

Refounding Labour: Progress submission

Opposition provides the Labour party with a small window of opportunity to focus on internal issues and ensure the structures and culture of the party are fit for the purpose of winning the next general election. Progress has always believed in ensuring the party cultivates a spirit of healthy debate and was set up in 1996 to provide a space for members to contribute to the development of New Labour's ideas. Since then, the organisation has grown to 2,000 members; our monthly magazine reaches 5,000 recipients; our daily email 10,000; and our events programme engages thousands of party members across the country. Our chair is Stephen Twigg MP, and Vice-Chairs are Tristram Hunt MP, Liz Kendall MP, Bridget Phillipson MP, Rachel Reeves MP, Jonathan Reynolds MP, Anas Sarwar MP and John Woodcock MP.

Background

Progress believes it was essential that the Labour party professionalised its communications and centralised its message and command structure in the run-up to the 1997 election. Part of New Labour's success was to understand the importance of consistent messaging and to focus scarce party resources on the voters who would win Labour the general election. The Labour party's key purpose is to win control of power, so that Labour's values can be put into practice for the benefit of the many not the few.

However, it is clear that since 1997, the need to control what the party does has overwhelmed other potentially important aspects of engaging members and external stakeholders. As Robin Cook said, 'Labour went from dissent to discipline in the 1980s and 1990s but missed out dialogue and debate.' The Labour party wins when it is in touch with the public and the party is unified. Too much top-down control sometimes allows the party to lose touch with the public and allows member resentment to breed if the footsoldiers feel they do not have a stake in what the party says or does in their name.

The aim of Refounding Labour, therefore, should be to rectify some of the problems which have arisen in the last 15 years, while remembering that the goal of the party is to secure positions of political power. Progress believes the following key principles should be considered in the final Refounding Labour document.

Progress has organised events on the Refounding Labour and the Partnership into Power reviews in Birmingham, Coventry, Gillingham, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle and at both the Progress and Labour Students political weekends. Through this process, Progress has run an extensive survey of members on party reform and the Refounding Labour process. Party reform has been an ongoing theme in Progress magazine and on the ProgressOnline website.

1. Putting the community at the centre of the party

Very few members say that the thing they love about the Labour party is its meetings. Meetings are often tediously dull, sometimes entirely dysfunctional, dominated by small cliques or know-it-alls and can put new members off engaging with Labour for the rest of their time as a member. No one joins the Labour party to take part in meetings; they join to change the world, or have an influence on the party's ideas or direction, or because they want to represent their community.

Labour has been saying that the community should be the main focus of the party for over 10 years. In its 21st Century party consultation in 2000, it stated that local branches should be '*the key to local community organisation*', yet over 10 years later they are anything but. Refounding Labour has to try and make this a reality. The more that voters have face-to-face contact with local Labour representatives and members, the more likely they are to support Labour at an election. It sounds simple, but it is not so easily achieved. The party should look at best practice in places such as Birmingham Edgbaston where the CLP believes in continuous campaigning, has created a huge base of Labour-supporting volunteers, and has successfully experimented with community coffee mornings with the local MP to help further embed what the party does.

Working with organisations such as Movement for Change could help local parties who want to change their culture from meetings to campaigning locally, and provide ideas for easy ways of engaging with local residents. Encouraging all branches to build up email lists of local residents, as Stella Creasy MP does at a constituency level, would help to focus their effort towards communicating with local people about social events, policy forums or campaign days. Perhaps the notion of a supporters list should be localised, with branches being given the permission to charge local supporters a small amount which goes directly into their branch funds, while the national party gets access to supporter data so that it can market membership and campaigns. All parts of the party should be encouraged to build relationships with local and national NGOs, charities and community organisations.

The views of the community should also be made a central feature of Labour's policymaking process. Emergency motions which are sent to annual conference, for example, could be admitted if they had 2,000 signatories to a petition from the local community, showing that the local party had reached out and that the issue had political salience. Local parties should be encouraged to hold at least one meeting a year to allow the public to debate the party's priorities.

2. Selecting candidates who represent our communities

Despite the recent welcome increase in Labour party membership, the number of members who select parliamentary candidates has decreased markedly from the heyday of membership which stood at one million in the 1950s. Research by Will Straw for Progress has shown that the average CLP has 280 members. This equates to a very small percentage of the local population. In the research quoted, Straw found that a median of 40 party members vote in the final round of PPC selection contests. When candidates were selected by large memberships, it was much

easier to see how they reflected the wishes of the local population, but now that membership has declined, the power to select candidates, often in seats for life, lies with a privileged few.

While steps have been made towards ensuring Labour candidates reflect our community, Labour still cannot say that our elected representatives fully do. In 2010 31 per cent of our MPs were women – an improvement on 2005 – but still far away from 50 per cent. Labour also increased its non-white representation with the election of 16 MPs from a BAME background in 2010, but significant steps forward need to be made if full representation is to be reached. According to House of Commons research, since 1979 there has been a large decrease in the number of MPs who were formerly manual workers, from around 16 per cent of all MPs in 1979 to 4 per cent in 2010. Instead, the number of MPs who come from a political background have increased – in 1979 3 per cent of MPs from the main parties were previously politicians/political organisers, compared to 14 per cent in 2010.

From Labour's perspective, 27 per cent of MPs now come from a political background, compared with 9 per cent from a manual background. This has led to a sense that the party is disconnected from its core supporters, and from the ordinary working people we seek to represent. Combined with the tiny numbers of members selecting candidates, it is time to look at opening up the way we select MPs and some form of closed primary seems to be a good option. Primaries were successfully used by the Conservatives before the general election in both Totnes and Gosport. A Labour primary could preserve the sanctity of members to choose the shortlist, while opening up the actual vote to a list of registered Labour supporters. Not only would this help to identify Labour support, but it would also engage supporters in the Labour party without demanding they become members. We recognise, however, in the light of the coalition's gerrymandering of the boundaries, the need to introduce such changes with sensitivity and care.

One way of introducing primaries could be to introduce a requirement that, if the constituency party has not ensured that at least one per cent of the Labour vote at the last election are party members, and the candidate selection takes place within a year of the general election, then the decision goes to a primary. The minimum threshold for a CLP to avoid an automatically triggered primary should rise in each year of a parliament by 0.5 per cent, meaning, at year four, a local party would need to have transformed two per cent of its vote into members. Thresholds for Labour parties in the big cities, particularly London, could be higher. This would provide an incentive for members to recruit new members so that the selectorate is big enough to be representative of the local population. It would also help prevent the last-minute 'parachuting' in of candidates which is loathed by local parties. This was first suggested by a Labour member at our event in Manchester (Jan 2011).

While Progress clearly prefers primaries as a model of selection, for those parties who do recruit a local membership beyond the thresholds discussed above, there are improvements needed to the current selections processes. The process should reward good campaigners, impressive orators, problem solving and those with the skills needed in a modern parliament. The process should not have high financial barriers. The party should realise that it is time, not

leaflets – glossy or otherwise – that results in prohibitive costs for want-to-be candidates. Shorter processes, a clear timeframe and open access to membership details are more important than arbitrary spending caps – considered by all to be impossible to police – while rules about the amount, size and colour of written communications are a red herring.

The ‘selections committees’ that are part of the new process being trailed for the 26 ‘island seats’ that are selecting early should be abolished immediately, between six and 10 people, who must already be members of both the general committee and the executive committee, can shape the outcome of the selection and changing radically the choice available to local members. Richard Angell (Progress, Mar 2011) says this will take decisions ‘even further from the membership at large, never mind the electorate’ to a group that are often unrepresentative of the party and the voters.

Finally, in seats where Labour candidates are in a distant second or third, and local parties need a two-term strategy to bring the seat home for Labour, they should be able to innovate. ‘Part of the solution is to take a long view when it comes to its candidates by introducing selections for ‘long-term candidacies’ in seats that the party believes are not on our frontline of targets for 2015 – both a tortoise and a hare approach is needed for winning back key seats’ writes Jack Storry (Progress, Mar 2011). He goes on to explain, ‘the process would initially work like any other selection. However, after the election the candidate, should he or she be unsuccessful, is automatically reselected via a trigger ballot, similar to how sitting MPs are currently reselected.’ A Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition provides for a change in the political landscape in regions like the southwest and southeast of England. Changes like this and the Progress Third Place First network should all be seen as important ways of boosting Labour’s share of the vote and seats ready for a return to power.

3. Engaging members and stakeholders at all levels

One of the frustrations of party members is that they do not feel they can make a difference in the party. With scarce resources, the party needs to make the best it can of our members with their many talents and varied backgrounds. Party membership needs to be a two-way process so that members are not just asked to donate money and deliver leaflets, they also get something out of membership too. Perhaps the party should consider offering one free training session a year as part of a Labour academy with courses which cover everything from speechwriting, to Labour history, to learning English? Our party founded the Open University, and it should live out its values by providing its members with more than just a Labour party credit card.

Partnership in Power was an attempt to reconcile the difficulty of having strong policy leadership from the top with member voice. It has succeeded in the former, but failed in the latter. Many members view the process with suspicion and contempt. The feeling that submissions simply ‘end up in the waste bin in party HQ’, is widespread. The NEC and the leadership need to be clearer about what the goal of party policymaking is and to make it as straightforward and transparent as possible. There could be some lessons from the Swedish

Social Democrats here. They allow all members to debate what they like in a spirit of understanding and openness about the fact that not everyone will agree and that the leadership of the party are unlikely to see eye-to-eye on everything the membership suggests. This 'grown-up' levelling with the membership would be entirely preferable to propounding the myth that members get to have a say in the manifesto or in the cycle of policymaking in the Labour party.

As well as making the process clearer, the party should ensure that all members know who their internally elected representatives are and should be able to contact them online. National Policy Forum representatives should be allowed to share their contact details with each other so that ideas can be worked on and members' views compared across regions. So that members feel that party consultations are genuine, thought should be given to running processes externally to the party so that members feel they can engage in the process without fear of censure.

A marked change on Labour's 'control culture' could be demonstrated in Labour presenting a 'wiki' manifesto to the British public. Through our current – and hopefully vastly improved – methods of policymaking, countless individuals and organisations will engage in what we present to the electorate. This multitude of voices should be on display, transparent and presented to the voters as the people's manifesto. The manifesto would therefore link key policies to an advocate, who could be anyone from the leader or appropriate minister to a branch, CLP, NPF commission, union, socialist society, external campaign organisation (such as the Votes at 16 coalition), NGO (eg Breastcancer Breakthrough) or a private company (eg Sheffield Forgemasters).

Party HQ should start from the premise that Labour members are there to do good not bad, that they are an asset not a drain, and that at a local level they should be given freedom to innovate within the confines of party rules. Perhaps where party rules prevent certain initiatives, local parties should be allowed to apply to the general secretary to ask for special dispensation to run a pilot which would be closely monitored for its benefit and outcomes.

Labour needs to do far more to engage ordinary union members whose union is affiliated to the party. More unions should be encourage to follow the Unison model of the modern trade union link where members are allowed to join either a Labour-affiliated fund, or a general political fund. This would also offer protection against any moves by the coalition government to frustrate union giving to the party. Local parties should be encouraged to contact local affiliated union members in their area and involve them in branch meetings and campaign events.

Nomination meetings at a branch or CLP level for national positions such as leader, deputy leader and party chair (if this post were to become elected), should be open to all members to attend, not just delegates. This should be the default decision-making body of all local parties.

When balloting the electoral college on decisions of party leadership, all of the electorate should be able to be canvassed by each of the candidates. It is indefensible that parts of the

electorate can have communication controlled by a few people. Following an election, those who vote and tick to say they support Labour in the affiliates ballot should be added to ContactCreator so local parties can communicate with them directly and encourage them to join Labour and join in the political education, debate and fundraisers of the local party.

Conclusion

Labour will win if it has a winning formula of ideas the public support and a party which relates to the public. At the moment we need to work on both. Labour's position is by no means as poor as the Conservatives' after their defeat in 1997, but we have to move forward from the pre-1997 ways of running party structures. A little relaxation of centralised control and more freedom for party members to have their say would not go amiss. The most important thing is that the public sees Labour activists working in their communities, not just canvassing for their vote, but engaging them in campaigns and in the development of policy solutions. By opening up the party to more people there is symbolic value in Labour showing it is listening to the reasons why the public did not vote Labour at the last election, but will also help us to renew the party with fresh ideas to win the next.