

Report on Labour National Policy Forum held in Gillingham, Kent November 27 2010

Introduction

This one day meeting of the NPF was the first since the election of Ed Miliband as leader, and the first since the General Election. It was also the first since 1997 with Labour in opposition.

The format was broadly similar to previous one day NPFs, with a keynote address from the leader, a Q & A session, and the rest of the day given over to workshops to discuss key issues of the moment. As widely anticipated, Peter Hain was elected unanimously as chair. Billy Hayes from CWU was elected vice chair from the affiliates section, Simon Burgess from CLPs and Kate Green from PLP. There were brief speeches from Harriet Harman and from Peter Hain

Leader's Speech

Ed Miliband set out some broad themes in his speech (appended below), as well as attacking some specific actions being taken by the coalition Government. He argued that the party needed to move beyond New Labour to win back public support, while being proud of the significant achievements that had been delivered by Labour. He wanted to ensure that the party's policies are rooted in people's lives, recognising issues like very low pay, and urged the NPF to be part of the process of reconnecting and making Labour a strong community organisation. He made a strong defence of the role of trade union levy-payers, saying the challenge is to ensure better engagement and participation, while also suggesting that multiple voting in leadership elections should end. While acknowledging that government isn't always the answer, he said that government has a central role. He argued that Labour had got the balance on civil liberties wrong and said that liberty must once again be part of Labour's soul. He questioned whether social solidarity can exist within a vastly unequal society and said that Labour must take the idea of the Big Society back from Cameron. He concluded with a strong call for gender equality, praising the work done by Harriet Harman, and for putting the challenges posed by climate change at the heart of every policy. He promised no quick fixes and wants Labour to under-promise, but over-deliver. He answered a series of questions, including from Rachel Voller on the role Labour councils should play in opposing cuts, where he said it was important that Labour was part of campaigns, but shouldn't end up taking the blame for cuts imposed from above.

Workshops

Five sets of workshops discussed current key issues with relevant shadow ministers. Economy; Welfare; NHS; Constitutional Reform; Higher Education funding. UNISON members raised key current concerns. A consistent response from shadow ministers was a reluctance to make spending commitments that could be used against Labour by the Tories at a future election, as happened in 1992.

Policy Review

Liam Byrne explained that the policy review that he will be undertaking over coming months will work closely with policy commissions from the NPF and produce reports to go to Party Conference. His initial document 'New Politics, Fresh Ideas' is appended to this report. He argued that Labour has become disconnected from voters and wants party members to hold a million conversations with people over the next eight months. He said that the election defeat was a wake-up call and that shadow ministers would be twinned with constituencies to help the process.

Policy-making Review

Further workshops were held to discuss the NEC review into Partnership into Power which had been launched some weeks earlier. The low level of early responses was felt by some to show the level of dissatisfaction within the Party, and a sense of cynicism about the process. Delegates from Wales reported that the Welsh process had more support, with local members feeling greater sense of ownership of policies.

Final Plenary

The clear message from the workshops was that members wanted simple, clear messages to take to doorsteps for campaigning, particularly on economic issues. A consistent complaint about the policy process was that local parties didn't get responses to submissions and couldn't see what had happened to them or even whether they had ever been discussed – a much stronger audit trail will be required to start rebuilding trust in the process.