

NEC Update, 15 July 2016

First, I'd like to thank everyone for your personal support at a difficult time, it has kept me more or less sane. That and staying off Twitter and Facebook.

Second, I deeply regret the abrupt cancellation of all local party meetings. The reasons relate to threats and intimidation of fellow-members, councillors and MPs at a number of recent meetings, and a growing climate of hostility on social media. As I wrote a few days ago, most discussions were taking place in a comradely atmosphere despite strong and conflicting views, and it's unfortunate that all of us have suffered. NEC members are not exempt. My local party has had to cancel an all-member meeting at a cost of £270, a new members' social event and a women's tea party. At Tuesday's NEC meeting I was one of only two members to query the sweeping nature of the ban. I got exemption for September meetings to discuss conference business, and have asked about candidate selections for next May. At yesterday's procedures committee meeting I conveyed your messages forcefully, and a full explanation is on its way.

Third, thanks for all the messages before Tuesday's NEC. I received hundreds of individual responses followed by many more from organised campaigns, and did my best to represent the former in particular. I still have 800 messages in my inbox – I'm reading them but cannot realistically reply to every one.

Below is a report from the meeting. You'll have heard that it lasted seven hours, and many accounts are already online. We seem powerless to prevent proceedings leaking in real time, and Pete Willsman's proposal that all phones should be confiscated caused panic among those who need connectivity as much as oxygen and water. Below are the main areas covered, the votes, where I stood, and why.

National Executive Committee, 12 July 2016

At the start we stood in silence to remember Jo Cox, with the Chair Paddy Lillis reminding us that MPs perform an honourable public service, before returning to business as usual.

We considered a request from Andy Burnham and Debbie Abrahams to address the NEC on behalf of most of the shadow cabinet. They proposed seeking an independent mediator to try to avoid a damaging contest and asked the NEC to postpone decisions for 48 hours until they reported back. All of us hated this situation, but there was pessimism about whether any avenues remained unexplored, questions about why the shadow cabinet had waited till after a challenge, and concerns about indefinite drift. Thirty-two of the 33 NEC members were present, coming in on crutches, returning from holidays, taking time off work, and could not simply come back again on Thursday. The NEC eventually agreed to hear Andy and Debbie, who argued that far more time should be allowed for discussion. To give peace one last chance I proposed agreeing the papers before us, but delaying the start by 48 hours. If there was an eleventh-hour solution we could happily drop the whole process.

Safeguarding Issues

Before voting, the NEC discussed whether to hold secret ballots. Some argued that transparency was paramount. However members felt vulnerable, with personal details posted online, obscene and offensive messages, rape threats, death threats. The general secretary Iain McNicol faced legal intimidation for, among other things, planning to "impose" secret ballots. We know, now, that words have consequences, and those of us elected by party members or the public – councillors, constituency representatives, MPs – are in the front line. On a show of hands, secret ballots were agreed 17-15. I voted in favour, allowing each of us to account to our constituents in our own way. The close vote left some feeling that those who condemn abuse and intimidation had declined the opportunity to support their words with actions. My proposal to agree the process but delay the start for 48 hours was then carried by 20 votes to 12.

The next question was whether Jeremy Corbyn should be present. As leader he is a member of the NEC, but on all previous occasions, including Angela Eagle last year, NEC members standing for a position have absented themselves. The code of conduct states that aspiring candidates cannot attend any discussions that deal with election business. Some demurred because we hadn't yet agreed the code, though it was identical with last year's. Jeremy Corbyn addressed the meeting and withdrew, for the time being.

NEC members then expressed dissatisfaction about lack of notice of the meeting, and hearing about it in the media first. However the NEC could not discuss procedures for a leadership election until one had been triggered, and then had to move quickly. As soon as Angela Eagle announced that she would declare on Monday, Tuesday was obvious to anyone not buried under the duvet since 23 June, which began to seem an increasingly attractive place to be. And we had all, actually, got to the meeting.

Round One

After three hours we moved onto the agenda, with the first decision as to whether Jeremy Corbyn as the incumbent would automatically be on the ballot. We heard from James Goudie QC who said he would need to be nominated by 20% of MPs and MEPs, the same as challengers, and had copies of conflicting legal advice which said he wouldn't. The rulebook is frankly a mess. There are anomalies: because candidates only need nominations from 15% of MPs / MEPs where there is a vacancy, Jeremy Corbyn would face a lower threshold if he resigned and stood again than if he stayed put, which seemed silly. Others said the rulebook never envisaged a situation where a leader did not have the confidence of 20% of his colleagues. My feedback seemed typical in splitting 50 / 50, with some members saying that regardless of their personal preference the winner would not be seen as legitimate if Jeremy Corbyn was excluded.

The discussion was lengthy and wide-ranging. There were calls for Michael Mansfield to address the NEC, but a vote to hear from more lawyers was lost 13 – 19. I voted against, as I doubted whether any minds would be changed by further representations. Some NEC members then proposed letting Jeremy Corbyn back in for the vote. This was carried 16-15. I voted against, because of precedent and because of concerns about legitimacy if he only got on the ballot through his own vote. This was in fact not necessary as the meeting voted 18-14 that he should automatically be on the ballot. I voted with the majority, as promised: doing otherwise would be seen, rightly, as a stitch-up, and he could probably have gained the 51 nominations anyway. And this decision now frees MPs to nominate according to conscience.

Nuts and Bolts

Jeremy Corbyn then left again, as we moved on to details of the process. I had asked members about eligibility to vote. There was near-unanimous opposition to last year's £3 registered supporters, with full members feeling devalued and doubting supporters' commitment to Labour. Many wanted the scheme scrapped entirely and I would have preferred to do this upfront, but as it is in the rulebook there had to be some minimal allowance. I voted, in line with your views, against extending the two day registration period to seven days, which was lost by 16 votes to 10. The draft proposal was for the one-off fee to be set at £12, and alternatives suggested were £10, £15, £20, £25 and slightly facetiously £500. The meeting voted 15-12 for £25 and I voted in favour, again consistent with what you told me.

I had also asked whether there should be a qualifying period for members. Most people who responded said Yes, with six months the most popular option, in line with choosing candidates at other levels. This was the proposal in the draft paper. However I proposed a more generous cut-off date of 24 June 2016, in line with the NEC ballot and giving a say to members who joined to help in local and mayoral campaigns and in the referendum. Sadly the vote was 14-14 so this was not carried and the 12 January 2016 date went through. I've had complaints since the meeting, and would make two points. First, if there was no qualifying period then any ballot would have to be delayed for months to allow CLPs to check the new members. Second, people join to support Labour's aims and values and to campaign to elect Labour representatives to government. Many of us have stuck with the party under different leaders through continuing commitment to those general principles, not to any individual.

Equal Treatment

The six month period applies equally to affiliated trade unions and socialist societies, where members at 12 January 2016 have until 8 August to sign up as affiliated supporters. This has caused problems for some affiliates. Scientists for Labour have suspended applications until after the leadership contest, when they will process anyone who really wants to join: "Scientists for Labour is a Labour-supporting science policy group, not a fast-track for non-members to dictate who will lead the party." Meanwhile media reports say that in one day 3,000 people with no previous interest in trade unions had paid £2 to join Unite Community in the hope of gaining preference over members, which is clearly not what the NEC decided.

Local parties will still have to check registered supporters for political opponents, though there should be far fewer than last time. CLPs are normally allowed eight weeks to challenge any membership application. Because of the huge numbers joining since 23 June, and the fact that none of them will be able to vote in the leadership election, I have argued successfully for CLPs to be given until late October to consider them.

Finally I appreciate that there are strong and differing views on much of this. Like other NEC members I am struggling to do the best for Labour in difficult times and hope that disagreements can be expressed courteously, according to the new, kinder, gentler politics espoused by our leader Jeremy Corbyn.

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