trade unions that founded the party – indeed, in many areas with a dominant local industry, there was significant overlap between the two. Other elements, such as the practice of nominating delegates to the local constituency's General Committee (GC), were devised to reflect the party's unique membership structure – by adopting a delegate system, it was possible for individual members to sit alongside representatives of affiliated trade unions and socialist societies. Overall, the structure of the party was geared heavily towards securing Labour representation in parliament and on local councils, with local parties mirroring parliamentary constituencies and local government ward boundaries.



In many ways, this structure has served us well. However, that does not mean we should regard it as sacrosanct. For example, many local branch meetings are very poorly attended, because branches based on local government wards are too small to attract a critical mass. This in turn discourages new members from attending, because their local ward appears moribund. For those members who do attend, they face the excessive burden of organising all local branch activity. Even in those areas where the number of branches has been reduced by pairing wards together, there is still often a struggle to find volunteers for branch officers or even GC delegates. Contested branch elections are a positive rarity.

But there is no reason why the branch structure of local parties has to correspond to local government ward boundaries. Indeed, because wards are not always coterminous with identifiable neighbourhoods, these structures can appear meaningless. Ward-level organisation need be retained only for the selection of candidates for local government elections. Many local parties, including City of York Constituency Labour party (CLP), Wellingborough CLP, Mansfield CLP and Glasgow Springburn CLP, have already benefited from merging smaller branches.¹⁰ Others, most notably Enfield Southgate CLP (see Case Study) have taken even more radical steps by drastically reducing the number of branches. This will not be appropriate everywhere – in areas (unlike Enfield) which cover a large geographical area, members might be deterred from attending meetings if they had to travel further. But in other areas, such reform could inject a new vitality.

Likewise, there could be benefits in opening up decision making to more members at a constituency level. The current system whereby members need to be nominated as a GC delegate is necessary for effective decision making, particularly on party business matters. But it can exclude members from policy participation. While GCs should not be abolished, all members who want to be involved at a constituency level should be enabled to do so.

Many constituencies already encourage all members to attend GC meetings as observers. Others have experimented with more radical changes. For example, Mansfield CLP has turned its GC into an all-member meeting and has devolved responsibility for day-to-day business to the Executive Committee (EC). In Birmingham Edgbaston CLP, the only GC meeting held each year is the AGM, while other meetings are open to all members. Durham North CLP holds GC meetings every other month, alternating with all-member meetings. Wigan CLP's monthly meetings alternate between branch meetings, which are held in "clusters" and focus on campaigning, and all-member CLP meetings, which discuss policy, with an open invitation to supportive members of the public. And both Oxford CLPs have subsumed their GC functions within all-member meeting.¹¹ Some of the most radical changes have been pioneered by Enfield Southgate CLP, and their experiences are worth studying by other local parties (see Case Study).



Case Study: Enfield Southgate CLP

Enfield Southgate was one of the first constituencies to experiment with a new CLP structure as part of the 21st Century Party reforms. In consultation with local members, councillors, newly elected MP Stephen Twigg and the regional office, the CLP opted to trial a 2-year pilot structure in Spring 1999.

The starting point was an attempt to reduce the number of procedural meetings and instead focus on party renewal and how to attract members. Despite defeating Michael Portillo in the 1997 election and returning the first ever Labour MP for the area, the triumphal mood had not translated into an increased activist base.

A completely new structure was piloted locally. The GC was replaced by a quarterly All Members meeting, branches were abolished and the EC transformed into a Co-ordinating Group. A monthly newsletter that was posted to all members held the new structure together.

In addition a permanent campaign group was set up to co-ordinate active campaigning. The aim was to shift the focus of activity from branches to CLP wide activity where individual members could choose at what level they wished to engage. Branches were substituted for issue groups where members could discuss policy in more depth.

The experience of the new structure was mixed, with the All Member Meetings proving much more popular than the formal GC, but with some feeling that abolition of branches had removed more localised contact. Issue groups were not the success that some members hoped for. However, instead of simply reverting to the old system, the CLP consulted members again and adapted the structure further.

After two years, members opted for a composite structure combining regular All Member Meetings every other month, and grouped branch meetings in the other month. There are still problems with getting members involved in campaigning and the constituency recognises it could do more to engage affiliates and community groups. The pilot has, however, produced a simpler and more welcoming CLP structure with fewer meetings and a greater focus on campaigning.

The advantage of reforming local party structures is that it frees up time, allowing local activity to be diversified (see overleaf) and involving a wider cross-section of the membership. And crucially it provides local parties with an opportunity to be more outward-looking, addressing themselves to the issues that concern their local communities and recruiting new members.



Recommendations: The need for local reform

- ▶ There is no reason why the branch structure of local parties has to correspond to local government ward boundaries. By reforming branch structures to create larger branches, some local parties might be able to increase meeting attendance and re-engage members.
- ▶ The current GC-delegate structure is necessary for effective decision making, particularly on party business matters. But it also creates a two-tier system of membership which can exclude some members from party activity. While GCs should not be abolished, all members who want to be involved at a constituency level should be enabled to do so, and local parties should ensure their local arrangements provide scope for this.
- ▶ Local meetings should offer a range of different activities so as to engage the widest possible number of members and to ensure that local parties look outwards to their communities.
- ▶ Local branch parties should ensure they build the strongest possible links with other local branch parties on matters of common interest.

Diversifying local activity

A key theme of the 21st Century Party is the need for local parties to find ways of broadening the type of activities that they carry out at a local level. It is this thinking that lies behind the suggestion that local parties should have more all-member meetings and fewer process-oriented GC meetings.

Talking to members, it is clear that many of them welcome moves of this kind – especially younger members, who do not necessarily share the affection that some of their longer-standing colleagues feel for the traditional way of doing things. Simplifying meetings, and doing away with unnecessary procedure and administration might even help attract new members or existing members who are inactive. It could also free up more time for local policy forums, enabling local party members to contribute to the national policy-making process, for social activities, strengthening the bonds between local party members and raising additional revenue, for speaker events, providing a change from normal meeting agendas, for developing links with local civil society, and for campaigning and electoral endeavour.

There is also a demand from some members for a more formalised way of bringing members together who are interested in specific areas of policy, such as health, education or the environment. Many constituencies already have successful women's or youth forums. A health forum or an education forum could be seen as a natural extension of this. In those areas where there are too few people in a single constituency to make such forums viable, it might be possible to set up such groups on a cross-constituency basis.

This innovation also offers a mechanism by which local parties can strengthen their links with local civil society. Participation in a local health forum need not be confined to party members. Local nurses, doctors, hospital managers and other healthcare workers could be invited to attend. Similarly, an education forum might include teachers, school governors, parent groups, and even local employers. Attracting participants from outside our core of

Views of members – local party activity

“We’ve got to do something with the structure and the agenda. It’s just dire, process-driven.”

“We just spend so much time in GCs just jumping through hoops. You can see why the rules are there, but sometimes it feels like the rules are getting in the way of what we should be there to discuss.”

“We’ve just got bogged down with elections. Year after year after year of elections.”

“A standing item on each agenda we have in our branch is a speaker. It doesn’t mean we necessarily need to go outside, because the members who turn up are very interesting, they’ve got different experiences, different aspects of life, often to do with different lines of policy.”

“When do we ever talk to anyone from outside our boundaries? We’re doing campaigning, selections, for the local elections, for the assembly elections, when do we have open meetings? When do we say, you know, come and talk to us about parliament?”

“Women’s groups are one of the few well-developed groups within the Labour Party where you can pursue one issue. It’s the same with the youth movement. But if you’re interested in health, then there’s not really the same sort of organisation within the party that you need to get policy through.”

natural supporters would help both to broaden our base and to deepen the expertise on which the party is able to draw.

It is important, however, that such attempts to inject new vitality into the activity of local parties do not end up inadvertently diverting energy and resources away from the party’s core work. Part of the effort to create a more varied mix of activity at a local level also needs to involve devoting more time and effort towards campaigning and recruitment.

Recommendation: local party activity

- ▶ Local parties should consider new ways of diversifying local activity and re-engaging members – for example establishing forums on specific areas of interest, holding joint events with outside groups, and having more open meetings.

Unions and local parties

The current GC structure is the mechanism by which both grassroots members and local affiliated union branches are brought together, and has served the party well in the past. If one of our reform objectives is to increase engagement with civil society, we need to ensure that disengagement with a key component of civil society – the trade union movement – is not the unintended consequence.

Research by Sheffield University has shown the importance of maintaining local links with unions. It demonstrated that the 2001 postal vote campaign run by Labour’s affiliated unions was especially effective with trade union members more likely to turn out to vote and more likely to vote Labour than most other groups in the 2001 general election. Turnout fell less in Labour’s 146 priority seats and least of all in the 52 target seats where the Trade Union Labour Party Liaison Committee had run a postal vote campaign.¹²



In those constituencies that have experimented with new structures, there have been some commendable efforts to ensure that local union branches remain engaged – for example, union branches have seized new opportunities such as the ability to organise and participate in local policy forums. It is important that such efforts are encouraged.

But we should not underestimate the importance of formal structures to ensure the local union link is maintained. For example, the post of Trade Union Liaison Officer also takes on much greater importance in constituencies which have reformed their GCs, because following such reforms, this officer must effectively act as local guardian of the union link, responsible for maintaining and developing relationships with local union branches. However, this post is not always filled, and even where it is, links between the local party and local union branches are not always strong. The party should conduct an audit to establish how many local parties have filled this position, and should then try to identify how local parties might be helped to build stronger links.

Likewise, development agreements between local parties and trade unions are important. But the unions tend to sign development agreements with local parties in relatively safe Labour seats where a relationship has been built up over a long period with the local party and MP. Too few of Labour's battleground seats have development agreements with unions, and this includes many seats where the sitting MP is an active member of his or her union's parliamentary group. My own union, the GMB, currently has 38 development agreements with CLPs, but it had 64 at the time of the 2001 general election. Only 11 of those 38 are among Labour's 100 most marginal seats. We should do more to encourage unions and local parties to sign development agreements, particularly in battleground seats.


Recommendations: Unions and local parties

- ▶ Local parties experimenting with new structures should take steps to ensure that local links with trade unions are taken into account and do not suffer as a result of the reforms.
- ▶ The party should conduct an audit to establish how many local parties have filled the position of Trade Union Liaison Officer, and should then try to identify how local parties might be helped to build stronger links with local unions.
- ▶ We should do more to encourage trade unions and local parties to sign development agreements, particularly in battleground seats.

Effective communication

The way that the party communicates with its members can have an important impact on grassroots involvement. Sensible, practical improvements could both improve perceptions of the party among its membership and increase levels of activity.

The way the new members are inducted into the party requires particular attention. The party's complicated local structure is frequently a source of confusion for new members, who are bewildered by a barrage of unfamiliar abbreviations – GC, EC, LGC, CLP. As local parties adopt locally-tailored reforms to their internal workings, there is a risk that it



will become even more confusing. Such complexity may even deter people from getting involved. New members should therefore be provided with a welcome pack which would include a simple guide on the internal workings of the party, both nationally and locally.

Views of members – understanding party structures

“A lot of young people in particular don’t understand how branch meetings feed into GCs, how the NEC is elected, what impact that has, how they choose candidates. There are lots of traps. And I’m an intelligent person but I don’t know how it happens. So I don’t see how people who make less effort are going to work it out.”

It is important too for ongoing communication with members to be improved, not just immediately after they join. Members currently receive a range of regular bulletins from the party nationally, such as e-mail newsletters and the *Inside Labour* magazine. A common criticism relates to the “self-congratulatory tone” of much of the content, which many members find off-putting and sometimes patronising.

Views of members – party communications

“All communications from the party at the moment, the e-mails that they send every week – they just list achievements, but there isn’t very much politics in terms of what’s coming out of Old Queen Street. They don’t discuss the movement of issues in policy forums, for example.”

“Basically, what you get from the party is propaganda.”

While it is undoubtedly important for us to be able to demonstrate to members that we are achieving what we were elected to do, the balance of content in current party communications is not right. Communication with members is counterproductive if they simply click the delete key whenever an e-mail from the party arrives. We should therefore ensure we provide members with more substantive, informative and practical material about party and policy development, ideas for local activity, and so on.

Recommendations: Effective communication

- ▶ New members should be provided with a welcome pack which would include a simple guide on the internal workings of the party, both nationally and locally.
- ▶ Regular communications between the party and its members should focus more on substantive, informative and practical information about party and policy development, where the key debates are, ideas for local activity, and so on.



Reaching out to the local community

If the purpose of a mass-membership party is to connect us to society as a whole, then it is essential that we foster and develop those connections. Too many people see political parties as being interested solely in securing public office, while too few perceive them as genuinely committed to local communities.

The reality, of course, is starkly different. Labour Party members undertake a huge amount of community activity, most of it not linked directly to their involvement in the party. It may be that they are raising funds for their local school or church, doing meals on wheels, or are involved in the delivery of government programmes such as SureStart. The important point is that such community activity is motivated by the same principle and beliefs that make those people join the party.

It is important that as a party we do more to champion this sort of activity. A good example of how this might be done is found in Bromley, where a team of activists in Mottingham ward have mounted a campaign to tackle graffiti in the local area. With kits available from the local council, the members have been painting over graffiti on telephone cabinets (the green boxes on streets). Before each painting session the team delivers leaflets to local streets, encouraging volunteers to join their team and enlisting the support of other helpers. Leaflets were also handed out at the local Co-op and door-to-door after the session, to remind residents that the work was carried out by the local Labour Party at work in their community.

The objective of this kind of initiative, as argued by Paul Richards in his Fabian pamphlet on the subject, is to actively build local community support for the party.¹³ It is not intended to substitute properly funded public services. Furthermore, it complements rather than detracts from the party's core campaigning work. Initiatives combining community activity with party campaigning might benefit other local parties too.

Recommendation: Reaching out to the local community

- ▶ It is important for the party to reach out to local communities and to highlight existing community links.

A national Labour Supporters Network

An innovation that has proved successful in a number of constituencies – notably Reading West (see Case Study) – is the creation of a local Labour Supporters Club. Such schemes offer local parties a means of maintaining regular contact with the large numbers of Labour voters whose names have been gathered during election canvassing, who are contacted and asked if they would like to join the club.

Supporters clubs offer people a means of formalising their support for the party without going as far as becoming full members. This is especially important at a time when people are increasingly sceptical about joining political parties, because it provides people with a means of dipping their toe in the water without committing themselves fully. While only a small number of supporters will convert to full party membership, they may be willing to

Case Study: Reading West CLP

Between autumn 2001 and spring 2002, Reading West CLP, led by the local MP Martin Salter, set about establishing a local Labour Supporters Club. Using canvass returns, people who had supported the party in the previous general election but who were not party members were contacted and invited to join the club. Around 1,000 members were recruited to the club, four times the party membership in Reading West.

The supporters club provides a means by which the local party can maintain regular contact with its base of supporters. Members of the supporters club are sent a regular newsletter keeping them up-to-date with the activity of the local party and MP, and are invited to some events such as a Christmas reception and a Q&A with the local MP.

The key benefit of the supporters' club in Reading has been to engender a sense of belonging among a much wider group of Labour supporters. People who sign up to the supporters' club feel much more engaged with and more favourably disposed towards the party, and have more positive perceptions of its local activity.

Many of the people who signed up to the supporters' club in Reading were keen to express their support for the party, but did not necessarily have a great deal of spare time to devote to party activity. The scheme has been a useful way of encouraging low-level support for the party – posters displayed in windows, envelopes stuffed and so on – but it has encouraged a limited amount of more intensive activity.

It is therefore proved a good way of binding in people who are natural supporters of the party but don't necessarily have the time or inclination to become full and active members.

support the party in other ways, either by donating money, displaying posters at election time, or even offering to help deliver leaflets.

Supporters' clubs are an innovation that could be extended across the country through the creation of a national Labour Supporters Network. The party already enables people to keep in touch with the activity of the party by registering their e-mail address on the party's website. This could be taken further by offering party supporters a wider range of benefits, and by better integrating the information gathered on party supporters at both a national and local level.

Members of the Labour Supporters Network might receive the following benefits:

- ▶ regular communications from the party in addition to the current e-mail newsletter – e.g. regular copies of *Inside Labour*.
- ▶ invitations to open meetings of their local constituency party
- ▶ invitations to local and regional policy forums
- ▶ invitation to local social events
- ▶ the ability to attend party conference at a discounted rate
- ▶ the opportunity to participate in campaigning work

Indeed, modern information technology means that supporters could tailor the benefits they receive according to their particular interests. For example, those particularly



interested in policy debate might choose only to receive information about local policy forums. Others might express an interest in local campaigns on particular issues, such as education, transport or health services.

The purpose of establishing a national Labour Supporters Network would be to broaden the party's base of supporters by providing people with a new way to get involved. It would not be to create a two-tier system of membership or to water down the rights of existing members. Certain important entitlements would be reserved exclusively for party members – the right to vote in selection meetings; the right to vote for the NEC, the party leader and in other national party elections; the right to participate in votes at constituency meetings; the right to attend party conference as delegates and the right to stand as a Labour candidate. The existence of these members-only entitlements would act as incentive for members of the supporters network who want to become more involved to apply for membership of the party.

Nor would the intention of establishing a national Labour Supporters' Network be merely to create a base of "credit card support". While this is in itself a perfectly valid objective, this is a proposal that has greater potential than that. A national scheme would have a far higher profile than local schemes. This would mean that it could reach a large number of party sympathisers who might not be reached through local recruitment alone – for example, by gathering details from subscribers to the party's website, which would then be passed on to local parties. Local parties would therefore play an absolutely crucial role in making the most of such a scheme, by ensuring regular contact between local parties and registered party supporters. The national party would also benefit, because it would have access to details of supporters who are signed up locally.

Recommendation: Labour Supporters' Network

- ▶ The party should learn from the success of local Labour supporters clubs. We should establish a national Labour Supporters Network to provide people with an additional route to express their support for the party.

Harnessing new technology

The next General Election will undoubtedly see an increase in the use of the internet as a campaigning tool. Unlike other media, the internet enables direct communication between voters and political parties, and its grassroots, bottom-up character could energise sections of the electorate that traditionally don't vote especially the young. Labour must be at the forefront of that revolution.

The 2004 US presidential campaign is already taking internet campaigning to new heights. John Kerry, John Edwards, and Howard Dean, the three leading contenders for the Democratic nomination, have all made central use of the internet as a campaigning and fundraising tool.

Dean's campaign was particularly successful at using "viral communication" to gather momentum, with subscribers to Dean's website recruiting other new supporters by e-mailing their friends and family. Campaign activities, such as meetings, leafleting and



envelope stuffing, were also planned online. And particularly striking was the campaign's ability to attract large sums of money in small-dollar donations pledged by credit card over the internet.

Many believe that Dean's failure to win the nomination was a consequence of his almost total reliance on the internet to drive his campaign. In contrast Kerry and Edwards developed a healthier mix of internet activity married to more traditional campaigning methods. It is this mix of old and new that is likely to prove the most effective.

Developing these new techniques in the UK poses some interesting challenges – but they are challenges we must rise to. For example, Dean's use of the internet to organise "meet-ups" to bring activists together tried to compensate for the absence of grassroots structures like local branches. For us, the challenge is using this methodology to complement and strengthen existing structures, not to build something from scratch.

In particular, we should use the internet to reach out much more to people who would not normally become involved in politics. For example, during election campaigns, we could use websites to notify party supporters about local campaign activity for which they could volunteer – information normally only be available to regular activists. We should also pilot an internet-based fundraising drive in the run-up to the next election, to learn how such a strategy might work in the UK. And we should use our own website more effectively to provide more regular information and significantly improve the range of resources we give to our supporters. All of these activities could be carried out under the auspices of a national Labour Supporters' Network, reinforcing our efforts to involve more people who support the party but are not party members.

Recommendation: Harnessing new technology

- ▶ We should make better use of the internet to involve non-traditional supporters in local campaign activity.
- ▶ We should pilot an internet-based fundraising drive in the run-up to the next election.
- ▶ We should provide a significantly improved range of online resources for our supporters – including friendly 'viral' messages for passing on.
- ▶ Because the key goal of an internet strategy is to broaden our base of support, it should be co-ordinated by our new Labour Supporters' Network.

Representative candidates

As a party, we have understood more clearly than any of our opponents the need for elected representatives to reflect the make-up of society as a whole. We appreciate that when the public looks at the House of Commons and sees row after row of middle-aged white men in grey suits, it makes the electorate feel distant from the people who represent them and undermines faith in politics. Furthermore, the problem is self-reinforcing. Women and ethnic minorities are deterred from entering politics by its white, male-dominated image, while the workaholic lifestyle of politicians is off-putting for anyone who wants to enjoy a normal family life, men and women alike.



We have succeeded in tackling this problem to a greater extent than any other party. We have 95 women MPs, four times as many as all the other parties put together. We have 12 black and ethnic minority MPs, while our opponents have none. And our MPs come from a wider range of different backgrounds, from the public services, trade unions, business, law, journalism, academia etc. In the devolved assemblies, we have performed even better – the Labour-controlled National Assembly for Wales now has equal representation for women, and the Labour Welsh Assembly Government is the first cabinet in the world with a female majority.

Nevertheless, women still make up less than a fifth of all MPs, despite representing more than half of the population, while black and ethnic minority MPs comprise less than 3 per cent of our total parliamentary representation compared to 7 per cent of the population as a whole.

Our strategy for increasing the number of women MPs in Parliament through the use of women-only shortlists is controversial and far from ideal. But it is the right one. For example, in Wales our use of women-only shortlists in 1997 saw a record number of women MPs elected. But in 2001, when the policy was not deployed, not a single additional woman was elected in Wales despite a historically high number of retirements among sitting MPs.

It will inevitably take time for the impact of women-only shortlists to be felt fully, because the policy can only be applied when vacancies arise. Over time, however, we will move towards equal representation, and that will in itself help to generate a cultural shift that brings more women into politics. Until that cultural shift occurs, however, past experience demonstrates that women will remain under-represented unless we take positive action to correct that balance.

Recommendation: Selecting more representative candidates

- ▶ We must continue to take steps to ensure that our elected representatives better reflect the make-up of society as a whole, including through positive action measures.

Should we introduce primaries?

There has been growing interest lately in the proposal to broaden participation in candidate selection processes by introducing US-style primaries for parliamentary candidates, mayoral candidates, and so on. Advocates view primaries as a key way to revive political participation and to strengthen links between parties and civil society. They point out that, at present, candidates are typically chosen by only a few dozen people. Turnout in elections would go up following the introduction of primaries, they say, because many of the seats with the lowest turnout are those where a single party dominates, depriving voters of a real choice. By throwing the selection process open to all voters in such constituencies, higher and more meaningful participation would result. And candidates would be more representative, because more people would be able to participate.



Some commentators, such as Paul Richards, have also pointed out that primaries need not rely on official registration of party allegiance, as happens in the USA.¹⁴ Instead, they might be based on the kind of Labour Supporters Network described earlier.

I do not find this convincing. Would primaries really boost participation? The evidence from the United States is that they work better in high profile elections such as the presidential election. But even then, turnout is still consistently lower than in Britain. And primaries are much less effective at raising turnout in smaller elections such as congressional races.

And would they lead to the selection of more representative candidates? In the US, the effect is often the opposite – to win a primary, candidates must appeal to the views of the party's most dedicated supporters, rather than to the wider electorate. Would primaries help broaden our candidate base? There is a real danger that the opposite would happen, with the prohibitive expense of mounting a primary campaign resulting in many ordinary people being shut out.

What impact would the introduction of primaries have on our own party? Our political culture is very different to that in the United States: less personal and more policy-oriented, less money-driven and more ability-based. And the Labour Party is fundamentally different to the Democratic Party. Our strength is in having an active membership devoted to the party as a whole, while political activism in the United States is centred around individual candidates. Party members would understandably regard any move towards primaries as an attempt to diminish their role in the party. Furthermore, the right to participate in candidate selection – or even to stand oneself – is a powerful incentive to join the Labour Party in the first place. There would be a significant risk that the introduction of primaries would simply erode our membership base, weakening rather than strengthening the party.

Views of members – primaries

"They've got a system of primaries in America, and it's a big country, but the percentage of people who actually vote is lower than ours. So it doesn't mean to say that just because you've got primaries that you're going to get people to vote."

Interestingly, the Conservative Party has already piloted a variation of the primary system in order to select candidates in a small number of constituencies. For them, primaries are seen as a means of side-stepping the extremist tendencies of local Conservative Associations and selecting candidates with a more balanced profile in terms of gender, background and political views. However, the Tory primary model has not been developed in any thoroughgoing way. In Warrington, for example, the innovation amounted merely to allowing members of the public to attend an open meeting at which the candidate was chosen by members. The potential pitfalls of this are obvious, such as the ability of opponents to pack out the meeting hall or disrupt the meeting altogether. It is entirely possible that such a lack of procedural rigour would intensify extremist influence rather than diminish it. Indeed, one might reasonably conclude that the Warrington "primary" was merely a gimmick rather than a serious attempt to overhaul selection practices. Until this sort of experiment is attempted more widely, there is a limited amount that we can learn from it.



Recommendation: Reaching out to the local community

- ▶ We should rule out the introduction of primaries as a means of selecting our party's candidate. The evidence from the United States does not suggest that primaries would drive up political participation overall. Indeed, their introduction would be detrimental to activism within the Labour Party.

Conclusion – reviving involvement, building support

So in conclusion, there is a clear case for reform to revive the Labour Party at a local level, with a pattern of declining membership and activism across the country. To address this, local parties should look at streamlining their structures to provide members with new opportunities to get involved and to recognise the different interests of members. We should also try to develop links with the many Labour Party supporters who are not currently members, by creating a Labour Supporters' Network that ties them into the party without going as far as full membership. And finally, we need to look at the issue of local candidate selection, continuing our efforts to increase representation for under-represented groups.



3 Reconnecting the party with policy-making

Party members and policy

When Partnership in Power was introduced in 1997, the key objective was to create a new settlement between the leadership and the membership, engaging party members and the unions in partnership on policy-making to sustain the party in office. The importance of this objective is undiminished – as a point of principle, members must be involved in policy-making. But in reality, many of them feel marginalised, and the Partnership in Power framework is losing credibility.

I believe that we will struggle to establish ourselves as a true party of government unless we can end the relationship of perpetual distrust between party members and the leadership. Yes, that means members must be realistic about the demands and responsibilities of government. But it also means trusting members, and giving them a much clearer role in policy-making. This chapter sets out a number of possible reforms for achieving that.


Renewal in government

The intention of the 1997 reforms was to shift the emphasis away from resolution-based policy-making, which had historically encouraged high-profile but ultimately symbolic confrontations between the leadership of the party and grassroots members. Such showdowns proved deeply damaging to external perceptions of the party and its readiness for government, and proved ineffective at giving party members a meaningful say over policy-making. Instead, Partnership in Power moved us to a more deliberative, collegial form of policy-making.

Almost seven years into a Labour government – longer than any Labour government has ever held power in the past – the rationale remains sound. One of the most significant challenges facing us as a party is how we renew ourselves in power. We must remain a leading force of radicalism, constantly seeking to reshape our society and our economy, distributing power, wealth and opportunity as widely as possible and facing up to the big policy challenges of the future.

In the past, this is something that Labour governments have consistently failed to do – and the relationship between the party leadership and its grassroots has been a central cause of that failure. All previous Labour governments have lost power after short periods in office. This was not only because we allowed our momentum to be sapped by unnecessary internal division. It was because we failed to balance the task of policy renewal with the challenges and responsibilities of government. Instead, we were overwhelmed either by current events or electoral advance by the Conservatives. And the opportunity to transform society for the better was lost.

Party members represent a vast pool of expertise from which fresh and positive policy thinking can be drawn. Our grassroots connect us to civil society more generally, connecting the leadership of the party to the communities that elected it, rather than becoming a distant governing elite.



The lesson we must learn from this is simple. We risk stagnation unless we encourage a free flow of ideas about how to realise our shared objectives, and celebrate rather than stifle the plurality of opinion that exists within the party. Many leading figures within the party have already acknowledged our mistake in failing to recognise this earlier – the tight political and presentational strategy necessarily exercised in opposition and in the early years of office is not a sustainable foundation for remaining in government, because to achieve that requires constant renewal.

At the same time, too many members harbour an unrealistic nostalgia for old ways of doing things. The left is also unaccustomed to being in power. There is an oppositional culture in which party member motivation has been fired by being against something (usually the Tories). When Labour is in power and the inevitable constraints of office prevail, Party members get quickly disillusioned – leading to the familiar cycle of “betrayal” and eventually loss of office. Labour under Tony Blair broke with that cycle in our first term. But it has returned to dog us again.

Improving policy-making

The deliberative approach to policy-making embodied by the Partnership in Power reforms is here to stay. But the current policy-making process needs reform if we are to maintain the trust of grassroots members.

There is belief among many members that policy forums are intended to neuter rather than empower the membership¹⁵. For example, the November 2001 NPF expressed concern about inaccurate reports going to the Joint Policy Committee (JPC) from local, regional and national policy forum meetings, from which contentious points had been omitted to give a false sense of consensus. This sort of thing breeds resentment and disillusionment. Ultimately, unless these concerns are addressed, there is a risk that members will disengage. We could even see a further decline in membership levels if people leave the party as a result.

Views of members – policy-making

“I recently went to my first policy forum, and I thought, this is actually what I thought the Labour Party was supposed to be like all the time.”

“I think if people feel they can make a difference on government policy – because that’s what it’s about – they will join.”

“The National Policy Forum came in and it took the sting out of us.”

Talking to party members, it is clear that they have strong opinions on where the problems lie. For the most part their expectations are realistic. They understand that a governing party has obligations to the wider electorate. They recognise that there are issues where the urgency of a response takes precedence over internal consultation. And they concede that a governing party has a right to disagree with its members.

But they also have a number of practical suggestions on how the policy-making process might be improved. The party will be rewarded if it listens to feedback from members on



these points. Members want the NPF to work effectively. And if it is seen to work effectively, members will engage more fully and the task of policy renewal will be made easier.

Issues that matter to members

A key concern for members is a perception that devolution of most responsibility for policy-making to the NPF has been used as a means of denying them a say over contentious current policy issues. This is possibly the most serious weakness in the party's policy-making process, because it leads members to believe that they have a say only on those issues where they are less likely to have strongly held views, engendering significant disillusionment.

Views of members – cynicism about policy-making

"It's no good having meetings and talking about things and getting feedback if nothing happens or the exact opposite happens. Once we see that these policy forums have some clout, then they'll take off."


"There's a lot of cynicism about the policy forums, not least because of the significant major policies which the party has adopted with precious little consultation with party members."

Foundation Hospitals are a clear example of a recent policy that was not submitted to the NPF prior to legislation being brought before parliament. The fact that the policy had not received prior endorsement from the party exacerbated the resulting controversy. Only belatedly was the policy explained with reference to core Labour values of decentralisation and community engagement, following widespread disquiet among the membership.

There was clearly a valid and interesting debate to be had over Foundation Hospitals. I believe that if the issue had been approached differently, the government would have been able to advance its arguments more persuasively, allaying many of the legitimate concerns expressed by members while taking other points on board. Clearly, we would have been able to approach the issue more calmly if it had gone through the party's policy-making process, instead of trying to resolve matters of contention while the bill was progressing through parliament and under the glare of a hostile media.

This example demonstrates the importance of involving party members more fully in developing policy. In particular, it highlights a weakness with the mechanism for dealing with contemporary issues within the NPF. The controversy over tuition fees – another policy adopted without adequate consultation among members – provides yet a further illustration. There must be much more consultation on specific, current policy issues to retain credibility among party members.

Under the current rules, where policy is discussed in a rolling programme leading towards the development of the next manifesto, the scope for debating current issues is limited. Members welcome the opportunity to shape the next manifesto, but want a say in current policy too, otherwise they believe they are being denied the chance to comment on the policies that really matter to them. The growing use of contemporary resolutions at party conference – a relatively blunt instrument in policy-making terms – is testament to the need for a more effective mechanism for dealing with such issues.



We should therefore look at incorporating a stronger mechanism for the consideration of contentious current issues into the policy forum process. Wherever feasible, all major issues should be referred to the NPF for consultation. For example, we could have a workshop or plenary at the beginning of each policy forum to consider contemporary issues. The Policy Commissions should then ensure that documents on important contemporary issues are submitted to the NPF for consideration. This should not replace the contemporary resolutions mechanism at party conference, but it would provide a greater opportunity for deliberative discussion on topical issues.

Furthermore, we need to involve members much more closely in the development of government policy. Although the current system provides members with considerable scope to think about long-term policy development, current government policy-making is poorly integrated with the party's own deliberations.

There will inevitably be some areas of policy where it is simply not possible to consult the party, because the government needs to respond urgently to an emerging situation – the anti-terrorism legislation introduced after September 11 is one example. But as a matter of routine, we should ensure that Green and White Papers are referred either to the NPF or the Policy Commissions for consideration and comment. Certainly this should be the case for key issues likely to be controversial or high profile such as student fees or identity cards. In order to prevent the NPF from becoming overloaded, the Policy Commission might act as a filter, identifying important or contentious issues to be referred to the NPF.

It is also important that the JPC should exercise a much stronger co-ordinating role. At present, the JPC tends simply to confirm decisions that have been taken by the Policy Commissions. Instead, it should be more pro-active, orchestrating the work of the whole NPF. We should also increase the level of constituency representation on the Policy Commissions. Members need to be more involved from an early stage, and involved at the level where the real power lies. A broader membership would also help allay concerns about the extent of leadership control over the Policy Commissions.

Recommendations: Issues that matter to members

- ▶ The procedures of the National Policy Forum (NPF) should be altered to enable it to consider contemporary issues that arise outside the rolling programme. Wherever feasible, all major issues should be referred to the NPF for consultation.
- ▶ We need to involve members much more closely in the development of government policy. Government Green and White Papers should be routinely referred either to the NPF or the Policy Commissions for consideration and comment. In order to prevent the NPF from becoming overloaded, the Policy Commission might act as a filter, identifying important or contentious issues to be referred to the NPF.
- ▶ The Joint Policy Committee (JPC) should exercise a much stronger co-ordinating role, orchestrating the work of the whole NPF.
- ▶ Constituency representation on the Policy Commissions should be increased.



Stimulating discussion

Talking to party members, a common criticism of the NPF process is a lack of clarity in the presentation of ideas in policy documents, which are intended to stimulate discussion.

There are a number of layers to this criticism. Some members believe that NPF documents are written in language that is difficult to penetrate or workish. Others regard the documents as too bland, and believe that they over-emphasise the achievements of the government at the expense of detailed and informative policy analysis. And finally, some members argue that the documents should include a greater number of alternative policy options for discussion.

Views of members – policy documents

“The documents are so bland. They never get to the nub of the issue. They don’t say ‘this is the decision that we’ve got to take.’”

Some of these points have been made in similar terms by people who have served on the NPF, who have argued that the workshop format lacks the kind of focus that might be provided by a debate on a clear policy proposition. A solution might be for Stage One policy papers to focus on identifying key issues and relevant considerations, perhaps even sketching out alternate policy options, while Stage Two policy papers would consult on specific policy proposals. This would allow time for CLPs and unions to submit amendments and for difficult issues to be discussed with Joint Policy Committee representatives and ministers ahead of NPF meetings.

In addition, many members evidently regard policy forum papers as rather impenetrable, and would find it easier if the factual and analytical content were improved. In particular, details of government achievements should be included only where they are directly relevant to future policy considerations. Policy forum documents are not an appropriate medium through which to disseminate good news about the progress of the government. Indeed, if we are to stimulate open-minded and free-ranging debate, it is essential that the process is relatively neutral.

Furthermore, party members might find it easier to engage with the NPF if it were easier to follow the progress of the NPF on an ongoing basis. The periodic publication of policy forum documents on the party’s website is insufficient to achieve this, because they reach only a limited audience and do not enable ordinary members to track proceedings. Regular NPF updates should therefore be included in *Inside Labour* and distributed via local government and councillor networks.

Recommendations: Stimulating discussion

- ▶ Policy forum documents should give members a clearer idea of the key policy debates in a given area of policy. One potential solution would be for Stage One policy papers to focus on identifying key issues and relevant considerations, perhaps even sketching out alternate policy options, while Stage Two policy papers would consult on specific policy proposals.
- ▶ The factual and analytical content of policy forum papers should be improved and details of government achievements should be included only where they are directly relevant to future policy considerations.
- ▶ Regular NPF updates should be included in *Inside Labour* and distributed via local government and councillor networks.

Strengthening party conference

Under the constitution of the Labour Party, our annual conference is established as the party's sovereign policy-making body – a principle that we must maintain. The introduction of Partnership in Power was intended to enhance rather than undermine this. Although Partnership in Power delegated much of the detailed work on policy development to the NPF, new policy must still be formally approved by the annual conference.

This arrangement acknowledges the limitations of the old resolution-based policy-making system, and instead creates a system where more time is available to consider policy. Furthermore, the NPF is itself a democratically elected and accountable body. It was hoped that this would lead to party conference taking a more strategic role in policy development, rather than becoming pre-occupied with the micro-detail.

This division of responsibilities between conference and the NPF can only work, however, if conference is presented with real choices over policy. In reality, though, the NPF presents conference with few contending policy options when it reports back. Or when alternative positions are presented, they too often become characterised as a confrontation with the leadership or party organisers. This places undue pressure on conference delegates to avoid causing embarrassment to the party, and presents them with little more than a take-it-or-leave-it choice on the policy issues. The wholesale rejection of an entire policy document, combined with the negative publicity associated with a conference “showdown”, is a high price to pay.

Views of members – party conference

“I feel that the excitement has gone out of party conference. It used to be there.”

“The old conferences, they used to be great fun, and you did feel you were actually making policy. Now you feel policy's been made anyway and all you've got to do is nod it through.”

The solution to this is to make it easier for the NPF to present conference with a range of different policy options on key issues. We must make it easier for the NPF to submit minority positions to conference for debate and consideration. This would involve a rule



change to reduce the minimum number of votes required to adopt a minority position, currently set at 35 votes. A more realistic threshold might be 25 votes. This would help restore the role of conference in the policy-making process, and may even help reverse the decline that we have seen in recent years, whereby fewer constituencies are exercising their right to send delegates.

Recommendation: Party conference

- ▶ The NPF should present party conference with a wider range of real policy choices when it reports back, and conference should be given an opportunity to vote on these.

Independent policy working groups

A more radical approach would be to end the role of the Policy Commissions in drawing up discussion documents, which would instead delegate responsibility to more broadly constituted working groups that were less closely associated with the party hierarchy. These working groups would be responsible for identifying different policy options and developing new policy ideas which could then be submitted to party conference for consideration.

The remit of the working groups would be determined on the basis of submissions to the NPF – ordinary party members participating in local forums would be able to say which areas of policy they believed required further investigation, and the Policy Commissions would establish working groups according to the key priorities identified by party members. For example, if members thought that policy on drugs was particularly important and merited discussion outside the rolling programme, this would enable a specific piece of work to be commissioned on that topic.

Such working groups might include ordinary grassroots members alongside members of the NPF, and each group would have at least one MP or other elected representative serving on it. The relevant government minister would be a member of the working group to ensure the process was properly integrated with government thinking.

The working groups would also co-opt independent policy experts as members. For example, a working group looking at economic policy might recruit an expert from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, or a working group on health policy might appoint an experienced health economist from a respected academic institution.

Unlike the current NPF arrangements, these independent policy working groups would take a much more pro-active role in policy development, rather than simply assimilating submissions. They would work in a manner comparable to parliamentary select committees. Once they had been established by the Policy Commissions with a remit to investigate a particular area of policy, they would be free to gather evidence and call witnesses, enabling them to generate genuinely radical new policy ideas. This would help solve one of the criticisms that some members make of the current policy-making process – that it is unrealistic to expect policy forums to generate well-formulated and original policy ideas. Working groups would be able to take embryonic ideas proposed by members and turn them into something genuinely workable.



Views of members – effectiveness of policy forums

“You put a group of strangers in a room and they are expected to solve the problems of the world overnight. But if it was that simple, it would have been done elsewhere. You need to get some specialists involved to focus on certain issues.”

“The idea that you can hold these meetings where twenty strangers get in a room and they come up with this little bit of wisdom that’s never been thought before that’s going to change government policy is a nonsense.”

“The policy forums for me seem to be a great way of just brainstorming and seeing what ideas are out there and what people think. But how are you supposed to develop policy in a room full of anything between 10 and 50 people? It’s quite obviously not feasible to do it like that.”

The Swedish social democrats already operate a successful policy-making system that makes greater use of outside policy expertise and involves the pro-active development of new policy ideas.

The advantage of such an approach would be that discussion documents would gain credibility with members as a result of the greater level of independence and outside policy expertise. This might make the process more engaging. Different ideas developed or identified by the working groups could be referred to party conference for discussion. This would ensure a genuinely deliberative policy-making process, while retaining the overall role of party conference in determining policy.

Recommendations: Independent policy working groups

- ▶ We should debate the merits of introducing independent policy working groups, comprising members of the NPF, ordinary grassroots members and outside policy experts. The relevant government minister would also be a member of the working group to ensure the process was properly integrated with government thinking.
- ▶ The working groups would operate in a way similar to parliamentary select committees, and would be given a remit by the Policy Commissions to identify or develop new ideas in a particular area of policy. These different ideas would then be referred to party conference for consideration.

The missing audit trail

Despite all of its limitations, one of the great merits of the party’s old way of making policy from a member’s perspective was its seeming procedural clarity. Local parties could submit motions to the annual conference and, notwithstanding the cumbersome and mangled text that often resulted from the compositing process, could see their motions put to a vote.

Nowadays, party members are critical of the lack of an “audit trail” in the NPF process. Yes, party members are able to make submissions to the Policy Commissions. Yes, those submissions are sent to members of the NPF for consideration. And yes, many of those suggestions are reflected in the final output on the NPF.



Views of members – the missing audit trail

“We already send issues up to the policy forum, but it’s the lack of an audit trail. We can’t see what happens to them. It’s a black hole.”

“The main criticism of the policy forum process is that it’s not particularly transparent from a member’s point of view. It would be nice to say that this particular element of the final document is a result of something which we said at this policy forum. That would actually do an awful lot to build confidence in the whole process.”

But for many party members, the process by which that happens is less transparent than the old system. Their strong perception is that that submissions go “into the ether” or “into a black hole”. The party also loses, because it means that some members disengage from what might otherwise be a richer and more vibrant policy debate. We should therefore look at ways in which key proposals in policy forum documents might be credited to the local parties and affiliated organisations that submitted them. One solution might be to ask Policy Commission members to act as champions for particular submissions and to highlight new and innovative ideas that have been discussed.

Members also argue that more feedback could be given on why particular proposals have been rejected. The party should therefore consider publishing synopses of policy forum discussion which record why particular ideas are not adopted.

There is also a lack of understanding about how the policy-making process works, particularly among newer members. This was recognised by Progress in 2002 when they published *Making Sense of Policy-making*, a short guide written by Paul Richards and Tony Robinson. A similar guide should therefore be produced by the party and made available online, as well as being sent in hard copy to all new members when they join the party.

Recommendations: The missing audit trail

- ▶ We should create an “audit trail” in policy-making by looking at ways in which key policy proposals might be more clearly credited to the local parties and affiliated organisations that made them. One solution might be to ask Policy Commission members to act as champions for particular submissions and to highlight new and innovative ideas that have been discussed.
- ▶ Local parties should be provided with clearer explanations as to why particular policy ideas have or have not been taken forward.
- ▶ The party needs to produce a simple guide to make it easier for members to make sense of the policy-making process.



Conclusion – reconnecting the party with policy-making

The current Partnership in Power structure is losing credibility among members because they do not believe it influences major policy decisions. The party will become divided and will fail to renew itself in office unless it addresses this. That does not mean a return to the confrontational ways of the past – the old policy-making framework simply didn't work and it damaged us electorally. The question is how the new deliberative approach to policy can be reformed so that it works for all sections of the party.

A key problem is that major, current policy decisions are not referred to the NPF. We need to ensure that this happens wherever feasible, and should involve the party more in government decision-making. We need also to ensure that party conference is presented with more meaningful, alternate policy options by the NPF. And we need to look at ways of giving the NPF a more pro-active role in policy-making, perhaps by enabling it to establish working groups to investigate particular questions of policy. Finally, we need to make the process more transparent and understandable for members, revamping policy documents so that they better stimulate debate, and creating an “audit trail” for policy proposals so that members are able to see where their ideas have been taken on board.



4 Re-engaging with young people

Attracting new blood

The ability to attract young members is a crucial plank of any party's recruitment strategy, and is essential to the long term health of a party. People who become involved and active at a young age are likely to remain committed to the party into the future, thereby broadening the membership base and bringing in new blood.

But historically, we have neglected the importance of a clear youth strategy, striking a positive note towards younger voters in the run-up to elections, but ultimately failing to demonstrate a commitment to giving young people a voice.

At the last general election, turnout among voters aged 18-25 was less than four in ten.¹⁶ This evidence of disengagement is also reflected in the declining number of young people joining the Labour Party. Although we successfully recruited large numbers of young members prior to the 1997 general election, that trend has since been reversed.


It is important to stress that young people do not appear to be turned off by politics in general. Indeed, research repeatedly indicates that many young people care passionately about particular political issues, such as the environment and trade policy. It is notable, for example, that a large proportion of the people who marched against the military action in Iraq were young. But rather than pursuing these concerns through mainstream political parties, many young people are attracted instead to campaign organisations and protest movements, which they feel are better able to reflect their political priorities. This has been the case for decades: as a youth activist I myself was initially involved in campaigns like the anti-apartheid movement. The difference is that, in the past, many of those young people would have identified with Labour.

There are many reasons why young people feel less sympathetic to Labour now. Being in government is one. Decisions like military action in Iraq and our proposals for higher education funding have played a part. But the most fundamental problem is that too many young people see joining a mainstream political party as pointless. Among the young, too many believe that political parties are about surrendering ideals, not advancing them.

Views of members – young people and politics

"I think as far as younger people are concerned, a lot of younger people have become much more politicised, which is good in lots of ways, but they don't see it as relevant to be joining a political party."

"At the end of the day, if we want to attract young people, we have to listen to them. Otherwise, what's going to happen to us? It will be what happened to the Conservatives – the membership will just get older and older and older, and we'll have no young people."



We therefore need to put in place better structures to attract and mobilise young people within the party. We must ensure we do not give young people the impression that joining a political party means surrendering your political principles. We need to treat our youth section as a serious organisation within the party, with proper resources at its disposal and the ability to influence the party as a whole. This requires a real commitment from senior politicians, not just empty rhetoric. Without a strong youth section, we will not bring new blood into the party and are cutting ourselves off from an important section of society.

A single youth section

At present, the Labour Party effectively has two youth organisations – Labour Students and Young Labour. Labour Students is an affiliated organisation, with a separate structure and its own membership. Young Labour, in contrast, is not an independent organisation, but exists under the umbrella of the mainstream party, automatically covering all members under the age of 27. Unlike Labour Students, it does not have its own well developed structure, and levels of organisation differ markedly from one area to the next, with some areas having no organisation at all.

Out of the two, Labour Students is by far the stronger body. This is not really surprising – young people at university are easier to organise, because it is easy to identify and recruit potential supporters within a particular organisation, facilities such as meeting rooms are readily available, and members have time available to devote to party activity. Many universities have large Labour clubs, and these clubs are often highly active, holding weekly meetings, organising campaigns, hosting speakers and holding social events. Indeed, many young people first join the party after being recruited at university. The greater strength of Labour Students is also the result of its status as an autonomous organisation.

But this arrangement also has a number of drawbacks. Links between student Labour clubs and local parties are not always strong, and young members introduced to the party through Labour Students are not always adequately inducted into the party as a whole. As a consequence, when they leave university, many of them will not remain as active members. Furthermore, because young people tend to be more mobile than the rest of the population, it is often difficult for them to become settled in a particular local party.

Views of members – problems attracting young people

“I don’t think we help attract young people with the party structures that we have, quite frankly.”

“The problem for young people in London is that they are very mobile. Every time you move house, which for most people is every year, you cross a constituency boundary and are in a new party.”

A solution would be to follow the example set by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and establish a single youth and student wing. Like Labour Students, this would be a separate organisation with its own structure. But unlike Labour Students, young people would continue to be members even after leaving university, ending the situation whereby membership automatically ceases then. Because young people would be members of an established national organisation, they would retain a strong link with the party even if they moved from one part of the country to another.



Greater efforts would also be made to integrate the organisation into the mainstream party. Branches of the youth section would automatically be affiliated to their local parties, and would be given branches to adopt. This would mean that in branches where there was a particularly high concentration of students because of the presence of a university campus, for example, much of the responsibility for running the local branch would be handed over to members of the youth section. This would result in increased engagement with the local community, and might even mean increased number of young people standing for election to their local councils.

Membership of the youth section would also confer automatic membership of the party – unlike Labour Students. The objective of these reforms would be to ensure greater continuity and to encourage young people to play an ongoing role in the party long after signing up at Freshers' Fair:

Recommendation: A single youth section

- ▶ Labour Students and Young Labour should be merged to create a single youth and students organisation with its own autonomous structure. Greater efforts should also be made to develop links between the youth section and local parties, to encourage young people to remain involved in the party even after leaving university.


Resources

One of the advantages that Labour Students currently has over Young Labour is that, with three full-time sabbatical officers – chair, national secretary and campaigns – the level of support available to the organisation is far greater. This also allows them to focus on NUS and students' unions as a training and development ground as well as concentrating on recruitment.

Young Labour has no such support. This means that young people wanting to establish Young Labour groups around the country do not receive the kind of organisational assistance, guidance and encouragement that they require to ensure that such groups are successful. This is a significant problem, because Young Labour groups have a much more daunting task identifying and reaching out to young members than is the case for Labour Students.

Even after the establishment of a single youth and student section, it would still be necessary to recognise the greater challenges involved in organising young people who are not in full-time education. Efforts have been made to remedy this. Young Labour groups are able to operate across constituency boundaries, making it easier to achieve the kind of critical mass required for such groups to be viable. But under-resourcing is still a particular issue.

To address this problem, we should therefore create a position for a full-time, elected sabbatical support officer for Young Labour, responsible for providing organisational support and best practice guidance for Young Labour groups around the country. This officer would work alongside the existing Labour Students sabbaticals within the new



merged structure, but their role would be to develop support among young people not in full time education. In particular, this officer would be responsible for forging links with trade union youth sections, ensuring skills sharing across the youth section of the entire movement as well as representation for young members in the workplace. Young Labour needs to be a training ground for future party activists, and proper mentoring is required if it is to fulfil that role.

We should also consider how the youth representative on the National Executive Committee (NEC) is integrated into the new youth section. For example, the role could be combined with one of the sabbatical positions.

In addition to these proposals, the party should consider appointing a senior official – with a budget – who would have responsibility for youth development. This official would have a role similar to the current Equalities Unit, and would oversee work such as the creation of a proper tracking mechanism to ensure that young people do not drop out of the party once they leave full-time education.

Views of members – resources for the youth section

“The problem is, in the youth movement, there is a lot of enthusiasm, and a lots of us who are prepared to put a lot of time into it, but we don't really know what to do. We don't know what's going to appeal to people. If we had some kind of template, or if we had communication with other youth sections about things that they've done that have attracted people to come along to meetings, it would be useful.”

Autonomy and accountability

Providing better support for the party's youth section should form part of a wider effort to make the organisation more autonomous and accountable. In particular, ensuring the youth section has more autonomy to address young people's concerns is vital if they are to regard it as a serious channel for advancing their beliefs.

For many young people, political parties seem irrelevant. It is not the young people are uninterested in politics, rather, they do not believe that political parties either champion or listen to their concerns. Youth politics is seen as a vocation for political careerists rather than people who are passionate about the issues.

This is not helped by evidence of interference in the affairs of the youth section, such as internal elections, which have become widely discredited, with particular candidates being favoured at the expense of others. In addition, members of the national executive of Young Labour currently hold their positions on an ex-officio basis, which draws the legitimacy of the organisation into question. And pressure has been placed on the youth section to fall into line over certain policy issues. Overall, this creates the impression that the organisation is little more than a vehicle for junior machine politics, rather than a means of advancing political beliefs.

The party should maintain a position of scrupulous neutrality in relation to the affairs of its youth section. The young wing should be encouraged to reach independent positions on



policy issues that matter to its members, even where this is at variance with the policy of the party as a whole. And it should be given clear opportunities to feed those positions into the policy-making process of the party as a whole. For example, the party's youth section should have a guaranteed slot at party conference on topical debates. We could also add a youth and student report section to the annual conference. This would help ensure that the youth section became more mainstream. There should also be an annual youth conference, which all young members would be entitled to attend, and which would provide young members with a platform for discussing the policies that are of greatest importance to them.

We must avoid re-incarnating the sectarian tradition of Labour youth politics which enabled Militant to take it over. But, if the youth section is to have credibility with the huge swathes of young people who are becoming disengaged with mainstream politics, it must show that it is able to accommodate independent thought, and the party must show that it is taken seriously within the organisation as a whole. Otherwise, we stand little chance of winning young people back.

Recommendations: Resources and accountability

- ▶ More resources should be made available to the youth wing to help young people set up local Young Labour branches around the country.
- ▶ We should create a position for a full-time, elected sabbatical support officer for Young Labour, responsible for providing organisational support for young members who are not in full-time education.
- ▶ We should also consider how the youth representative on the National Executive Committee (NEC) is integrated into the new youth section. For example, the role could be combined with one of the sabbatical positions.
- ▶ The party's youth section should be fully autonomous and accountable, with an elected executive and greater freedom to champion policies that appeal to young people.
- ▶ The party's youth section should have a guaranteed slot at party conference on topical debates. We could also add a youth and student report section to the annual conference. This would help ensure that the youth section became more mainstream.
- ▶ There should be an annual youth conference, which all young members would be entitled to attend.



Case Study: London Young Labour

Since its formation, Young Labour has often found it difficult to form sustainable groups. As young people go to university, move out of home or find new jobs, groups lose and gain members. This often results in a group becoming dormant when key activists leave.

London Young Labour (LYL) was re-established in summer 2002 after a year or two of inactivity. Several attempts were made during that time to create an organisation, but they did not reach further than holding one or two events. The greatest hurdle in organising events was communicating with members. To reach as many members as possible, mailings had to be sent by post, because email addresses were not available for most members. This meant a substantial cost, especially given that Young Labour has no guaranteed national budget. But with fundraising and support from the regional party office, this has been overcome. Since then, the regional office of Unison has supported and funded a regular newsletter mailed to all members.

When Young Labour was set up, its structure was left very flexible and vague. This was done to ensure that unlike its predecessor (Young Socialists), it would not be dominated by factionalism. However, this flexibility also resulted in a lack of accountability. To address this, shortly following LYL's launch event, open elections were held, overseen by the regional party office. Since then, only two of thirteen members on the executive stood again, yet the transition went smoothly, with regular events and activity throughout the past two years.

Ensuring that the organisation is democratic and accountable to its members is a key to LYL's success. Working with the regional party and trade unions, LYL has shown that by engaging with its members and ensuring accountability, it is possible for a Young Labour to thrive.

What LYL demonstrates is that a modern, inclusive structure can still be democratic. Events are welcoming and inclusive, avoiding endless bureaucracy, but the executive is accountable to its members.

Conclusion – re-engaging with young people

So in conclusion, if the party is to attract new blood, we need a new youth strategy backed with real political commitment. The centrepiece of this would be a new youth and student movement, incorporating all young members of the party, not just students. This would be backed with real resources and would be integrated into the mainstream party. But we also need to recognise why so many young people are turned off by traditional politics. It's not because they don't care about the issues, but because they don't see the main political parties as an effective way of advancing their beliefs. We will not be successful at attracting young people to the party if they continue to see our youth wing merely as cheerleaders for the government.



5 Reconnecting with the unions

The link with the unions

Periodically, the strains between the government and the unions have been enormous. Commentators have long predicted the demise of the union link. But despite that, we have still not followed the example of social democratic parties in some other countries, such as Germany and Sweden, where the formal link has been ended. The relationship has now endured for more than a century – and both the party and the unions are stronger for it.

The union link under pressure


The experiences of the 1970s and 1980s continue to influence the debate about the union link. Throughout our eighteen years in opposition, the Conservatives consistently invoked the spectre of 1970s trade union militancy as a means of stoking fears about a future Labour government. At the same time, they highlighted the party's financial links with the unions and implied that this would result in undue influence and distorted public policy priorities. This was coupled with strict new forms of regulation on union activity, such as the requirement to ballot members on the existence of a political fund.

In light of all this, it is unsurprising that some within the party began to wonder openly whether the link with the unions had become a liability. The answer to that question came in 1997 and 2001 with our huge parliamentary majorities, proving that voters cared less about trade union links and more about the election of a competent and responsible administration with a positive policy agenda. Recent polling has shown that only 36 per cent of voters favour ending the union link, while Labour supporters are opposed to ending the link by 64 per cent to 25 per cent.¹⁷ Few people now seriously contend that our relationship with the unions represents an "Achilles' heel" for the party.

Nevertheless, the ongoing process of party modernisation has altered the constitutional role of the unions. The introduction of one-member-one-vote, changes to the National Executive Committee and the establishment of the NPF have all forced unions to adapt the way in which they engage with the party.

Some changes, such as Partnership in Power, have presented trade unions with new opportunities to influence the direction of the party, and none of them has posed a fundamental threat to the union link. Nevertheless, the pace of change has contributed to the impression that the link remains under pressure. And there are some in the party who would like to open up debate about the union link further:

A worrying new trend has been the increasing number of trade unionists who are questioning the value of the link with the party. This has been fed by dissatisfaction among trade unions about the direction of government policy in certain key areas. The expulsion of the RMT, led by an anti-Labour general secretary, over its decision to allow branches to affiliate to other parties represents the most extreme example of this trend. But it is also reflected in the decision of other unions to reduce their affiliation fees to the party.



This is an issue that needs to be settled – it benefits neither of us for things to proceed as they are at present.

Views of members – the unions

“It is crucially important as a recruiting base for Labour, to maintain the link with the unions.”

“There are still a lot of trade union activists out in the membership of the Labour Party. You’ll find that a lot of people who come out to work are trade unionists or ex-trade unionists.”

Where next?

Labour’s link with the unions provides a key bridge between the party and a leading pillar of civil society. As noted earlier, Labour is the only one of the three main parties that has its origins as a bottom-up, grassroots movement. Even today, the union link means that we are more broadly based and more strongly rooted in the communities that we represent than any other party. At a time when concern is mounting about the growing distance between the political class and the electorate, it seems strange that some should contemplate severing one of the strongest remaining ties.

But ensuring that Labour’s link with the unions remains strong and relevant in the future means that we must make an honest assessment of why it is less relevant today than it once was. It is not, as some claim, a case of the party turning its back on its traditional supporters or focusing excessively on Middle England. Rather, it reflects a long decline in the importance of unions in society as a whole.

Fewer than one in five private sector workers in Britain is a trade union member today, with membership of unions concentrated in the public sector.¹⁸ UK employment has never been higher, but union membership is currently one million lower than it was when employment levels began to recover at the end of the last recession in 1992. Despite more union recognition agreements since Labour’s 1999 Employment Act granted extra employee rights, workplace organisation is increasingly weak. In a quarter of all workplaces where unions are recognised, there is no workplace representative, and 56 per cent of non-union members in organised workplaces say that they have never been asked to join the union.¹⁹ The challenge for the unions is to develop a coherent narrative explaining why they remain relevant in today’s economy, thereby providing workers with a compelling reason to join and halting the decline in membership.

We also need to restore a more harmonious relationship between the party in government and the unions. We are never going to agree on everything – and nor should we. A Labour government has to govern and the unions have to represent. But we are united more than we are divided. And we can disagree from time to time without falling out forever.

Blame for the deterioration in the relationship between the party and the unions lies on both sides. In government, Labour has tended to treat the unions as “embarrassing relatives”, at best maintaining a cool distance and at worst seeming to pick deliberate fights. We have also often failed to consult the unions on key areas of policy. Controversies over PFI and Foundation Hospitals might have been avoided if we had attempted to identify and resolve trade union concerns earlier.



Meanwhile, the unions have sometimes given the impression of opposing all change and rejecting all dialogue, when I know that is not the reality. And grandstanding by certain trade union leaders has impeded sensible discussion. For example, union poster campaigns attacking the government have zero impact on policy. Do union members really want their subscriptions spent in this way rather than financing the party to fight the Conservatives? Divisive and lurid attacks that we are “just like the Tories” when we most emphatically are not breed cynicism and play right into the hands of our opponents. Dialogue cannot be conducted via billboards.

We need to put such squabbling behind us. For the government this means an end to antagonism and renewing the trust of the unions. For the unions it means concentrating on the real concerns of members.

It is in the interest of both the trade unions and the Labour Party that the union link remains strong. The link encourages political participation among some 3 million plus union members, many of whom are not members of any political party. The union movement represents a crucial recruiting base for Labour. And union support is vital to fighting successful election campaigns. And unions benefit too. They can better influence policy, for example the agreement to tackle the two-tier workforce in contracted-out services, as well as enhanced employee rights. The link generates a deeper understanding of the interests of ordinary union members and helps to build a relationship of trust between employees and elected representatives.


Recommendation: Where next?

- ▶ It is in the interest of both the trade unions and the Labour Party that the unions succeed in regaining their strength. The challenge for the unions is to develop a coherent narrative explaining why they remain relevant in today’s economy, thereby providing workers with a compelling reason to join and halting the decline in membership.
- ▶ Blame for the deterioration in the relationship between the party and the unions lies on both sides and we need to put such squabbling behind us. For the government this means an end to antagonism and renewing the trust of the unions. For the unions it means concentrating on the real concerns of members.

The unions and the Future Party

In the past, the process of party reform has often been seen as a threat to dilute or even sever the union link. As we move forward and the party adapts to the challenges of the 21st century, we must therefore ensure that the unions are engaged in the process as positive partners not “embarrassing relatives”.

The introduction of the NPF is one reform that has been embraced by many unions, which have used the process to press for action on the key concerns of their members, and have even adapted their own internal processes to enable their members to contribute to the development of policy. This is particularly important if the NPF is to deliver policies that are relevant to ordinary union members.



However, many trade unionists argue that there is room for improvement in the NPF process, notably on the mechanism for dealing with contemporary issues, and the question of placing a clearer series of choices before party conference. I agree, and we should work with the unions to find a detailed way forward.

Similarly, we should work with the unions to ensure that they remain fully engaged as the process of local party reform is taken forward. It is important to ensure that local reforms enhance rather than undermine the relationship between local parties and affiliated union branches. Part of the challenge for unions is that, with workplace organisation in decline, it is often difficult to manage the workload involved. This is unfortunate, because engagement with the party at a local level can often offer real rewards for ordinary union members – for example, the opportunity to participate in local policy forums and to put issues that matter to those members on the party's agenda.

There is also scope for co-operation with unions on the establishment of local Labour Supporters' Clubs, and indeed a national Labour Supporters' Network. This could work both ways: for example, local union members could be encouraged to join the party, and local party supporters – many of whom would at one time have automatically been union members but nowadays increasingly are not – could be encouraged to join a union.

Recommendations: The unions and policy

- ▶ The party should address the concerns of the trade unions in relation to the NPF, and improve procedures in a manner that is acceptable to both sides.
- ▶ We must ensure that unions remain fully engaged as the process of local party reform is taken forward, for example through participation in local policy forums, or through the establishment of local Labour Supporters' Clubs.

The unions and public funding of political parties

There has been a great deal of debate in recent years whether to move towards a greater degree of public funding for political parties. Reports have been produced recently on the topic by both Catalyst and the IPPR, and the Electoral Commission recently sought views on the issue.^{22, 21, 22}

Public funding is a cause of anxiety to many in the trade union movement, who see it as a potential Trojan Horse for severing the link between the Labour Party and the trade unions. If the Labour Party were able to rely on public funding, the argument goes, then the party's reliance on union funding would evaporate. Severance of the link would then follow soon after.

On one point there is no room for compromise: any proposal to extend public funding of political parties must not be a backdoor route to diluting or even ending the link with the trade unions. Union donations to Labour are already heavily regulated, and we must continue to stand up for freedom of expression for union members who choose to donate to the Labour Party through their union's political fund.

But the financial health of our political parties is a fundamentally important question for



Views of members – public funding of political parties

"I don't believe in state funding. The trade union movement would be decimated. And the links with the party would just disappear."

"I am in favour, primarily for electoral work. There must be some formal way that could be worked out to fund electioneering. Certainly from a Labour perspective, we could then bring out other funds for other activity."

"I'm broadly in favour of state funding. Thinking back to the days when the Tories got millions and millions from private companies."

"I'm absolutely opposed to state funding of political parties. I refuse to give my money to the Tories! The notion that my taxation should be used to fund the Tory Party is such an anathema to me."


our democracy. Political parties are the primary mechanism by which voters exercise political choice, connecting voters into the political system. Without adequate financial resources, the links between political parties and wider civil society begin to break down.

The increasing dependence of both of the main parties on big money individual donors has also drawn the legitimacy of the current funding arrangements into question, with suggestions of undue influence, however unfounded, becoming difficult to avoid. We just need to think back to the days of Tory sleaze during the 1990s, when the Conservative Party received massive undeclared donations from both British and foreign donors, and the public had no means of knowing whether those donations influenced policy.

As a government, we have introduced tough new legislation to improve the transparency of party funding, outlawing the opaque and undemocratic arrangements described above. But this has arguably intensified the debate about the influence of donors, because it makes it far easier to highlight instances of apparent influence. For example, we have seen the recent example of Stuart Wheeler, the £5 million Tory donor whose criticisms of Iain Duncan Smith massively inflamed last year's Conservative leadership crisis, and may even have brought down the party leader. The fact that we receive funding from a much more diverse range of sources – party members, trade unions, large and small individual donors, business sources and our own commercial activity – means that we are less prone to such undue influence from a single financial source.

An extension of public funding of political parties offers a route around these problems, by further diversifying and stabilising party funding. It also provides an opportunity to renew our political parties and help reconnect with the electorate. The move would not prove as radical as is often supposed, because the state already provides significant levels of support to parties – free mailshots during elections, free airtime for party political broadcasts, £5 million of "Short Money" to support the parliamentary activity of opposition parties, £2 million of Electoral Commission policy grants, plus numerous other sources of support. Indeed, last year the Conservatives actually received more money from public sources than from private donors.

But if we are to secure popular support for further public funding of political parties, it is essential that we are able to demonstrate how the money is being spent. The electorate



will not tolerate a blank cheque. Nor are they likely to back public funding to finance campaign expenditure – few people believe that taxpayers' money should be used to fund a propaganda war between competing parties.

Any extension of public funding should be devoted to strengthening political parties as institutions of civil society, by funding their organisational structures to better connect with local people. Political parties are a vital component of our democratic system, and people will accept greater public funding if it can be shown that it is enhancing democracy by reconnecting political parties with the electorate. Public funding should reinforce activities such as political education, recruitment and policy research. We might consider adopting a model similar to that of Germany, where policy development is undertaken by party-linked foundations that receive public funding, together with Sweden's where local and youth organisers are public funded.

Under such a system, parties would still be entirely responsible for raising the funds they need to conduct campaign work. Public funding could therefore complement rather than displace existing sources of funding, including affiliation fees from trade unions. Crucially, public funding would not spell the end of donations from either individuals or trade unions. Indeed, such grassroots sources of funding add legitimacy to political parties because they represent the free choice of individual voters and union members.

Recommendations: Public funding of political parties

- ▶ We must make it crystal clear that any proposal to extend public funding of political parties is not a backdoor route to ending the link with the trade unions.
- ▶ But without adequate financial resources, the links between political parties and wider civil society begin to break down. We should build support for extending public funding to finance the grassroots organisation of parties, policy development and political education and training, while enabling individual and union donations to continue to finance campaign work.

Conclusion – reconnecting with the unions

The party's link with the trade unions remains important and relevant to both sides, despite coming under pressure in recent years. The party benefits from the financial and organisational support provided by the unions, while unions and their members benefit from the opportunity to participate directly in the political process. We need to affirm the value of the link by listening sympathetically to key union concerns, for example in relation to Partnership in Power. We also need to make it crystal clear that any proposal to extend public funding of political parties is not a backdoor route to ending the link with the trade unions.



6 Conclusion

The Future Party will be a broad-based party with an active and engaged membership, looking outwards to the community. This was the thinking behind our drive to recruit new members during the 1990s, and reforms such as the introduction of the National Policy Forum. But we must go further, and think more radically than before.

People join Labour because they share the party's broad vision of a society based upon social justice and equality. By joining, they hope both to contribute to the effort to deliver that vision and to help shape the policies that build towards it. Our objective, therefore, must be to create a party where members are given the chance to become involved in a wide variety of ways, that is outward-looking and where members have the opportunity to debate policies and exercise influence, but still feel they have a home in the party even if they do not win the argument. And there are two key areas that we must address to achieve this: reform of local parties, and reform of the party's policy making process.

If we are to maintain our strength as a national level, we must look to strengthen the party at a grassroots level too. It is imperative that the Labour Party reforms at a local level to revive party membership and activism, to encourage more members to attend meetings, to have more debate on policy, to devote more time and resources to campaigning, and to engage with local civil society.

The objectives of Partnership in Power – to create a new settlement between the leadership and the membership, engaging party members and the unions in partnership on policy-making to sustain the party in office – are admirable and vital. But the reality is many feel marginalised, and the Partnership in Power framework is losing credibility.

The deliberative approach to policy-making embodied by the Partnership in Power reforms is here to stay. There can be no return to the confrontational ways of the past, still less to policy by composite motions spatch cocked together in smoke filled rooms: these damaged the party and denied members a meaningful say in policy-making. But if we are to regain and maintain the trust of members, we must involve them much more effectively as real partners in policy-making.

Finally, we cannot ignore the importance of engaging the trade unions and young people in building a strong party. That means respect for trade unions in return for positive rather than oppositional involvement. And it means both energising and better resourcing our youth wing.

Political parties must continually adapt to changing circumstances, reinventing themselves to take account of changes to society. But we must never lose sight of their primary purpose – as agents of political participation. This means strong roots to the communities we serve. And it means a strong membership, actively engaged in the direction of the party. The Labour Party was founded to empower people and it remains our purpose today. It must be the purpose of the Future Party too, for our vision of a participatory society rests in part on the foundation of a participatory Labour Party.



Recommendations

Reviving local involvement

- ▶ There is no reason why the branch structure of local parties has to correspond to local government ward boundaries. By reforming branch structures to create larger branches, some local parties might be able to increase meeting attendance and re-engage members.
- ▶ The current GC-delegate structure is necessary for effective decision making, particularly on party business matters. But it also creates a two-tier system of membership which can exclude some members from party activity. While GCs should not be abolished, all members who want to be involved at a constituency level should be enabled to do so, and local parties should ensure their local arrangements provide scope for this.
- ▶ Local meetings should offer a range of different activities so as to engage the widest possible number of members and to ensure that local parties look outwards to their communities.
- ▶ Local branch parties should ensure they build the strongest possible links with other local branch parties on matters of common interest.
- ▶ Local parties should consider new ways of diversifying local activity and re-engaging members – for example establishing forums on specific areas of interest, holding joint events with outside groups, and having more open meetings.
- ▶ It is important for the party to reach out to local communities and to highlight existing community links.
- ▶ Local parties experimenting with new structures should take steps to ensure that local links with trade unions are taken into account and do not suffer as a result of the reforms.
- ▶ The party should conduct an audit to establish how many local parties have filled the position of Trade Union Liaison Officer, and should then try to identify how local parties might be helped to build stronger links with local unions.
- ▶ We should do more to encourage trade unions and local parties to sign development agreements, particularly in battleground seats.
- ▶ New members should be provided with a welcome pack which would include a simple guide on the internal workings of the party, both nationally and locally.
- ▶ Regular communications between the party and its members should focus more on substantive, informative and practical information about party and policy development, where the key debates are, ideas for local activity, and so on.




Broadening our base of support

- ▶ The party should learn from the success of local Labour supporters clubs. We should establish a national Labour Supporters Network to provide people with an additional route to express their support for the party.
- ▶ We should make better use of the internet to involve non-traditional supporters in local campaign activity.
- ▶ We should pilot an internet-based fundraising drive in the run-up to the next election.
- ▶ We should provide a significantly improved range of online resources for our supporters – including friendly ‘viral’ messages for passing on.
- ▶ Because the key goal of an internet strategy is to broaden our base of support, it should be co-ordinated by our new Labour Supporters’ Network.
- ▶ We must continue to take steps to ensure that our elected representatives better reflect the make-up of society as a whole, including through positive action measures.
- ▶ We should rule out the introduction of primaries as a means of selecting our party's candidate. The evidence from the United States does not suggest that primaries would drive up political participation overall. Indeed, their introduction would be detrimental to activism within the Labour Party.


Reconnecting the party with policy-making

- ▶ The procedures of the National Policy Forum (NPF) should be altered to enable it to consider contemporary issues that arise outside the rolling programme. Wherever feasible, all major issues should be referred to the NPF for consultation.
- ▶ We need to involve members much more closely in the development of government policy. Government Green and White Papers should be routinely referred either to the NPF or the Policy Commissions for consideration and comment. In order to prevent the NPF from becoming overloaded, the Policy Commission might act as a filter, identifying important or contentious issues to be referred to the NPF.
- ▶ The Joint Policy Committee (JPC) should exercise a much stronger co-ordinating role, orchestrating the work of the whole NPF.
- ▶ Constituency representation on the Policy Commissions should be increased.
- ▶ The NPF should present party conference with a wider range of real policy choices when it reports back, and conference should be given an opportunity to vote on these.
- ▶ We should debate the merits of introducing independent policy working groups, comprising members of the NPF, ordinary grassroots members and outside policy experts. The relevant government minister would also be a member of the working group to ensure the process was properly integrated with government thinking.

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- ▶ The working groups would operate in a way similar to parliamentary select committees, and would be given a remit by the Policy Commissions to identify or develop new ideas in a particular area of policy. These different ideas would then be referred to party conference for consideration.
 - ▶ We should create an “audit trail” in policy-making by looking at ways in which key policy proposals might be more clearly credited to the local parties and affiliated organisations that made them. One solution might be to ask Policy Commission members to act as champions for particular submissions and to highlight new and innovative ideas that have been discussed.
 - ▶ Local parties should be provided with clearer explanations as to why particular policy ideas have or have not been taken forward.
 - ▶ Policy forum documents should give members a clearer idea of the key policy debates in a given area of policy. One potential solution would be for Stage One policy papers to focus on identifying key issues and relevant considerations, perhaps even sketching out alternate policy options, while Stage Two policy papers would consult on specific policy proposals.
 - ▶ The factual and analytical content of policy forum papers should be improved and details of government achievements should be included only where they are directly relevant to future policy considerations.
 - ▶ Regular NPF updates should be included in *Inside Labour* and distributed via local government and councillor networks.
 - ▶ The party needs to produce a simple guide to make it easier for members to make sense of the policy-making process.
 - ▶ The party must not become over-reliant on new technology as a means of communicating with members, because there is a danger of excluding the large number of members who still do not have access to e-mail or the internet.

Re-engaging with young people

- ▶ Labour Students and Young Labour should be merged to create a single youth and students organisation with its own autonomous structure. Greater efforts should also be made to develop links between the youth section and local parties, to encourage young people to remain involved in the party even after leaving university.
- ▶ More resources should be made available to the youth wing to help young people set up local Young Labour branches around the country.
- ▶ We should create a position for a full-time, elected sabbatical support officer for Young Labour, responsible for providing organisational support for young members who are not in full-time education.
- ▶ We should also consider how the youth representative on the National Executive Committee (NEC) is integrated into the new youth section. For example, the role could be combined with one of the sabbatical positions.

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- ▶ The party's youth section should be fully autonomous and accountable, with an elected executive and greater freedom to champion policies that appeal to young people.
 - ▶ The party's youth section should have a guaranteed slot at party conference on topical debates. We could also add a youth and student report section to the annual conference. This would help ensure that the youth section became more mainstream.
 - ▶ There should be an annual youth conference, which all young members would be entitled to attend.

Reconnecting with the unions

- ▶ It is in the interest of both the trade unions and the Labour Party that the unions succeed in regaining their strength. The challenge for the unions is to develop a coherent narrative explaining why they remain relevant in today's economy, thereby providing workers with a compelling reason to join and halting the decline in membership.
- ▶ Blame for the deterioration in the relationship between the party and the unions lies on both sides and we need to put such squabbling behind us. For the government this means an end to antagonism and renewing the trust of the unions. For the unions it means concentrating on the real concerns of members.
- ▶ The party should address the concerns of the trade unions in relation to the NPF, and improve procedures in a manner that is acceptable to both sides.
- ▶ We must ensure that unions remain fully engaged as the process of local party reform is taken forward, for example through participation in local policy forums, or through the establishment of local Labour Supporters' Clubs.
- ▶ We must make it crystal clear that any proposal to extend public funding of political parties is not a backdoor route to ending the link with the trade unions.
- ▶ But without adequate financial resources, the links between political parties and wider civil society begin to break down. We should build support for extending public funding to finance the grassroots organisation of parties, policy development and political education and training, while enabling individual and union donations to continue to finance campaign work.



Notes

- 1 For one influential analysis of this development, see Mair, P, (1997) *Party System Change*, Oxford, Clarendon. See also Mair, P, (2000) 'Partyless Democracy? Solving the Paradox of New Labour'. *New Left Review* No.2, March-April.
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By David Walker

ISBN 1 904508 01 4

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By Tony Edwards and Sally Tomlinson

Foreword by David Chaytor MP

ISBN 0 904508 00 6

For the government, the modernisation of secondary education means moving into a “post-comprehensive era”, replacing “bog standard” provision with an expanded programme of school specialisation in the name of “diversity” and “choice”. But in reality this will mean an increasing return to both covert and overt selection, argue Tony Edwards and Sally Tomlinson. And the research evidence they present indicates that this will do nothing to raise standards, and will serve only to worsen existing social segregation and inequalities of educational opportunity. In conclusion they sketch an alternative approach to secondary education that avoids the damage done by selective systems to both individual life chances and the common good of society.

Decentering the Nation: A radical approach to regional inequality

By Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift

ISBN 1 904508 07 3

One of the most persistent characteristics of the geography of the UK is the wide inequality that exists between its constituent regions. In the present period, in spite of many stated intentions and much government rhetoric to the contrary, it has on many measures grown considerably worse. This pamphlet argues that it will continue to do so unless there is a more serious engagement with the power dynamics that underlie this fundamentally unequal and undemocratic geography: dynamics that continue to return London and the South East as the centre of the nation.

Public services and the private sector: a response to the IPPR

By Allyson Pollock, Jean Shaoul, David Rowland and Stewart Player

Revised with a new foreword by David Hinchliffe MP

ISBN 0 9533224 7 5

The final Report of the IPPR's Commission on Public Private Partnerships is expected to be a major influence on the government's approach to public service reform in the coming years. Though critical of the way certain projects had operated in the past, it endorsed an extension of these new forms of public procurement into core public services. Here some of the country's leading academic experts in the field argue that this is likely to result in greater cost to the taxpayer, reductions in service quality and scope, and threatens to undermine the very principle of universal public services free at the point of use.



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