



# Fit for Purpose

A programme for  
Labour Party renewal

Jon Cruddas and John Harris

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# Fit for purpose: a programme for Labour Party renewal

Jon Cruddas and John Harris

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## Executive Summary

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- Labour is at a crucial point in its history, and in the midst of a debate about the much-discussed idea of ‘renewal’, in terms of policy and personnel – but also the party’s organisation and abiding culture. Under the auspices of the so-called Party Renewal Project, ideas are being canvassed for a reinvention of its structures and practices, and not without reason: party membership is currently under 200,000 (less than half of the figure in 1997), too many local parties are moribund, and the morale of members is at an unquestionable low. This coincides with a high-profile debate about the crucial issue of party funding, which has clear consequences for Labour’s future.
- Within the current debate, senior party figures have reiterated and developed proposals that have been heard regularly since the 1990s: a decisive move away from the idea that Labour is a federal, pluralist party; a severing of its formal link to the trade unions, which would be partly facilitated by increased state funding; and an increased role for a so-called Supporters Network, whose proposed status in decision-making remains very unclear. The party’s recent history suggests that within this vision there lurks the danger of a pseudo-democratic monolith: a tightly drilled central bureaucracy, serviced by a loosely bound mass of ‘supporters’ with no meaningful role beyond that of electoral campaigning, and providing the kind of support that can be easily manipulated (witness a recent official questionnaire built around such enquiries as, ‘Do you think the government should make sure there are new safeguards to protect innocent people?’).
- The progressive alternative lies in a decisive settling of the party’s federal shape, a revival and remodelling of its democratic processes and a reinvention of Labour’s culture, so that it is outward-looking, firmly rooted in the society the party aims to serve, and capable not just of successful electioneering, but strong on-the-ground campaigning. This does not imply any kind of return to a troubled past, but rather a belated act of modernisation, bringing Labour’s internal processes in line not only with its own fundamental belief in democracy, but a society now characterised by multiple centres of debate, and the expectation that participation should be meaningful rather than cynical and tokenistic. We believe that a party constituted along these lines – which also involves a boosting of Labour’s on-the-ground presence and a corresponding cutting-down of its national secretariat – would be an asset to those in power, potentially playing a key role in the belated creation of that fabled Progressive Consensus.
- With all this in mind, as far as Labour’s national organisation is concerned, our proposals include:
  - \* The settlement of the party’s federal structure along lines that have been taking shape for the last two decades. Labour’s decision-making bodies – the National Executive Committee (NEC), the National Policy Forum (NPF), the annual conference – should be founded on a model in which a third is given over to the membership, a third to the unions, and a third to a new force made up of MPs, MEPs, Labour representatives in local government, and socialist societies.
  - \* A revival of the National Policy Forum, based on opening up the election of its constituency section to a vote by the entire membership; allowing members and affiliates to engage with its proceedings via the internet and making sure submissions are subject to an ‘audit trail’; ensuring its documents are more options-based; and commencing a regular renewal process, whereby a debate and restatement of Labour’s aims and values always takes place immediately after a general election.
  - \* An opening-up of the annual conference, involving a blurring of the divide between its formal and fringe aspects, an increased role for outside voices and organisations, a modernising of the contemporary resolutions process, which would allow for more discussion in the run-up, and a move away from the strangled management that has played a role in so deadening the event’s atmosphere.
  - \* A review of the broken-down state of the party’s youth organisation and its appeal to young people, possibly orientated around the idea of re-constituting Young Labour as a socialist society, and thereby allowing it an increased independence.
  - \* A cutting-down of Labour’s national bureaucracy and a reinvention of the role of party chair, based on election by the membership.
  - \* As far as national party funding and its regulation is concerned, the drawing of a qualitative difference between organisations and individuals that are subject to internal democratic processes, and private individuals and companies. This would safeguard the union link, and allow any public company or membership organisation to establish a political fund, subject to democratic processes. We also propose new statutory limits on national party spending.
- Our suggestions for Labour’s local organisation and culture include:
  - \* Along the lines of a central recommendation of the recent Power Inquiry, the institution of a new form of state funding: the local ‘voter voucher’, whereby £3 of public money would be allocated by each voter to a party of their choice, exclusively reserved for activity in their area. Labour could respond to this innovation by creating a new Democracy Force: full-time (and/or part-time) organisers who could assist local parties in all aspects of their work, and play a key role in forging links between the party and wider society. We believe this proposal would help turnouts, reduce cynicism about the political process and enfranchise many of those communities currently discounted by the political class.
  - \* A reinvention of Labour’s campaigning role, so that electioneering is complemented by activity focused on local, national and international issues – from a living wage to trade justice. This would go hand-in-hand with work aimed at an ongoing, positive engagement between communities and the party’s MPs, councillors and candidates, allowing the party to act as a kind of politicised Citizens Advice Bureau.
  - \* Allowing flexibility when it comes to local structures, offset by minimum requirements so that the constituency voice within the party remains strong, among them a re-emphasis on the local union link.
  - \* A re-aligning of the Supporters Network project, involving its administration and control by local parties, a firm rejection of proposals for Labour’s embrace of US-style primaries, and a restatement of what formal party membership entails, and why it is important.
- Underlying all of these ideas is the belief that though organisational change is crucially important, the need for a cultural shift cannot be overstated. In our view, if it is to be a credible political force, Labour needs to display the same characteristics as the society it aims to create – being not only democratic and pluralistic, but open, consistent, and built on the idea that – as the new Clause IV puts it – ‘by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone’.

## Introduction

*'As one young moderniser quipped at a conference fringe meeting recently, when there is a Labour government "every member will be a party spokesperson and there will be a source close to the prime minister on every street.'*

Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle,  
The Blair Revolution, 1996

*'Labour membership has halved since Tony Blair became prime minister, senior party figures have revealed.'*

Guardian, 3 August 2004

Among the tangled threads of debate that define modern British politics, one particular theme is returned to time and again. Though the approach to the Westminster ritual of the three main parties is still cast in terms of their democratic legitimacy, something is up. Worries about the increasingly washed-out state of our democracy are no longer restricted to those anxiously observing party politics from the outside: the same concerns, though often ineffectually expressed, go right to the centre. Talk of public cynicism, woeful electoral turnout, and disconnection from the entire political process is now a regularly heard refrain; though existing in a sealed-off orbit arguably makes the short-term lives of our politicians that bit easier, there is now a sense that this cannot go on.

As an indicator of the malaise, levels of party membership and activism tell us a great deal. Their decline, unquestionably, has to be viewed in terms of both the general civic disengagement that has been a feature of western societies over the last few decades, and the fracturing of political allegiances that has gone along with it. But in Labour's case in particular, the steep fall in both over the last decade has been little short of shocking. A decade ago, senior figures were dreamily talking about the prospect of a 'million member party', and membership numbers had reached a high of 400,000; now, the figure is less than half that, and the organisation that remains

*'People in Britain still march against the Iraq war or in favour of the countryside ... They send their savings to the victims of Tsunamis and want to end world poverty. What they no longer want to do is join a party or get involved in formal politics.'*

on the ground is often moribund and broken. Some of this is unquestionably down to ill-advised policy decisions, compounded by the Blair government's regrettable behavioural tic whereby it recurrently defines itself against party opinion. Equally important, however, is the sense that the party's culture and organisation are out of kilter with modern needs.

The party's upper echelons are currently in an accelerated phase of a reinvention project – at various stages of its progress, termed 'the 21st Century Party' and the 'Party Renewal Project' – which has been ongoing since the late 1990s, and looks set to reach a watershed point this year. Of late, it has dovetailed with the government's travails in relation to political funding, and a cross-party drive to grapple with

the hitherto-taboo question of state funding. For Labour, this has a particularly serious aspect – because in the mess of proposal and counter-proposal that currently defines the debate, some voices are calling for a cap on funding that would spell the end of the place in Labour's federal structure given to the trade unions.

As Mr Blair would have it, everything is in flux – though the prevailing views of senior party figures seem to be in favour of what we would term a pseudo-democratic monolith: a tightly drilled central bureaucracy, supported by a loosely defined membership – increasingly drawn from a so-called Supporters Network – whose role would be restricted to campaigning, socialising and participating in the odd stage-managed policy plebiscite. Throw in vogueish talk about adopting the US model of primaries for the selection of both candidates and leaders, and you may start to feel very anxious: Labour's proposed solution may be a system of party organisation that, if America is anything to go by, will kill the idea of the party as a meaningful membership organisation, harden the power of political elites – and, most importantly, serve to hack down political options, leaving the population at large feeling yet more politically disconnected.

Earlier this year, however, there came a publication that shone penetrating light through the political murk. The Power Enquiry, financed by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable and Reform Trusts and chaired by Helena Kennedy QC, issued its report – strap-lined 'an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy' – in March 2006. Based on hundreds of witness interviews and split between a diagnosis of the UK's democratic deficit and a set of proposals for its remedy, it remains a revelatory document, much of whose impact came from its exploding of one of the assumptions that underpins too much of the conversation about Britain's political problems: the idea that the public is not just disconnected, but politically apathetic. We make no apologies for applying both its underlying logic and some of its specific recommendations to the question of Labour's future; it is an inspirational document that anyone interested in Britain's political future should read. Consider, for example, this paragraph: Ways have to be found to engage people. Markets, contracts and economic rationality provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the stability and prosperity of post-industrial societies; these must be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty to the community, trust and political engagement. People in Britain still volunteer; they run in marathons for charity; they hold car boot sales to raise funds for good causes; they take part in Red Nose days and wear ribbons for breast cancer or AIDS. They sit as school governors, do prison visiting, read with children who have learning difficulties ... They march against the Iraq war or in favour of the countryside ... They send their savings to the victims of Tsunamis and want to end world poverty. What they no longer want to do is join a party or get involved in formal politics ... This is a travesty for democracy and if it continues the price will be high. The only way to download power is by rebalancing the system towards the people. This is the agenda. Now we need the political will.

Given Labour's in-built commitment to equality and

## Introduction

democracy, we believe the party – despite the political contortions of recent years – can play a leading role in making these aims a reality. This pamphlet proposes all kinds of reforms that could play their part in catalysing the change – from a reinvention of the party's national structure, to an opening-up of its annual conference, and on to a drive to shift its culture so that it speaks the same language as the people and organisations who make up some of the healthier components of our democracy. Crucially, we argue that Labour, in broad terms, should look like the society it aims to create – so we reject the monolithic model in favour of a renewed federal party, replete with a strong link to the UK's trade unions, which would offer competing centres of power, multiple locations for debate, and a thriving internal culture. Contrary to the doom-mongering of some of Labour's more pessimistic voices, we do not believe that this would spell a return to the fall-outs and anarchy of the past – both because Labour has so obviously changed, and because a need for ongoing negotiation would familiarise all levels of the party with the need for accommodation and compromise; or, put another way, the imperatives of leadership.

One particular proposal in the Power report, based on a recommendation in the Council of Europe's green paper *The Future of Democracy*, offers the prospect of radical democratic change. In keeping with its keynote contention that politics has become far too centralised, the report proposes that part of the solution to pressing questions about party finance lies in the innovation of a new kind of public funding: a 'voter voucher' of £3, paid annually from public funds on behalf of each voter to a party of their choice, whose use would be 'restricted to activities conducted by parties within their constituency'.

This is a brilliant idea. The next challenge is to come up with specific ideas about what this release of resources into local party organisations could conceivably achieve. For Labour, we propose the innovation of a new Democracy Force: full-time local party workers – appointed by region, and partly answerable to the members they would serve – rooted in Britain's communities, who could play a crucial part in guarding against organisational breakdown, and restoring one aspect of Labour's identity that in recent years has fallen into disrepair: its role as a campaigning force. In this area, we have been inspired by the work being done by cutting-edge organisations – in particular, London Citizens, a coalition of faith groups, trade unions and community associations that is playing an incredible role in defining the terms of politics in the capital. There is much we can learn from them.

After all, any centre-left political force should aspire to its organisation achieving more than the prosecution of successful election efforts – and here, there is a far bigger issue, bound up with the fundamental health of our democracy. An active, engaged, socially rooted party is one of the key means by which Labour can ensure its own legitimacy, rooting itself in the communities that it purports to serve, and ensuring that its political approach chimes with the outlook of its supporters. Moreover, the party's underlying belief in a social democratic ideal of democracy and equality should oblige it to create a model that not only reflects those principles, but is also bound

up with their realisation. If the Blair government's commendable work in areas like child poverty and social exclusion has often been tainted by a sense of top-down paternalism, here lies at least part of the explanation: if the party's ethos and organisation could play a role in creating a two-way channel of communication to the people these policies aim to help, how much stronger and more enduring would they be?

So, what we propose goes further than a response to Labour's decline in membership and the disaffection of existing activists. It is aimed at being a first step in a process whereby a structure and culture forged at the height of the industrial age belatedly addresses a very different world. Crudely put, the party was created as the political arm of organised Labour in a society divided into clear-cut blocs, with an ethos and organisation to match, and has yet – for all New Labour's talk of modernisation – to adjust properly to a very different reality: one in which politics is focused on a terrain much wider than the workplace, and policy must be something enacted with people rather than on them. If Labour is to prosper, it needs a new project as decisive as its original foundation: the creation of new links with wider society that will augment the party's ties to the trade unions and cement Labour's role not only as a successful electoral project, but a political force with deep and long-lasting foundations.

This ties in with a wider aim that underlies a great deal of what we have to say. In terms of its on-the-ground organisation, Labour faces one particularly historic and very pressing challenge. Consider one particularly important passage from the Power Inquiry's report:

The organisations that shaped and campaigned for the demands of the industrial working class for so much of the twentieth century, and ultimately brought them to the very heart of the formal political establishment through the Labour Party, have not proved able to do the same, to anything like the same extent, for that section of society now suffering persistent poverty ... Their alienation is, in effect, doubled. Not only do they have no strong organisation link to formal politics, but the stubborn persistence of their disadvantage has created a sense that politics has nothing to do with them anyway.

Of course, addressing this very dysfunctional aspect of our society will not be easy. It should not cut across the fact that Labour's electoral success is necessarily dependent on a coalition that includes those on the opposite side of Britain's socio-economic divisions, or that involving the party in grassroots social movements must never be a byword for the sectionalism that bedevilled Labour in the past. But it shows that the supposed 'internal' questions about Labour's organisation and culture are integrally bound up with its wider egalitarian mission.

We argue, essentially, for a New 1900: a moment in Labour's history in which the party reaches out and re-establishes itself as an immovable part of Britain's society and culture. It's a tall order. But that is what the best Labour ideas, exemplified by the work of Compass, have always been about.

## Where are we and how did we get here?

*It is, I think, almost universally realized at present that the Bolsheviks could not have retained power for two and a half months, let alone two and a half years, without the most rigorous and truly iron discipline in our Party ...*

V.I. Lenin, Left Wing Communism:  
An Infantile Disorder, 1920

*Labour must replace competing existing structures with a single chain of command leading directly to the leader of the party. Philip Gould, memo entitled 'The Unfinished Revolution', 1995*

Modern party politics is built on an awkward fault-line. Across a whole range of policies, senior figures in both the Conservatives and Labour endlessly espouse the mantras of choice, personal empowerment and participation, yet their views of their own party members rather suggests the opposite. As Andrew Rawnsley recently wrote in the Observer (2006), 'The message from the leaders to their own members is that they can't be trusted. Tony Blair has always been frightened that the Labour Party might go berserk on him. David Cameron doesn't trust Tory members to get with his modernisation programme, so he has to hand down to his associations a centrally selected A-list of parliamentary candidates.' Since that was written, the Tories' leader has actually gone one step further, instituting a system whereby local parties create a shortlist, but the choice of candidate is left to centrally appointed party managers.

Consequently, there is an increasing gulf between what remains of the parties' membership bases and their leaderships and central bureaucracies, compounded by a dramatic contrast in the two sides' respective vibrancy and political clout. In keeping with the demands of the modern political game, leaders and party machines have to be seen to be almost hyperactive, endlessly churning out policy initiatives, headline-grabbing speeches and PR stunts. In contrast, it is almost a given that parties on the ground are in a state of inevitable disrepair – quiescent, moribund and dominated by activists who understand little of the modern political process. In the limited academic literature on party decline, one tends to encounter common assumptions: of a long-term trend of membership decline, working alongside the fracturing of traditional voting patterns and party associations. This tends to be grouped with the decline in political participation and turnout, together with a consequential rise in numbers of floating and protest voters. All these phenomena are usually seen as generic characteristics of western market economies. The same applies to the centralisation of the parties, the decline in political independence of their members – from MPs to local activists – and the increasing dominance of their central secretariats. Inevitably, these seemingly unstoppable shifts have had consequences for the substance of politics: an increasing interchangeability of the parties as they seek to occupy the same political space – as crystallised by the notion of 'Blameronism' – and a relentless decline in the esteem in which the modern politician is held. The latter has been chronically exacerbated by two key consequences of membership decline and centralisation: a near-desperate search for private sources of money resulting in accusations – if not the actual practice – of corruption, and a political culture in

which populist stunts and press manipulation take the place of genuine debate, further reinforcing an ongoing popular disengagement. In Labour's case, what was once an organisation aimed at giving ordinary people a say now looks increasingly like a structure that reproduces the power of a hardened elite.

Within what remains of the party, there is far too little debate about the role and function of modern political organisations. Indeed, those set on hacking back Labour's federal, pluralist structures have been gifted with circumstances that allow them to pursue their objectives; party decline might in itself be responsible for the lack of discussion, as collapsing membership and activity has meant that the party is now

*'If we, as local councillors, set up a slush fund or a campaign fund to fight an election that wasn't accountable to the members,' says a Mancunian Labour activist, 'we'd be hammered. Absolutely hammered.'*

incapable of being a site for real democratic political life. Put simply, Labour has perhaps been so emptied-out that it is unable to debate what its modern role should be.

In many ways, the party has long been trapped between the two general ways its organisation and culture have been viewed from within. The first strand – in the broadest sense, the way Labour's internal affairs are seen from the right of the party – considers the party as a centralised structure driven to achieve and retain power and consolidate the leadership. The second, usually associated with the left, is built around such considerations as the accountability of the leadership to the party at large and formal internal democracy. Via their professed belief in their own model of ad hoc plebiscitary 'democracy', some elements of New Labour have perhaps attempted to pursue the first view using the language of the second – a classic Blairite 'double shuffle' – though it has not been hard to see through such sophistry; even now, these two archetypes still fit the party's ongoing tussles about its future.

What has been sacrificed in this polarised debate has been an ability to see the party as having a genuine role in supporting and thereby legitimising the leadership, while simultaneously holding it – and the party's policy framework – to account within the institutions of the party. Moreover, now that voices at the top seem to be set on moving Labour into the era of a loosely defined, 'virtual' party, there is no practical conception of the possibilities of the party on the ground acting as a radical force in the communities it aims to serve and represent. Without that, we would argue, any talk of Labour's renewal represents a forlorn hope.

### The decline of the party on the ground

Labour's membership currently stands at under 200,000, the lowest it has been since Ramsay McDonald split the party in the 1930s, and less than half the figure at which it stood in 1997, when membership had risen from just under 300,000 in

## Where are we and how did we get here?

1989 to a peak of around 400,000. Those figures illuminate what might be termed the Blair effect: an initial boost in numbers, followed over time by a downward trend that has left membership numbers at a historic low. The figures are inevitably crude, but they undermine the idea – propagated by some senior party figures – that the fall is largely ascribable to the falling-away of the anti-Tory mood in the mid-1990s and the subsequent euphoria in 1997, and the detachment from the party of short-lived members whose involvement was never going to be long-standing in the first place. Labour's membership decline appears to have gone way beyond that, and eaten into the party's core – a hypothesis borne out by the testimony of many who have left, and the evidence of increasingly moribund branch and constituency parties.

A similar pattern, of course, has befallen both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In the former case, membership fell by 75 per cent – from 1.2 million to 300,000 – between 1982 and 2004, though the rate of decline from 1998 onwards has been altogether slower than that of Labour: 15 per cent, as against over 50 per cent (there has also reportedly been an upswing since David Cameron became leader). The Lib Dems have moved along a more up-and-down trajectory: from 145,000 (1980), to 82,000 (1989), up to 100,000 (1998), and down to a current level of around 70,000, representing a Blair-era decline of around 30 per cent.

International comparisons reflect the same picture. Across just about all the world's long-standing democracies, party membership is now the preserve of an increasingly small minority: to take two examples at random, between the 1950s and present day, party membership rates in New Zealand collapsed from 23.8 per cent of the electorate to just 2.1 per cent, while in Denmark they fell from 15.7 per cent to 3.1 per cent (the UK, meanwhile, saw a drop from 10 per cent to 1.9 per cent). In many cases, moreover, the picture of a particularly sharp pre-millennial fall is confirmed: between 1998 and 2004, for example, the French Parti Socialiste lost a mind-boggling 60 per cent of its membership.

However, to throw back one's hands and put Labour's plunging membership down to trends that are somehow insurmountable is to avoid two matters that require pressing attention. First, plenty of evidence suggests that there are clear and addressable reasons for much of Labour's decline, from specific policies, through the more general matter of the party's current culture, and on to recurrent complaints about the voice denied to the ordinary party member. Second, even if the problems defy easy solutions, if the Labour Party's claim to still be pushing the frontier of politics is to ring true, here is a very pressing challenge. If the current model is not working, then what will?

Earlier this year, one of the authors spent time on an assignment for the Guardian in and around Manchester, talking to people who had either left the party during the last nine years, or opted to remain involved and observed the party's problems first-hand. The choice of location was partly symbolic – Manchester, after all, is the location for the 2006 Labour conference – but also based on the city's place in the last decade of Labour history. Its regeneration speaks volumes

about the UK's current vibrancy, and the city council is run by a Labour administration who have pioneered much of what is now known as the 'Respect Agenda' (and thus, in the view of some activists, provided a rare example of policy feeding from the base of the party upwards), though gains for the Liberal Democrats have suggested that they must vigilantly guard their hold on power.

Among activists in the Northenden branch of the constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale West, there were warm words about the Labour Party's national and local record and some of the government's leading personnel, but more pessimistic opinions about Labour's health on the ground. The national drop in membership numbers had been reflected locally in a fall from around 120 local members to somewhere in the region of 50; as many as 30 of those who had left the party had done so because of the invasion of Iraq. The consequences had not just been organisational, but financial: 'We can't really get unsecured loans from multi-millionaires to fight Northenden,' said one local councillor. 'So it's had a real impact on our funds.' They said their constituency General Committee (GC) was 'defunct', and had substituted 'open meetings on particular subjects' for the traditional model of formal monthly gatherings. Ten years ago, its annual general meeting would have attracted in excess of 100 delegates; the most recent AGM had seen a turnout of between 30 and 40. Mention of the nascent Supporters Network brought a mixed response, coloured by the fact that – as with all local Labour parties – if anyone in their area had signed up, neither the constituency nor branch party had so far been informed. One activist commented:



*'It is no good paying endless tribute to the globally orientated politics of Make Poverty History one minute, and offering such a parochial, reductive set of political options the next.'*

It's almost going in the direction of American politics, with registered Democrats and registered Republicans ... Our job in the future might not be to run a mass membership party; it'll be to run this network to make sure we win elections, and bring in resources ... I think we should try and retain a mass membership, as much as possible – the ideal solution would be to renew the party and develop the network.

When asked whether they felt as if they had a say in party policy, the verdict was pretty much unanimous: 'Not enough,' said one activist; another said that in the absence of the old model of pushing policy resolutions up through the party, they were faced with an ad hoc range of often unsatisfactory options: 'Writing to the minister concerned about what party members feel, or doing it through our MP ... it never was a good system, but it's not been improved.' One woman had been a delegate at national conference and discovered that the position brought 'absolutely no power whatsoever. I was disappointed, I have to say.' There was also anger about the sense that standards that applied to local parties did not seem to matter to those at the top: 'If we, as local councillors, set up



a slush fund or a campaign fund to fight an election that wasn't accountable to the members, we'd be hammered. Absolutely hammered.'

Down the road at a General Committee meeting of the Manchester Central Constituency Party, delegates were pleased to be attending the first quorate gathering in a long while, though they had recently voted to reduce the quorum 'because we'd been missing it for months'. Membership numbers for the entire Constituency Labour Party (CLP) had gone from close to 700 in 1997 to around 400. 'It hasn't been a steady slide,' said one delegate. 'It's really, really taken some tumbles. Iraq was a big one. Most people fade away; they don't send in angry resignation letters. For every 20 members you lose, you get one letter explaining why someone has gone.' Among those who remained, there was a noticeable frustration with the opportunities for debate offered by the party machine: one man spoke about his disappointment with 'policy seminars that just turn out to be exercises in Tory-bashing'. Trying times for the party, meanwhile, had been demonstrated by local election results: thanks to the Iraq issue, in 2003, the inner-city Ward of Whalley Range had seen a Labour majority of 700 converted into a winning margin of 500 for the Lib Dems, despite the candidate campaigning on an anti-war platform.

Elsewhere, when speaking to a handful of people who had either recently left the party or stayed in despite serious misgivings, the verdicts on the reasons for the party's decline threw up easily identifiable themes. Opinions included the following: 'On something like the education bill, the government isn't even taking note of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) any more. It's a nonsensical situation: a government putting through legislation that its own MPs oppose, and getting it through with the support of the opposition'; 'It's very difficult being in an organisation that's doing things you don't believe in'; 'People are not given any power or influence, and that's what turns them off – why pay all that money if you can't actually participate?'; 'They seem to want to do away with members, do away with meetings... just have supporters who they believe will miraculously turn out and work for them at elections'; 'I suppose I always had this illusion that my membership brought some influence. But when you realise that you cannot influence what happens, and you're just supporting something you find insupportable ... what do you do?'

### Labour's dysfunctional culture

Much of this disaffection is bound up with the organisational structures that are examined below. But a good deal of it can also be traced to Labour's abiding culture: the language in which the leadership speaks to the party at large, the framing of debate, and the ongoing failure to bind the membership into Labour's actions in government. In debates about party renewal, this area has long been overlooked, but in historical context, its importance is only underlined: given that Labour's internal machinations have always fallen far short of any ideal of member-led democracy, the fact that complaints about the disconnection between the party's leadership and members have reached such a high pitch must at least partly be ascribable to these cultural factors.

You do not have to look too hard to identify the key problems. Many of those at the top seem to yield to the idea that the membership should be quiescent and deferential, happy to leave the difficult issues – those that most dominate the political agenda – to professional politicians, and focus most of its attention on much more workaday concerns. Take, for example, the party's official explanation of the Partnership in Power process: 'Many people have good ideas about how the government could do things like reduce traffic congestion, improve the NHS, make our schools better, or tackle violence and anti-social behaviour ... Through Partnership in Power, these good ideas get listened to and debated on both local and national levels.' There is a disjunction here not just between politics as discussed by the population at large and the party's idea of its own internal discussions, but also between the latter and some of the government's own rhetoric: it is no good, for example, paying endless tribute to the kind of globally orientated politics that reared their head during the Make Poverty History campaign one minute, and offering such a parochial, reductive set of political options the next.

The same accent on a cynically stripped-back debate informs the party's current use of the internet. Rather than being used as a means of substantially engaging members in policy discussion, and allowing them to develop ad hoc communication networks with one another, the party's website – which, by modern standards, is remarkably light on content – and its use of email have thus far clung to a determinedly top-down modus operandi. Messages sent from party HQ to members and supporters seem emblematic of a crucial mistake: given that becoming formally involved in Labour politics will usually denote an above-average interest in politics, the tenor of emails is usually almost comically crude. On the eve of this year's local elections, one Labour email advised that 'as the Lib Dem leadership ballot closes today, Lib Dem councillors everywhere should be challenged to decide where they stand on crime and anti-social behaviour – are they on the side of hard working families or on the side of the bullies, yobs and vandals?' Even more notorious was the online party questionnaire – for which the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke later apologised – that appeared on the eve of the parliamentary vote on the Terrorism Bill in November 2005. It offered three questions: 'Do you think that our laws should be updated to cope with the current security threat?'; 'Do you think police should have the time and opportunity to complete their investigations into suspected terrorists?'; and – best of all – 'Do you think the government should make sure there are new safeguards to protect innocent people?'

There is a wider problem with the language in which the party talks to itself: the absence of much of a sense of underlying values, as if the government's recurrent emphasis on 'what works' has bled into a misplaced idea of what leads people to become and remain Labour members. A desiccated, painstakingly pragmatic approach to certain issues may or may not be a correct approach to these issues on the part of government ministers, but it will hardly bind a party together; and when it is carried over into official party material, you sense a failure to reach out to the concerns that might bring someone into political involvement. The list of 'issues that

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matter to you' offered to potential members of the new Labour Supporters Network (LSN) speaks volumes: there are boxes to be ticked for such options as 'business', 'community', 'economy' and 'crime and anti-social behaviour', but nothing that denotes the more resonant stuff of political principles. Why not a box for the keynote Labour issue of equality? Even if that seems too amorphous, how about including the option of registering an interest in poverty and social exclusion? Here, it seems, may lie one reason why as party membership has declined, single-issue groups have thrived; as against the former's increasingly drab vocabulary, the latter still speak the language of morals, values and an emotional kind of engagement.

This problem, of course, goes much wider than that. There will always be a difference – sharp, on occasion – between the messages the party sends to its members and those aimed at the wider electorate, but in government, too much of the government's rhetoric has seemed to sit in an ill-defined place between expressing values that run counter to those of the party, and enunciating none at all (for example Alan Milburn's claims during the 2005 campaign that it was Labour's mission to enable people to 'earn and own' and the party should ensure 'more people get the opportunity to join the middle class'). Here is one token of the pessimism that still lies at the heart of the New Labour project: over the last two decades, the party has developed a vocabulary that leaves behind the sectarianism and impossibility of the past, yet the very people who so accelerated that change still seem reluctant to frame their actions in terms of Labour's supposed principles. At meetings of the party, there may be speeches paying tribute to such ideas as equality and solidarity, but it should not be forgotten that members' perceptions of the party's actions are also shaped by messages that go out to the wider public. Obscuring Labour's values is not the best means of keeping them motivated; in retrospect, the idea of progressive politics by stealth was always going to corrode Labour's relationship with its own members.

Even when the party meets, this mixture of pessimism and reductive politics serves to stymie the opportunity for the kind of debate and discussion that would serve to bind the party together, these days seemingly left to the organisations that set up events on the conference fringe. At the Labour conference of 2005, one cabinet minister was asked what conference was actually for, and replied thus: "To bring together people from all over our country, throughout the Labour movement, to meet each other, to meet government ministers, to ... if you like, just renew everybody's sense of purpose, but even more importantly, to discuss and share what we're doing, so we achieve all our manifesto commitments as effectively as possible." This implies a depressingly stripped-down vision of the party's most important gathering. Leaving aside the question of the role of conference in policy and the specific issues it should discuss, it should surely focus on matters that range much wider than the current political programme or the odd contemporary resolution. There seems no reason why the party cannot allow for regular discussions

about its core principles, its members' vision of the good society, and the future that might lie ten, 15 or even 100 years ahead.

One last cultural issue also deserves discussion. If progressive politics in the USA is anything to go by, Labour may soon have to adjust to a model of political activism in which some people choose to campaign for particular candidates, and for tactical reasons, election campaigns find people's activities ranging across parties (anecdotal evidence suggests that this began to happen in the UK in both the 2001 and 2005 campaigns). To take a particularly topical example, consider the rise of the BNP in some towns and cities, and how imperative it may make tactical voting and campaigning. Moreover, there will be an increasing case for alliances – both temporary and ongoing – between the party, nationally and/or locally, and single-issue organisations whose agenda squares with some aspects of Labour politics. As things stand, Labour's rather paranoiac, vanguardist mindset – essentially, the belief that even qualified or tactical support for other parties represents something close to treachery, and that pressure groups are usually to be treated with suspicion – will have to loosen up dramatically.

### **How we got here: 20 years of party reform, and the strange case of Tony Blair**

Throughout the long hard years of opposition from 1979 to 1997, the idea of reinventing the Labour Party – not just politically, but in terms of its organisation and culture – took centre-stage. During this period, internal reform became a signifier for the general electability of the party itself. At the same time, issues around organisational change and internal party democracy were the focus of an obsessive battle between Labour's left and right, locked in a fight over such issues as the mandatory reselection of MPs, reform of the electoral college still used in the selection of the party leader, and control of the manifesto. What arose, via a process of accommodation, compromise and commendable leadership initiative, could be seen as part of the long-term, incremental development of the party.

*'Blair did not lose a conference vote for years – though this was not an organic reflection of his brilliance, but the product of a ruthless political machine.'*

By the early 1990s, Labour's internal debate had given rise to a settlement defined by the horrors and wreckage of the early 1980s and the party's response to serial election defeats. As far as the party's internal affairs were concerned, this represented an inspired balancing of democracy and the demands of power that, by current standards, represented a shining example (and, sadly, a missed opportunity). The door was closed on this development – in essence, a modernising of the basic federal structure of the party, and its internal system of checks and balances – by the rise of Tony Blair. Relative to his predecessors, the model he has sought to build has been qualitatively different: it is fundamentally authoritarian, and its proposed final hardening into the pseudo-democratic monolith mentioned above gives cause for real alarm, as we shall see.

Neil Kinnock's time as Labour leader – from 1983 to 1992 – was at first characterised by a spotlight-hogging debate over

policy, and the attempt to rid the party of Militant. Following Labour's third consecutive election defeat in 1987, however, there was an escalation of party reform, crystallised by the organisational aspects of the watershed policy review, which began that year. In retrospect, the core elements of the idea are very interesting: the basic idea that policy and organisational change had to be built around a coalition of support within the institutions of the party that was as wide as possible, and a drive to transcend the old left–right divide and Labour's deeply factionalised culture. In attempting to develop a new dialogue between the policy review's formal groups and the party and unions across the country, it aimed at something new: a responsive form of policy discussion, which did not simply boil down to the annual shoot-out at the party conference. It acknowledged the central problem for the party in government – the party-on-the-ground going one way and the leadership going another (as with the two manifestos that, somewhat alarmingly, were pulled together for the 1979 election; one authored by the political office in Number 10, the other by the National Executive Committee or NEC). For Kinnock, the objective was to anticipate this rupture and build intermediary forms of discussion, so as to glue the institutions of the party together.

This set the tone for the key internal change under Kinnock's leadership: an attempt by core elements in the party to establish a new party structure anchored in a modern, pluralist conception of what Labour could be. It was heavily influenced by the experience of Social Democratic parties in some of the key countries of Europe – France, Germany, Spain and Sweden. It acknowledged the failings of the party in the 1970s and 1980s, yet remained of the view that it could modernise; in that sense, it took the party seriously and saw its role as legitimate.

In 1990, Labour's Conference was presented with the document Democracy and Policy Making for the 1990s, whose recommendations were to be implemented after the forthcoming general election. In her work on Labour's organisation, Building New Labour (2005), Meg Russell describes the document as 'the most ambitious programme for internal reform ever presented by the party leadership'. It aimed at a process that would be 'deliberative' and 'representative', and result in 'a policy programme which [was] a clear and authoritative statement of party policy at any given time'. The process would be built around a two-year cycle, during which CLPs and affiliates could submit resolutions in the form of amendments to the programme; subject-specific policy commissions would oversee particular areas; and a National Policy Forum (NPF) – including representatives of the party's regions, socialist societies, the PLP, the Labour members of the European Parliament and Labour councillors – would oversee the whole process. Its chief architect, the then General Secretary Larry Whitty, saw the NPF as a National Council of Labour, acknowledging a legitimate role for the party not only in policy development, but also in holding the leadership to account within the very structures of the party itself.

Unfortunately, Labour's defeat in 1992 prevented these proposals from being properly implemented. An embryonic

NPF sat from 1993 onwards, though its place within Labour's rules and structures was never made clear. Meanwhile, the tragically brief leadership of John Smith was characterised by a number of watershed advances: one member, one vote for the selection of parliamentary candidates and the constituency section of Labour's NEC, individualised block votes at Labour conference, and the drive to ensure the election of Labour's leader and deputy leader on the widest possible franchise. Plans for the NPF were eventually revived under Tony Blair, when they were substantially altered, and realised in 1997 under the title Partnership in Power. On the face of it, the policy machinery introduced was not too dissimilar from the model envisaged earlier. As it turned out, however, a combination of changed proposals and the subsequent management of the process conspired to route the process away from any idea of a new pluralism, and towards the altogether more sinister territory of centralisation and control. Such has been the tenor of Tony Blair's 12 years as leader of the party.

As Meg Russell points out, Partnership in Power (2005):

*“created far weaker bodies than those originally envisaged, and these have proved unable to mediate effectively between the leadership and wider opinion in the party. They have suffered from a lack of transparency and made it difficult for constituency members to get their concerns on to the formal agenda. Whilst some sought to use the new system to introduce a more ‘deliberative’ model of policy-making, its operation lacked some of the essential elements demanded by the proponents of this model. These include genuine commitment from both sides, negotiation based on mutual respect and real visible results.”*

Such shortcomings are amply demonstrated by recurrent complaints from CLPs that it is effectively impossible to trace the fate of submissions to the NPF – down to the simple matter of whether anyone actually reads them.

Moreover, the new constituency delegates to the NPF – whose candidacies are still backed by very brief written statements, thus placing their selection in something of a political vacuum – were to be elected by regional delegates to conference rather than by Labour members, thus allowing an informal political machine to move in and fix the vote. Over time, there has been a marked decline in those seeking election from the membership; these days, those nominated barely cover the number of places. This reflects a more general problem: the fact that the NPF represents an elusive body in the eyes of the membership, contaminated by top-down management of its deliberations and celebrated examples of watershed policies being implemented with no reference to it, as with top-up fees and foundation hospitals. As such cases suggest, the original idea of the NPF seeing to the party's rolling programme has often seemed in danger of being effectively sidelined.

There is, of course, an underlying problem here: the fact that even in its hobbled, uncertain form, the NPF represents an example of the kind of mediation – not to mention the political pluralism – that the more extreme allies of Tony Blair have long set themselves against. This approach has long

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defined the Blairite approach to the practice of power – as evidenced, for example, by Peter Mandelson’s arguments for a ‘formalised strengthening of the centre of government’ – and spread out into influential views of the party. Take, for example, this rather chilling passage from Philip Gould’s *The Unfinished Revolution* (2001), in many ways Blairism’s most seminal text, alluding to his secret 1995 memo of the same name, which he describes as ‘a war-cry for total modernisation’:

I added a recommendation which was to become highly controversial: ‘Labour must replace competing existing structures with a single chain of command leading directly to the leader of the party. This is the only way that Labour can become a political organisation capable of matching the Conservatives. It will be more effective, and in a one member, one vote party, more democratic.’ This offended everybody. It was in part a response to my short-term concerns about campaign organisation, but at root the point was much bigger than that: I felt then, as now, that only a unitary system of command could give Labour the clarity and flexibility it needed to adapt and change at the pace required by modern politics ... Labour’s structure had become too diffuse, with power shared between the NEC, the PLP, the conference, the unions and the constituency associations.

Blair has never gone as far as Gould suggested, though since the early 1990s, his vision of Labour’s internal affairs has pointed in the same direction (there is a convincing argument that this runs alongside the Blairite obsession with the supposedly streamlined operations of markets; as Gould implies, sidelining mediating structures could conceivably be justified as a matter of simple efficiency). Under John Smith’s leadership, Blair proposed total exclusion of trade unions from Labour’s leadership elections and candidate selection. By March 1996, a process called *Road to the Manifesto* – which would climax with a vote of party members on the agenda with which Labour would fight the following year’s election – was highlighting a concerted attempt to squash Labour’s pluralist aspects, and set the tone for a carefully controlled system of party plebiscites, as evidenced by a run of newspaper headlines: ‘NEC seen as troublesome anachronism’ (*Financial Times*), ‘Blair paves way for future plebiscites over the heads of union leaders’ (*Independent*) and ‘Blair cuts the unions out of key stage of policy making’ (*Guardian*).

Of those who voted 95 per cent supported the new manifesto – a figure of East German-esque dimensions, whose participation cost rather a lot of money, perhaps a not-insignificant brake on Blair’s plebiscitary designs. For whatever reason, the process was not repeated. It also pointed up a problem with the plebiscitary model that verges on the absurd – as Clare Short (quoted in Rentoul, 2001) asked with reference to an early Blair proposal, made while John Smith was leader, to ballot party members on whole areas of policy:

Say you’ve got a proposal for a housing policy ... you’ve got housing for rent, housing for elderly people, mortgage tax relief, all these questions. So you’re going to have a long and detailed document that everyone can read ... How can you then say, ‘Are you in favour, yes or no?’ and call that a rational, intelligent policy-making process? I think that’s a way of really downgrading the membership’s engagement in

any rational process and giving the power to parliamentary leaders who make proposals, and then the passive membership has to say yes.

Besides, as New Labour’s time in government began, a supposed belief in the emancipation of the membership was exposed as a sham whenever the party threatened to vote the wrong way – for Ken Livingstone rather than Frank Dobson in London, or for Rhodri Morgan rather than Alun Michael in Wales. As soon as democracy threatened Blair’s tight control of the party’s public face, he hit the rewind button and resorted to the machine politics of Labour’s past – an Old Labour route if ever there was one – to fix the requisite party structures.

The general strategy of circumventing the party has been delivered through an informal cross-departmental task-force within the party’s head office. This was established as soon as Blair came to power, and charged with party management and the delivery of votes within party structures, especially the annual conference. This unit’s work has now become formally built into the core duties of head office, and in particular the role of the general secretary. Heavily dominated by young Labour activists and officers, it has cultivated a new culture of cynical management – among other devices, using regional offices to nominate conference delegates and influence them to vote the ‘right way’ via pre-conference seminars, and giving ‘help’ with speeches and leaning on delegates during the event itself. This has been an extraordinarily successful operation that has hardly ever been exposed, allowing Blair to create the image of a dashing national figure in complete control of his party. In contrast with his predecessors, Blair did not lose a conference vote for years – though this was not an organic reflection of his brilliance, but the product of a ruthless political machine.

Two other aspects of the Blair years deserve mentioning. First, there has been an ongoing quest to diminish the role within the party of the unions – beginning with a seemingly reasonable quest to rebalance the party’s federal structure so as to give a greater say to constituency parties, so that 1995 saw a 70:30 split between the two respective sides at conference changed to 50:50. Ever since, however, there have been recurrent calls from some of the Prime Minister’s more zealous allies to diminish the unions’ role within Labour’s decision-making yet further, and eventually sideline them altogether. The Phillip Gould memo mentioned above characterised reducing the union proportion of conference as a ‘short run’ measure, a step on the path to Labour abandoning its federal shape and becoming ‘a genuine one member, one vote party’. Stephen Byers has recently argued for a ‘re-examination’ of the union link, claiming – and here, the irony is priceless – that ‘Labour must learn the lessons of its own history and ensure that the priorities of a small, unrepresentative number of people are not allowed to distort our programme’. Alan Johnson is on record as supporting the idea that the election of Labour’s leader should be decided by constituency members alone. Meanwhile – and most seriously – the current debate about party funding has seen calls, even from some Labour figures, for donation caps (for which a future Tory government will apparently legislate) that would limit the ability of unions to affiliate to the party, and thereby kill the most important aspect of its federal structure.

Finally, the party's upper echelons are currently involved in a review of the one aspect of Labour's internal affairs that Kinnock, Smith and even Blair (thus far) left all but untouched: the party on the ground. In a sense, this represents a belated response to the way that the strangulated culture of the New Labour period has seen the grassroots atrophy, not just in terms of membership decline, but also with reference to a chronic failure to grasp the possibilities of new technology, and follow the examples set by all manner of other campaigning organisations. Such, as far as Labour's presence in the country is concerned, is the central tragedy of the Blair period: a revolutionising of political activity, from the rich conversations and debates that define the blogosphere, through the international dialogues underlying the Global Justice Movement, from which Labour seems to have learned precious little. In comparison with the maelstrom of progressive politics swirling outside its structures, the party looks drab and old-fashioned; a New World has been created, but Labour has so far played no part in it. Unless there is a response to the challenge, one aspect of renewal – the recruitment of new generations – will surely come to nothing.

### The Party Renewal Project

In 1999 a stop-start project called The 21st Century Party began, since renamed the Party Renewal Project. Earlier in 2006, in a letter-cum-press-release supposedly sent from Tony Blair to the newly appointed party chair Hazel Blears, he talked about the need to adopt 'new ways of working to connect with voters, members and potential supporters', so as to 'provide the platform for a fourth successive general election victory'. This required a new emphasis on the party's presence online ('the face and the front door of the party to an increasing number of people'), and 'a radical review of the way in which we are organised at every level ... the ways in which we communicate with members, supporters and voters; and the ways that we campaign'.

*'In comparison to the maelstrom of progressive politics swirling outside its structures, the party looks drab and old-fashioned; a new world has been created, but Labour has so far played no part in it.'*

The letter's most extensive passage was dedicated to the nascent Labour Supporters Network, aimed at providing a home for 'many people who support the party, share our values and who are willing to campaign actively for us ... Some become members, but increasingly many do not.' Blair went on to mention the possibility of involving the network in 'policy discussion' with government, but on the current evidence, such claims do not promise much. Case studies of existing local supporters networks in official party literature suggest a role that falls far short of anything substantial; according to one account, 'Many of the supporters offer

their help at election times with the stuffing of envelopes and polling day tasks. They are also great at displaying posters early on in an election, giving real momentum at the start of the campaign.'

Of course, possible methods of engaging supporters that augment the sole option of party membership merit serious discussion, but in the context of Labour's current democratic deficit, the Supporters Network scheme inevitably causes

some alarm. First, it seems to answer the party's current membership travails with a topsy-turvy solution: if a good number of Labour members have left the party because of a perceived lack of say in the direction of the party, why address the problem via a new kind of membership that will have even less input? Second, it conjures up the dread prospect of Labour's current centralising drift reaching its logical conclusion: a party run determinedly from the top, with – at best – an increasingly functional role for those who wish to engage at the bottom; this is in effect, as the Labour MP Angela Eagle recently put it, 'the ultra-moderniser cheerleader model', to be polled at critical times to reinforce the trajectory of the government, used intermittently at election times and occasionally hit for money.

That said, to hear some people talk, the role of the archetypal party activist has little place in the 21st century. As Andrew Rawnsley put it in the aforementioned Observer article (2006):

There's an argument that the decline of parties doesn't much matter. I've heard it said that there's now little point in activists slogging around streets to ring on doorbells that are never answered and deliver leaflets that are never read. High command has the technology to launch mass bombardments of emails and text messages at voters with the push of the leader's button at campaign HQ. They can employ call centres. At the last election, both the Tories and Labour spent large sums on phone banks to trap voters at home.

All that may be true, but experience suggests that centrally directed campaigning is best used as a complement to direct contact with voters. Many Labour members who campaigned in 2005's general election and this year's local elections can doubtless attest to the effect that a lack of local activists has on the party's electoral prospects. At least one modern example proves that the model of the party-as-centralised-clique is simply not electorally tenable: in Italy, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia began as a loose political force serviced by Berlusconi's media empire, with precious little presence in the country. That has since changed. As Colin Crouch points out in his Fabian Society pamphlet *Coping with Post Democracy* (2000), 'As the years have passed, so Forza Italia has come to resemble more closely a classic party: it has acquired members and a local voluntary structure, and it has come to become more successful as a result.' (Though we should also note the seedbed of its growth, singularly lacking in the UK: 'the importance in Italy ... of local government as the prime link between people and politics and as the lifeblood of parties'.)

Closer to home, a study of the 1997 general election by the University of Sheffield's Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd (1999) concluded that, despite the vogueish belief that it is difficult to draw lines between on-the-ground campaigning and actual results, 'Local campaigns played a very important role in influencing the vote ... the evidence that campaigns mattered for Labour and the Liberal Democrats is particularly strong, but there is evidence to support this conclusion for the Conservatives as well.' In their view, 'local party activists play an important role in mobilising the vote in British elections', and there is a very important distinction to be made 'between nationally-directed constituency campaigns and locally-directed campaigns – while the former are not particularly effective, the latter are highly effective'. With reference to the

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effect local parties can have on electoral outcomes, they claimed that ‘parties which neglect and discourage their activists in the belief that they play only a ritualistic role in electioneering are likely to pay a significant price in terms of seats lost’. So, as banal as it may sound, parties are still necessary to those who seek to win elections. The point is only compounded by what we see as the key challenge Labour faces: reinventing itself as an immovable campaigning presence across the UK. To achieve both aims, Labour needs not only a coherent set of values and a large and motivated membership, but an organisation that, from top to bottom, is characterised by a vibrant culture and a firm organisational shape. What follows is a picture of how this might be achieved.

### The formal architecture of the Labour Party

The Labour Party was formed in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee. Historically, neither the Labour Party nor the Conservatives existed as parties in the conventional sense of collections of individual members, and in formal terms the Conservative Party remains a federation of autonomous associations. The Labour Party did not introduce individual membership until 1918 – before that it was composed of unions, socialist and co-operative societies, and the Independent Labour Party, which itself had existed since 1893.

The structure of the Labour Party today reflects its origins. Although the constitution has been overhauled a number of times since 1918, fundamentally it is still based around two forms of membership: that of individual membership and affiliated membership, both of which are ascribed rights by virtue of their legal status within the party.

For example, take the Labour Party Conference, the body which formally controls the specifics of the Labour programme, and the sovereign institution of the party. The unions and other affiliated societies are entitled to send delegates to conference based on the size of their affiliated membership: one delegate per 5000 affiliated, with individual affiliation costing £2.50 per annum; 50 per cent of the votes at the conference are assigned to this membership. Constituency parties also send delegates according to the size of their membership: one delegate per 749 members, with an extra delegate for every 250 members over and above this baseline. Again, half of the conference vote is assigned to this form of membership.

Throughout the rest of the institutions of the party, there is a third form of representation, given to elected representatives. For example, the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party – the body responsible for the ‘strategic direction of the party as a whole’ – has 12 seats for the unions elected at the annual conference and another one for Labour’s socialist societies (for example the Fabians, Labour Students and the Christian Socialist Movement) together with six elected directly by the membership. It also has an allocation for two representatives of Labour councillors and another for three representatives of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The party leader, deputy leader and treasurer also sit on the executive along with Labour’s leader in the European Parliament and three more representatives of the government, all of whom are nominated by the leader.

The two forms of membership, together with elected representatives, also make up the National Policy Forum, set up on an interim basis in 1992. At the 1997 conference, following the work of the initial Party into Power project, the NPF was greatly expanded. It now numbers some 183 members. Among other allocations, its largest single share (54) is reserved for those from CLPs, with 30 places for the trade unions, 18 for Labour’s regions, 9 for the PLP, the same for those representing local government, 8 for the government, and 3 for socialist societies (the 32 members of the NEC are ex-officio participants). The Policy Forum presents proposals to the conference as part of its role in pulling together the two-year rolling policy programme. Positions on the forum must be supported by two-thirds of those voting. Policy reports are pulled together by six policy commissions made up of 16–20 members of the government, the NEC and the Policy Forum itself. Since 2005, these policy commissions have been charged with considering topical issues in their area with the party and affiliates and, following the 2003 Big Conversation initiative, with engaging with groups outside the party when forging policy positions.

A joint committee of the NEC and government and members of the Policy Forum called the Joint Policy Committee has strategic oversight of the rolling policy programme and the NPF. This is chaired by the prime minister. There is also a second joint committee, the Joint Local Government Committee, which is made up representatives of government, the NEC and local government.

Alongside these structures there also exist three standing committees of the NEC: the Women, Race and Equalities Committee; the Audit Committee and Business Board; and the Organisation Committee. Finally, two panels serve the NEC: the Disputes Panel and the Selections Panel. There is also a Party Development Task Group charged with looking at party development over the course of the Parliament. The basic architecture of the party also includes localised branch structures based around council boundaries, CLPs and their general and executive committees, and local government committee structures. At regional level the party is overseen by the regional boards, which also retain responsibility for the Regional and Local Policy Forum infrastructure.

The basic method of candidate selection was agreed at the 1993 Conference, following the final report of the review group on links between the trade unions and the Labour Party, which passed the framework of One Member One Vote, or OMOV. That Conference also agreed the revised electoral college for the election of the leader and deputy leader of the Labour Party: one-third elected by the PLP and European PLP, one-third by the individual members of the party and one-third by the individual levy payers of the unions and membership of the socialist societies. It also agreed a reduction of the block vote from the 70:30 established at the 1993 Conference down to 50:50, but with no timescale or formula. This was resolved with a straight move to 50:50 at the 1995 Conference.

In short, the formal structures of the party demonstrate that it is a party of both members and organisations, each of which are respected within the rules. The structure of the party has tended to emerge through a succession of constitutional rationalisations over time – for example, in 1918, 1993 and 1997 – with each development reinforcing not only the federal structure of the party, but also its hybrid evolution.

## A proposal for reform - the national party

*'It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.'*

Joseph Joubert, French essayist and moralist (1754–1824)

In contrast to the fatalism that grips much of the political class, we do not believe that the party is over. It is true that trust in traditional institutions is in decline; that technological change has led to profound changes in patterns of consumption, lifestyle and work; and that the world is an increasingly complex place, in which many traditional ideologies offer diminishing returns. Yet to write off political parties in terms of the inevitability of their decline is too simplistic (although this approach provides a useful excuse for those who want to avoid discussing deeper problems – not just of how we structure parties, but how we do politics). Anyone who knows anything of cultural and political history should be wary of claims that any kind of institution is necessarily doomed, as proved by the renaissance of such once-condemned national pastimes as football and cinema. Ten years of Labour government, lest we forget, arrived after all kinds of talk about the inevitable demise of our party. In that context, it is more instructive to pause for thought and discuss how, in the face of declining public trust in the political process, we might rebuild and remodel our political parties, and thereby begin to reverse that disconnection.

In the Labour Party, a debate about government and party renewal is already under way. At present, there appears to be a strong desire among senior party figures to move towards the kind of 'virtual party' discussed in the previous chapter, through a mixture of state funding, a change in the union link, concentration on the Supporters Network, and an overarching belief in a party envisaged as a pseudo-democratic monolith. In our view, this amounts to a systematic assault on Labour's basic federal structure, for what appear to be political reasons – to remove any check or balance that might hold back an ongoing shift to the right. In some senses, the arrival of the virtual party might represent something of a relief; we could then go and do something else, hand the party over to the pollsters and focus groups and surrender to the inevitability of it all. Alternatively, we might keep faith with our progressive instincts, regain control of our party and seek to rebuild it as a vehicle for lasting social and economic change.

Our proposed methods for beginning to achieve this focus on the party at a national level, its local organisation, and its abiding culture. With reference to the first, we propose a decisive settlement of Labour's federal shape, and a formula for the voice given to constituency members, elected Labour representatives, trade unions and socialist societies that – in contrast with the uneven arrangements that currently prevail – would apply across all of the party's key structures. We argue for a revival of the National Policy Forum, a new emphasis on its accountability and transparency, and a decision-making cycle at least partly based on general elections, so that renewal becomes a regular process tied to real political developments, rather than a fuzzy notion that seems to mean – not least right now – several different things at once. This in turn should be reflected in a new kind of Labour conference, at which the energy and debate that often seem to be confined to the fringe will be allowed into the main event.

Underlying a great many of our recommendations is an emphasis on the opportunities afforded by new technology. The party's record in this area is pretty woeful, but use of the web and email could assist its processes in all kinds of ways, by allowing regular communication between those who serve on party bodies and the members who elect them, by opening up internal elections to the kind of participation that would enhance the legitimacy of successful candidates, and – perhaps most crucially – by ensuring that the kind of deliberative policy-making that rightly replaced the seaside shoot-out goes right to Labour's roots. The internet – as if it needed saying – offers opportunities for ongoing dialogue and debate, a huge exchange of information, and the kind of member involvement that would lead to a real sea-change in Labour's culture. In keeping with our emphasis on pluralism as against any kind of top-down monolith, these are the terms in which we see technology's possibilities. If Mr Blair has recently been vocal about 'the ways in which we communicate with members, supporters and voters', we think even more attention has to be focused on flows of information that move in the opposite direction.

We also examine the hot issue of party funding. As against the voices who want to usher in the kind of state finance that would sever Labour's union link and enable the creation of a handsomely funded central bureaucracy with little need for a party at large, the aim of our proposals is not only a reduction of the party's dependence on private donations and loans, but the safeguarding of Labour's federal organisation. Yet more importantly, we argue for a rebalancing of the relationship between local parties and the central secretariat, achieved via a

*'Submissions to the National Policy Forum should be subject to an "audit trail" remedying the sense that they currently stand a good chance of falling into a void.'*

re-tilting of their respective funding. This ties into the wider aim of reviving the party as a force in British society – but it's also intended as a means of loosening Labour's current emphasis on top-down control. In this chapter, we set out proposals for new national

regulations that would go some way to achieving this while safeguarding the federal structure and affiliated arrangements that are crucial to Labour's pluralist democracy. In the next chapter, we outline a radical plan for the re-energising of Labour on the ground.

First, though, a slightly more pressing point has to be made, relating to the fact that the debate about internal reform seems to be reaching a watershed.

### The necessity of defence

Given the nature of the reform process currently under way, our first response is necessarily defensive – to ensure that consultation and debate about party reform take place through transparent structures and involves the whole of the party. This applied to the last two major reviews of Labour's structures: the changes of 1992–3 involved a 20-strong NEC review group and major consultation in the party on the union

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link, and the 1995–6 Party into Power project was the work of four NEC sub-committees. Both projects were therefore firmly anchored within the structures of the party and predicated on the large-scale involvement of all the elements within it. This time, an equivalent process should be established by the NEC, with a view to a new debate about the renewal of the party. If no such process is established, the party itself should be prepared to vote down any proposals, bounced on us at this or next year's conference.

This is by no means a conservative, oppositionist response to the supposed modernisation agenda. Debate and reform are critical, and the status quo – simply put, decline – is not an option. It is the possible form of modernisation that has to be contested, in terms of the difference between the monolithic and pluralist approach.

*'We should be wary of claims that any kind of institution is necessarily doomed, as proved by the renaissance of such once-condemned national pastimes as football and cinema.'*

When it comes to party reform, the New Labour 'double shuffle' is to dress up authoritarian reforms in terms of a move into a supposedly democratic future, and it's that trick that has to be guarded against.

We also need to buy some time in order to open up a

real dialogue with any future leadership contestants – and senior party figures – about the shape and future role of the party. As things stand, a new leadership is likely to be elected within the next year or so. This allows for a new debate and a new settlement – between Labour's members, affiliates, societies and leadership – about the party's democracy.

### The basic architecture of the party

The present structure of the party reflects the way new elements have been bolted on over time, occasionally at the expense of coherence and consistency (see 'The formal architecture of the Labour Party' on page 000). Elements such as the conference, the NEC, the NPF and systems for the election of the leader have re-modelled Labour's fundamental federal ideal depending on the political forces at work at particular points in the party's history. As the firm basis for party reform, there is now a very strong case for building a much more consistent model of organisation, so as to make the party more robust. It would also serve to protect it from fads and excesses on the part of any group or individual who might wield excessive power at any specific moment.

Over time – roughly from 1981 to the present day – the gradual reform of the party has consolidated a federal proportionality between members, unions and elected representatives of roughly a third each, originally enshrined in the electoral college still used to elect the party's leader and their deputy. This should now be reflected across the NEC, the NPF and conference. In the latter case, this would mean the unions' share of the vote being reduced, and the arrival of a new third force that would – among other effects – increase links between the party at large and its representatives in national and local government, and thereby increase the sense

that conference meets partly in the context of wider electoral developments.

This would be made up of MPs, MEPs, members of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, Labour representatives in local government, and the party's affiliated socialist societies (the latter are currently included in the 50 percent usually described as the Union Section). It would be split as follows: 15 percent for the socialist societies, 35 percent for local government representatives, and 50 percent for MPs, MEPs, Welsh AMs and Scottish MSPs. The exact proportions, we concede, might be revised, but the central objective would be to ensure formal representation at the conference for all of the stakeholders within the party. There may also be an argument for ensuring that the representatives of Labour MPs should be drawn from outside the government, given the leadership's current tendency to stage-manage conference through its control of the platform.

In entrenching this proportionality across the party, we would also reform the structure of the NEC. As things stand, 24 of its seats are divided between the unions (12), elected representatives of CLPs (6), Labour MPs (3), Labour councillors (2) and the socialist societies (1). We would add an additional seat and bring its membership in line with the other federal structures of the party, so that the unions received eight seats, CLPs were accorded the same, and the third force element was split as follows: two seats for the socialist societies, three for councillors and four for MPs and MEPs. The places reserved for the leader, deputy leader, Labour's leader in the European Parliament, the treasurer, and three appointed representatives of the government would remain.

The structure of the National Policy Forum would also be rebalanced, though its membership structure already reflects a rough proportionality between the membership, unions and elected representatives. Other proposed reforms of the NPF are outlined below.

### Socialist societies

Here, there is a proposal to be made that runs wider than the place of Labour's socialist societies within the party's federal family. At present, the following categories of organisation can affiliate to the party: bona fide trade unions, co-operative societies, socialist societies and other organisations that the NEC deems consistent with the interests and aims of the Labour Party. They have to agree to submit their rules to the NEC, abide by the party's standing orders and accept its programme, policy and principles (organisations that maintain their own versions of the latter three 'for distinctive and separate propaganda' are barred from affiliation). There are 15 such organisations, ranging from the Jewish Labour Movement, through Scientists for Labour and the Socialist Environmental Research Association, to Labour Students and the Fabian Society.

We believe that the concept of a socialist society should be overhauled and revived, and that Labour's conference should be revitalised by bringing many of the organisations that create debate around the conference into the formal proceedings. Some of the most important players in Labour



*‘Previous reforms were firmly anchored within the structures of the party. If no such process is established this time, the party itself should be prepared to vote down any proposals.’*

politics – not just Compass, but also Progress and the Labour Representation Committee – currently have a semi-detached relationship with the party, but there is no reason why they should not be encouraged to affiliate on the current basis of £1.25 per member. If that were to

happen, Labour would pull into its representative structures the very organisations that not only initiate many of its most crucial internal debates, but currently play a role in spreading Labour messages into the wider progressive milieu.

Moreover, this new relationship between the party and socialist societies might well catalyse their expansion, ideally not just when it came to organisations representing broad strands of party opinion, but also the kind of groups whose work in particular policy areas could bring the party real benefits. This already applies in areas such as housing, health, education and the environment, though we would look forward to the creation of socialist societies focused on other key areas: the developing world, UK inequality and social exclusion, civil liberties, or the arts and culture.

### The National Policy Forum

For some, the Party into Power initiatives of the 1995–7 period were an attempt to rebuild completely the party as a space for policy debate that would be active and vibrant, yet simultaneously deliberative and attuned to the realities of government. For others, they were a simple route to the leadership exercising central control of the party. In the more optimistic view of the NPF, its founding ideas built on discussion and debate stretching back to the late 1970s. The aim, in broad terms, was a framework that would allow for a new settlement between the party’s leaders, members and affiliated organisations, and a new integrated form of involved policy-making, which acknowledged – indeed treasured – the role of the party itself in the policy-making process.

In reality, the experience of the new structures has, as discussed in the previous chapter, failed to deliver this settlement. As a result the structures have lost credibility in the eyes of the membership as they have been tainted by a ruthlessly authoritarian culture at work within the party. That said, not many would wish a return to the contrived seaside dust-ups which tended to characterise the conference before the changes were introduced: the resolutions, the endless compositing and the borderline lunatic factionalism. But the debate should not be seen as an either/or between that period and the system that operates today. Between these two polar extremes lie acres of space to rebuild dialogue and discussion within the party.

We believe the ideas behind the rolling programme and the NPF remain worthwhile, but their current operation needs serious overhaul to meet the aspirations of those who have

championed the framework as a way of transcending the old party culture and its mutual paranoia between activists and leadership. To achieve this we need to open up the National Policy Forum, and re-democratise its membership and structures, and the material it produces.

In terms of the perceived aloofness of the NPF, much of the problem relates to the form of election of delegates. In 1997 it was proposed that regional delegates at the conference should elect the CLP representatives, thereby maximising the control of the process from head office. A whole industry has subsequently been built up to fix these elections, which has in turn devalued the significance of the NPF itself and the whole policy-making process. So, a first step in the reform of the NPF is that CLP delegates should be elected by the regional memberships. The ballot should occur alongside that for the CLP seats on the NEC. A term on the NPF would last, as is the case now, for two years. A specific part of the party website should be devoted to these elections, logging applications, allowing candidates to substantially set out their stall and/or record and communicate with members, and thus ensuring that the election process goes way beyond simply filling in your ballot form.

Another common criticism of the NPF is the impenetrable nature of the materials that emerge from it. Again, more use of new technology is necessary. Delegates should be encouraged to record their take on NPF proceedings via blogs or occasional webchats. Regular rolling reports concerning the rolling programme should also be issued online – if necessary, within the secure area of the party website confined to Labour members. By way of rebuilding a sense of mutual trust through dialogue within the party itself, online policy consultations are another good idea (meaning something much more substantial than the yes/no plebiscite), and an obvious initiative to encourage participation. Surveys of the membership on options for discussion are another.

The next point is particularly important. NPF documents, especially in the consultation period of the cycle, should be more options-based, actively discussing alternative policy solutions and not just basing themselves on a route-one approach – or, indeed, the restating of government achievements that has tended to substitute for actual policy text. This concern chimes with one of the main shortcomings of the Party into Power discussions: their failure to resolve how the NPF would ensure ‘minority positions’ were to be put to the conference, both in terms of the threshold of support required within the NPF and who would actually submit these positions. For example, in 1999 there were no ‘alternative positions’ at all, whereas 2000 saw seven, all of which had achieved at least 35 votes in the NPF but had

*‘There is now a very strong case for building a much more consistent model of organisation. It would protect Labour from fads and excesses on the part of any group or individual who could wield excessive power.’*

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fallen short of an overall majority. These tensions have long existed in terms of the 'take it or leave it' position of NEC statements at the conference and the inability of the conference to amend the texts. The acceptance of the legitimacy of 'minority positions' in the NPF ensured the Party into Power proposals themselves passed the conference and in turn removed the ability of members and affiliates to submit resolutions direct to the conference outside of the escape hatch of 'contemporary resolutions'. The problem has been that through the manipulation of the process (for example by ensuring that the mover withdraws the resolution despite the fact that it should be the property of the NPF and not any individual, or by falsely stating that successfully carried resolutions were defeated by the CLPs and only rammed through on the back of the block vote), the tactics deployed by the platform have undermined the very process itself. This in turn has placed more focus back onto the contemporary resolutions, controversy about which is now becoming the vehicle for reproducing the divisive atmosphere of the past.

So, the party should return to some of the earlier principles of the NPF. First, the rolling programme should be just that – a policy statement that is systematically revised every few years but at any one time is an expression of the platform of the party. It should also contain an updated statement of the aims and values of the party refreshed after every election (see later).

Second, this text should be amendable by the party through the NPF itself. Constituencies and affiliates should be able to propose amendments to the text directed to the policy commissions and the NPF. The original proponents of the rolling programme devised a model where the constituencies could submit amendments to the policy commissions who would sift them, determine which would be appropriate for possible inclusion within the party programme, and submit others as minority positions for the conference. Maintaining the current 35-vote threshold within the NPF could allow for this system. Crucially, as Peter Hain pointed out in the impressive Catalyst pamphlet *The Future Party* (2004), submissions to the NPF should be subject to an 'audit trail', remedying the sense that they currently stand a good chance of falling into a void.

Third, the policy commissions and NPF should be prepared to submit options for the conference to decide on, over and above minority positions. As part of this change, the government itself should accept that there might well be policy positions held by the party not coterminous with government policy. That said, government green and white papers also should be more formally routed into the forum process, so as to avoid fiascos of the top-up fees and foundation hospitals kind.

Finally, a key element within this revised forum would be a periodic restatement of the aims and values of the Labour Party. The conference following each general election should trigger a two-year renewal of the party through a systematic analysis of Labour's overall mission. This would actually be a key part of the rolling programme itself and ensure a real sense of purpose immediately following an election (win, lose or

draw) from within the party itself. The cumulative effect of all this would be a radical departure from the current operation of the NPF, retrieving the way it is perceived across the party, ensuring that it is Labour's key intermediary body, and creating something fundamentally different – both structurally and culturally – from what we have today. We would even return to its original title and re-brand it as the National Council of Labour. Under that remit, it would become what it was originally intended to be: the council for all of the stakeholders within the party, where they come together to consider policy, campaigning and organisational issues, maximising expert contributions within the party in a mature democratic manner. We envisage this change as part of general acknowledgement of the Labour's pluralist nature, to be embraced as a source of strength rather than weakness.

### The Party Conference

As mentioned above, the reform of the NPF would have obvious consequences for Labour's annual gathering, introducing the kind of debate and discussion that in recent years has been sadly lacking. These changes, however, should only be one part of a bigger re-invention of the conference's culture and overall purpose, ranging from the agenda to its location.

It may seem like a cosmetic point, but the decision to host this year's conference in Manchester is a real breakthrough. Much as the British seaside has much to recommend it (perhaps a contentious opinion, though we actually mean it), it seems much more fitting for the party to meet in the kind of places in which its aim to be tightly stitched into the UK's society can be symbolically represented. Though it's disappointing to note that Bournemouth (2007) and Brighton (2008 and 2009) have been booked for the next three years, Manchester should really only be the start: in future years, why not locate the conference in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds or London?

As far as conference proceedings are concerned, our recommendations are underpinned by one central suggestion: the blurring of the divide between the event's formal and fringe aspects, so as to increase the range of debate on offer, heighten the role of political education, and increase the opportunity for delegates and observers to participate. Obviously, there are parts of the agenda – as with the debates and votes on NPF documents, or speeches from key figures – that necessarily imply plenary sessions involving everyone present. Also, the fringe has to remain vibrant, and full of events whose appeal is at least partly based on the fact that they are outside the control of the party's organisation. All that said, one of the reasons why conference feels old-fashioned and drab (and, in that sense, why the number of party members who attend is on the slide) is the fact that in its current form, its formal agenda cannot even begin to reflect the diversity of ideas and argument within progressive politics.

As a set of additional steps towards re-energising conference, we suggest a number of measures. First, in keeping with the idea of overhauling the role of Labour's socialist societies, conference should host a socialist society afternoon, in which these affiliated organisations – joined, perhaps, by the range of thinktanks broadly aligned with Labour – organise a range of

*‘Conference feels old-fashioned and drab because in its current form, it cannot even begin to reflect the diversity of ideas and argument within progressive politics.’*

non-plenary events under the official conference banner. Second, though we envisage a watershed conference debate on the party’s aims and values always following a general election, each year’s event should host an official discussion on such subjects, led by a keynote speaker from either inside or outside the party, which could perhaps run on one day, in tandem with proceedings on the conference floor (to use a parliamentary analogy, as a Westminster Hall-type event, as opposed to one in the House of Commons), a report of which would be formally considered by the NPF. Third, as part of developing an informal conference tradition, two annual slots in the main agenda should be given to representatives of outside organisations whose aims and concerns chime with ongoing debate within the party; they could include spokespeople for single-issue groups, or representatives of progressive parties from overseas.

As part of the process of making at least some of conference the summation of a process that could be handled online, there is a strong argument for modifying the existing Contemporary Resolutions system, and creating a new model, whereby CLPs, trade unions and socialist societies would have an opportunity to submit resolutions in the three months leading up to the event itself. These would be posted online for comment and debate, and following the inevitable compositing process, an online voting form could allow the party’s constituent organisations to register – using an alternative-vote system – their preferences (in the case of CLPs, this would imply a need for pre-conference gatherings to decide the verdict, a good means of tying local party activity to Labour’s national calendar). An outlet for emergency resolutions would still be required, and compositing would still be a potentially fractious process, but this system would have two advantages: simple transparency, and the scaling-down of the some of the tension that surrounds the deliberations of the Conference Arrangements Committee.

Finally, there is a strong case to be made for loosening the strangulated culture of conference, via a move against some of the more neurotic means via which the party leadership seeks to manage constituency delegates. Any remotely clued-up observer knows when they are listening to a callow delegate reading a speech just handed to them by a crafty party official; the conference grapevine is efficient enough to ensure that everyone present soon learns about wheezes like the sudden introduction of CLP resolutions that have not been approved by any prior meeting; and though it’s very nice for delegates to be considered important enough to be ushered into the company of cabinet ministers, the practice has long been more cynical than fraternal. On last year’s evidence, such practices have now turned toxic, as proved by the much-maligned rejection of a contemporary resolution paying tribute to Robin Cook (partly ruled out as a ‘distraction’), and the absurd spectacle of the NEC being suspended for fear of

supporting recommendations – on employment rights, the post office, reform in the health service, pensions policy and housing – to conference that ran counter to the wishes of the leadership, which effectively meant the party’s executive was no longer overseeing its own conference.

If such tricks are tacitly justified out of a fear of the conference returning to the anarchy of the 1980s, the counter-argument needs making again and again: both organisationally and culturally, the party has moved on. Indeed, see-through manipulation by party officials and the suppression of dissent – symbolised last year by the disastrous ejection of Walter Wolfgang – actually serve to create the problems they most fear.

### Reviving the role of young people

Young Labour, the organisation (and we use that word advisedly) created to replace the Labour Party Young Socialists after decades of domination by our old friends Militant, represents an extreme case of Labour’s decline. There are pockets of vibrant activity – in Scotland, the West Midlands and particularly London – but its broken-down state is amply demonstrated by the fact that there is currently no dedicated Young Labour officer at Labour HQ, and – incredibly – no national Young Labour website. As with other areas of the party, much of its decline is obviously down to the fall-out from actions and policies that barely need mentioning, though the fact that Labour Students is still in reasonable(ish) health provides a neat counter-example, and suggests that at least part of the solution is down to resources and the matter of autonomy. The latter has three full-time national officers and, by dint of being an affiliated socialist society, a large measure of independence, not least when it comes to deciding campaign priorities.

As things stand, Young Labour is nominally governed by a national committee made up of each of the National Policy Forum’s regional youth members, people from Young Labour’s regional organisations, three representatives of Labour Students, a solitary person selected by the Young Fabians, and five trade unionists who were apparently appointed on a first come, first served basis (and, according to one committee member, ‘don’t really turn up any more’). They in turn elect an executive committee. Young Labour hosts a biennial conference, though the gathering’s only key decision is the election of the youth representative on Labour’s NEC, who is also a member of Young Labour’s national committee.

Having been ruled out by the NEC in previous years, in 2006 a rule change will once again be proposed at the Labour Party Conference, whereby the executive would be elected by Young Labour’s Conference, though its chances are predictably poor. This seems a shame: allowing even this piecemeal bit of democratisation would be a step in the right direction. Over time, however, much more obviously needs to be done. In the long run, we think the party should look at the fact that Labour Students – despite its rather blurred role in the party’s structure – is a socialist society, and as part of the overhaul of those organisations mentioned above, reconstitute Young Labour along the same lines. For now, however, an

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increase in its independence and a boosting of its resources would be a very welcome idea.

Some – like Peter Hain, in the Future Party – have advocated combining the party's youth organisations, along the same lines as the youth wings of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The hostile response from Labour Students, unfortunately, has often served to pivot all debate about reform around this divisive issue. Besides, given that Young Labour's age range runs from 15 to 27 and the party should necessarily appeal just as strongly to those who do not go to college, this proposal would have obvious downsides, particularly given Young Labour's state of disrepair – threatening to be the kind of merger in which Labour Students swallowed and silenced its moribund partner organisation, and a potentially important aspect of the party's appeal to the young was lost. Conversely, student politics is usually built around such specific issues, and so defined by the National Union of Students, that in the long run creating a combined youth wing might just as easily have negative effects that worked the other way.

At the bare minimum, there is a pressing need for an immediate review of Young Labour's finances, the absence of a national full-time organiser and public face, and the fact that the party will only attract younger members if it allows their official youth wing a more independent voice. Using the union link as a means of re-energising Young Labour should also be

*'See-through manipulation by party officials and the suppression of dissent – symbolised last year by the disastrous ejection of Walter Wolfgang – actually serve to create the problems they most fear.'*

considered. It is understandable that Labour's collective memory is still haunted by the experience of putting up with a youth organisation controlled by fans of dead Russians, but all that was a long time ago: allowing some measure of policy disagreement and a specific young campaigning voice – on issues like votes at 16 and ending the minimum wage's age differentials – will actually serve to boost Labour's bond with the people who represent its future.

This being a Compass pamphlet, this is also an opportune moment to drop the obligatory admiring reference to the Swedish Social Democrats: their youth wing, the SSU, has resources, autonomy and links with other progressive youth organisations from which we have much to learn. Labour's national bureaucracy and the party chair The fundamental renewal of the party that we propose necessarily means we should overhaul the nature of Labour's bureaucracy. In the next chapter, we propose a radical reconnection at local level, which in turn implies a re-ordering of the party's organisation. Thus far, when waves of redundancies have been announced they have tended to hit the

regional functions of the party disproportionately. By contrast, we would suggest that our staffing should be systematically devolved, and that there should be an accompanying significant reduction in Labour's central secretariat.

In order for our new party to be complete, we also need to reconsider how its voice is articulated to the government, and when in opposition the shadow cabinet. When the idea of a party chair was initially considered – and discarded – in the Party into Power debates it was seen as a mechanism to reflect party issues at the highest levels, and ensure there was no rupture between the party at large and a Labour government. At that point, it was turned down because of the political difficulties in getting key shadow cabinet members to agree to such a proposal, and Blair's fear that it would become an alternative power base within the party.

Some years later when the idea was re-introduced, its primary function was to strengthen control of the party from within the cabinet and Blair's office rather than represent party views at the highest level – the exact opposite of the earlier notion. This why the oft-mooted proposal to elect the party chair has been so vigorously resisted: it flies in the face of the reason it was actually introduced and the authoritarian instincts of those who championed the idea.

In order to rehabilitate the post in the eyes of a membership which tends to see it as essentially contaminated, it should become a democratically based post within the rule book of the party – elected at the conference and subject to the same timescale of nominations as we propose for the NEC and the NPF. The position would be a full time one, and the post-holder would also become chair of the NPF and co-chair of the Joint Policy Committee of the party. He or she would not sit in on cabinet meetings but would participate in the shadow cabinet – thus maintaining a strict separation of powers when the party was in government.

### Labour's national funding

Particularly in the current climate, no discussion about Labour's national organisation can avoid the issue of expenditure and funding. Though the increased state funding of parties has now become unavoidable, Labour has to make the case for the forms of party membership and affiliated status in any party being protected. It is not for the state to decide such matters – a point thrown into very sharp relief by current Conservative proposals. They advocate a cap on individual donations of £50,000 and limiting all 'corporate, institutional and trade union funding' to the same figure per year, and state funding in each electoral cycle to the tune of a lump sum composed of £1.20 for each vote received at the preceding general election, and an annual payment representing 60p per vote. These are clearly extremely partisan plans, for which the Tories will legislate if they win the next election. The rationale behind them is crisply illustrated by a Guardian article written in July 2006 by the Tory MP Andrew Tyrie, the author of a Conservative Party report Clean Politics (2006b). He wrote:

In recent years Labour's biggest donors have not been Paul Drayson, Bernie Ecclestone or Lord Sainsbury. They have been Unison, the GMB, Amicus and the TGWU. Those unions alone have given £30m to the party since 2001. The total for all unions is £50m – two thirds of Labour's funding. In return, instead of beer and sandwiches at No 10, Labour and the unions made a deal that included over sixty policy concessions to the unions, from watering down anti-strike legislation to support for burdensome European employment regulation ... [the unions are] able to run Labour's party conference and set out their terms: more concessions on legislation and public spending. And, of course, the unions are about to decide who the next prime minister will be, using their muscle in Labour's electoral college.

The lack of a robust response from senior Labour figures to this kind of attack has been depressing, to say the least. Self-evidently, Tyrie's picture is simply a malign caricature of the workings of a federal, democratic party, long open to the involvement of millions of trade unionists. There are alarming whispers about the party leadership broadly agreeing with the thrust of the Tories' proposals, but the challenge for Labour is surely to come up with an alternative model of party funding that acknowledges the negative impact on our political culture of huge individual donations and/or loans while safeguarding the arrangements and structures that lie at the core of the party's identity.

A qualitative difference has to be drawn between organisations that are subject to democratic internal processes, and private companies and individuals. Along such lines, within a transparent voluntary scheme regulated by the electoral commission and therefore clearly in the public domain, we propose that donations from the latter should be capped at £10,000, while organisational affiliation and donations should be subject to the kind of democratic provisions – including voluntary opt-out – that currently govern the trade unions' political funds. This would not only protect Labour's union link and federal structure, but ensure that regulations would not stand in the way of similar processes being used by parties and movements in the future. Crucially, this proposal does not consider unions as a unique case: if, say, a public company wished to establish a political fund, it could do so – though as with the unions, the decision would be subject to full democratic scrutiny and control. The point can be extended, way out into civil society: if membership organisations – from the Countryside Alliance, through Fathers For Justice, and on to CND or Greenpeace – wish to donate or affiliate to political parties, this model should apply.

The resulting contributions should be used to finance parties' national and regional organisations, as well as national campaigning. Along with so-called Short and Cranborne money paid to opposition parties in the Lords and Commons and free airtime for party political broadcasts, such would be the financial basis for party activity above the level of work in individual constituencies, leaving no need for any kind of national state finance (we therefore reject, in principle, the Tory plans mentioned above). In our view, again chiming with the Power Inquiry, public funds should instead be used as part

of a radical quest to revive local democracy, described in detail in the next chapter.

All this should be complemented by a ban on all loans to political parties, except those from financial institutions on fully commercial terms, and a new set of statutory limits on party spending. Outside the operation of the local state funding we propose, there should be all-year-round expenditure limits on money spent by national party bureaucracies on constituency-level campaigning, to ensure that vast amounts are not spent prior to a General Election, before expenditure caps kick in with the opening of nominations. This should be accompanied by a reduction in the national cap on parties' General Election spending, from the current £20million to, say, £10million; a figure which nicely contrasts with the Tory and Labour figures for the 2005 campaign, of £17,852,240 and £17,939,617 respectively (the Lib Dems' spend came in at £4,300,000). For Labour, the obligation to scythe down such spending might impact on at least some of the phenomena that have rather sullied the party's image, as exemplified by the £530,372 paid to the Washington firm of an American PR adviser named Mark Penn, £7,700 on daily hairstyling for Cherie Blair and £299.68 for "five Star Trek outfits to follow John Redwood around."

## A proposal for reform - local parties

*The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader'...* Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

*We have to find a different way of doing politics. It won't do just to be cheerleaders. People are more mature than that.*  
Hazel Blears

Over the last half-decade or so, the decline in numbers of Labour activists and members has had particularly grave consequences for the party's claim to be force with a strong presence in British society. As evidenced by the crucial role of trade unionists in delivering recent electoral successes, the union link goes some way to maintaining this aspect of Labour's self-image, and there are commendable examples of CLPs that have managed to buck the trend and maintain a strong bond with the communities from which they are drawn – but there is no denying that Labour's grassroots organisation is in a state of creaking disrepair. In an article in *Renewal* in 2005 the academic and former Birmingham city councillor Andrew Coulson painted a picture of the 2005 campaign in the safe seat of Birmingham Northfield, whose broad outlines will be familiar to thousands of activists: Door-to-door canvassing was confined to 'blitzing' trips to Labour-voting areas with the MP and agent, and the work of a few brave individuals ... many of those still willing to work were reluctant – fundamentally disturbed by the war in Iraq, disagreeing with the introduction of private capital into health and education, unconvinced by aggressive law and order policies.

Coulson goes on to peer into a future that, in large swathes of the country, has probably already arrived:

If membership continues to fall, it will be hard to get quality candidates onto the panel for council elections, other than those whose real ambition is a career in national politics. The volunteer administration to support candidates, MPs or councillors on the ground will be weak to the point of vanishing. The party will have no alternative to campaigning nationally.

A malign view of New Labour's understanding of the party's role would suggest that such an outcome might be exactly what some senior figures want, ushering in an age of politics-by-clique, neurotically controlled electioneering, and the effective death of the archetypal troublesome activist. It barely needs saying, however, that such a vision lies at odds not just with Labour values, but the very idea of a modern democracy. In an age of multiple social dialogues, supposed consumer sovereignty, political subsidiarity and the associated ubiquity of decentralisation, there is surely no place for a party run as a Soviet-esque dictatorship (albeit one that uses email).

Of course, the answer to Labour's grassroots renewal is far from being exclusively organisational. As Coulson's account – as with the quotes from Mancunian Labour members mentioned earlier – shows, the story of the party's decline involves a central political narrative, whose outlines are very

simple. Particularly from the second term onwards, the government's push to the political right, its tight alliance with George W. Bush and its accompanying tendency to define its showpiece policies against the very people who provide its organisational muscle were always going to work to empty the party. As Geoff Mulgan, once the head of Number 10's policy unit, recently told one of the authors of this pamphlet, 'a lot of the tacticians have favoured very visible battles with left-liberal opinion, just in terms of winning over the right-wing press. And even if that was justifiable in tactical positioning terms, I think it was not wise strategically, and it's caused all sorts of long-term problems. Essentially, it weakens – it hollows out – your side.'

Taking that as a given, there are still organisational and cultural changes that would play a key role in reviving Labour on the ground. Our central recommendation ties into the debate around state funding, and sketches out how Labour could respond to an injection of funds into local parties with a radical plan to decisively harden its presence across the country. In turn, that aim chimes with a vision in which the party at large rejects the idea that it amounts to a machine at the service of national politicians, and moves into a future in which activists and members campaign on local, national and international issues, and act as a two-way bridge between their communities and elected politicians and candidates. We also look at the extension of Labour's organisation into the nascent Supporters Network, and that scheme's implied link with proposals for the embrace of US-style primaries.

### A new Democracy Force

Among the recommendations of the Power Inquiry is the introduction of individual voter vouchers, whereby £3 per year would be paid from public funds to a party of any individual's choice. The idea is explained as follows:

During a general election, each voter is provided with a form listing all the registered parties and independent candidates in their constituency. Voters can then tick which party they wish to receive their allocation of £3 of public funds each year until the next general election. Those voters who do not wish to see their money spent on political parties can tick a box indicating 'none of the above' or can simply fail to complete the form ... Importantly, we suggest that this money is restricted to activities conducted by parties or candidates within their constituency. This would solve the current problem of national parties increasingly spending large sums on national campaigning and leaving local parties with no funds to engage with citizens or campaign locally. In effect, this would probably mean that money raised through donations will be spent nationally, while money raised through state funding will be spent locally. If the voucher was set at £3 per year, this

*'We believe a new Democracy Force of local party workers would help turnouts, reduce cynicism about the political process and enfranchise many of those communities currently discounted by the political class.'*

would mean that if 30 million people voted in a general election, there would be a potential pot of £90 million to fund local party political and candidate campaigning. In practice, however, many voters would probably fail to allocate their £3 voucher, so reducing the pot.

The report goes on to make the case for the voter voucher increasing the incentive for parties to engage meaningfully with voters and boosting the influence that citizens have over politics. It also draws attention to the fact that the scheme could play a key role in freeing up the political system, by allowing voters ‘to direct state funds to those parties that are not raising money from business and large individual donations’ and allowing people to ‘vote for one party while directing funds to another party which they feel may offer interesting alternatives in the future but is not quite ready for power yet’. These aspects of the proposal, we would argue, are open to debate: it may be more simple to allocate vouchers on the basis of votes cast for particular parties, and provide an opt-out box for those who wish their voucher to be re-absorbed into mainstream public spending.

What cannot be doubted, however, is the effect the scheme would have on local political life. As the report says, 10,000 vouchers – an easy target in hundreds of seats – would bring £30,000 a year into a constituency party’s funds, making a ‘huge difference to the activities which could be organized’. On 2005’s figures, in a safe seat – like, say, Manchester Central – the plan would conceivably result in an injection of around £50,000; down the road in Tory Tatton, if £3 was given for every Labour voter, the local party would receive just under £30,000. Even in ultra-safe Tory seats, the change would not be insignificant: Kensington and Chelsea’s Labour Party, for example, could reasonably expect an annual sum of as much as £15,000.

Particularly interesting is the suggestion that in hundreds of constituencies, the money ‘could cover the salary of a full-time organiser’. In our view, this may well hold the key to a crucial aspect of Labour’s renewal: the creation of what we would term a Democracy Force. The idea is simple enough. It could be possible to employ full-time (and/or part-time) workers across the country, there to assist local parties in all aspects of their work, though particularly focused on three areas: the simple maintenance of the party’s organisation on the ground, local and national elections, and the revival of Labour’s role as a campaigning organisation.

This would neatly dovetail with the trainee organiser scheme already developed by the party, allowing hundreds of participants to working through an official system and build the political capacity of the UK’s communities. It would offset the dominance of the Westminster edifice, which is switching off so many people and corroding trust in the political system. We believe it would help turnouts, reduce cynicism about the political process and enfranchise many of those communities currently discounted by the political class. Moreover, through this system votes would actually count. Over time, a new system of checks and balances on Westminster politicians would emerge through devolved financial support for community activity and participation in the political process;

and, hopefully, the notion of the ‘empty shell’ party at local level would begin to disappear. Better still, given that all constituencies would benefit, it would act as a constraint on the political dominance of marginal seats, especially when backed up with a national caps on election spending. All told, the plan would alter the fundamentals of political communication and rewind the movement towards engagement being seen as a four-week exercise every four or five years.

The fine details of the plan are obviously a matter for future discussion. Party workers would perhaps be best appointed by the party’s regional organisations, and be accountable to both their local CLP and regional HQ. Certainly, many – if not the majority – would be in their 20s, perhaps representing a vital aspect of a revived Young Labour organisation, and a means of professional political activity that would offer a more engaged option than the kind of early Westminster-based careers – as researchers or lobbyists – that currently stand as a byword for our sealed-off political elite. That said, we do not see the Democracy Force being exclusively young; there would be a strong argument, particularly as far as part-time roles were concerned, for recruitment among people of retirement age. It would probably be a good idea for the future NEC to have one ex-officio member dedicated to overseeing their work, and for all the people involved to attend not just the party conference, but their own annual regional and national gatherings.

As to their work, the possibilities are huge. Obviously, they would assist in the logistical work needed to keep local parties afloat – organising and publicising meetings, taking charge of recruitment, fundraising, seeing to a strong presence online – and liaising between local members and the regional and national party. During election campaigns, they would work closely alongside ward and constituency agents. Most importantly, however, we envisage the new Democracy Force playing the leading role in the kind of campaigning that would take place outside the regular election ritual, and acting as a vital bridge between local people and the party’s MPs, councillors and candidates, and recasting Labour’s local face as a kind of politicised Citizens Advice Bureau. The ideas behind both roles are fleshed out below; even without the creation of the Democracy Force, we think they are central to Labour’s local renewal.

### Reinventing the party’s campaigning role

The idea that local parties should extend their focus way beyond the business of holding meetings and electioneering has long been a commonplace of the debate about party reform, not least among the most zealous outriders for New Labour. In their book *The Blair Revolution* (1996), for example, Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle claimed that

local parties must turn outwards, involving themselves in their local communities. If there is a need for a new pelican crossing, or the youth club needs new equipment, local Labour Party members should be ready to help. In short, where community activity is taking place, Labour members should be getting involved and expressing their activism – as party members out in the community, not shut away from it

## A proposal for reform - local parties

... A local Labour Party should revolve around what is happening to the people in its local community as well as what is coming up [on] an agenda at some conference.

Of late, senior voices within the party have restated the case for this broadening of the party's work (which, of course, has long been demonstrated in the activities of scores of CLPs). In the Catalyst pamphlet *The Future Party* (2004), Peter Hain says that the party needs to do more to champion what he also terms 'community activity', the kind of predominantly voluntary work 'motivated by the same principle and beliefs that make people join the party'. He cites the example of Labour members in Bromley, 'where a team of activists in Mottingham ward have mounted a campaign to tackle graffiti'.

Earlier this year, a party document launching the Let's Talk initiative found the then chair Ian McCartney claiming that 'local parties must be seen as the engines of change in their communities' and arguing that 'if there is a local, national or international concern that needs addressing, then the local Labour party should be seen by local people as somewhere that these concerns can be addressed, and where people can go to help them achieve change'. Of late, his successor has re-emphasised such a view, and – somewhat uncharacteristically – taken it that bit further. In the words of a recent article in the *Guardian*, as well as encouraging local parties to be involved in community work and campaigning, Hazel Blears also wants the party at large to be 'two or three steps ahead of government and out campaigning on issues like raising the minimum wage further ... We have to find a different way of doing politics. It won't do just to be cheerleaders. People are more mature than that' (quoted in Wintour, 2006).

We agree. Though community work whose political aspect has a small 'p' – as with Mandelson and Hain's examples – should and does play an important role in the work of local parties, it would be naïve to expect people drawn to Labour Party activity to restrict their campaigning to this kind of activity. Moreover, given that society is characterised more than ever by multiple power centres straddling both public and private sectors, and particularly beholden to the power of multinational corporations, seeing the realisation of progressive values purely as a matter of either electioneering or lobbying councillors and MPs is an outmoded notion. Across all manner of issues, the focus of Labour campaigning might fall on companies, councils, or central or supra-national government. The root issues could well be local, but they are just as likely to be national or international. And within this web of intersecting concerns and institutions, there lurks part of the answer to Labour's revival. As Andrew Coulson puts it in the aforementioned article in *Renewal* (2005):

The recovery, if it comes, will need to reclaim the party as a local campaigning movement ... At local levels, it will need to escape from tedious administration and the mechanics of winning elections, to focus much more on policy debates. Its members will campaign, with others of like mind, on

*Labour members will campaign on a better deal for the world's poor, or an effective response to global warming. They will be doing so to pressurise their MPs, and through them their government, to be more egalitarian, more radical.'*

international as well as national and local issues: a better deal for the world's poor, an effective response to global warming, a fair deal in old age. They will be doing so not to implement policies handed down by central government, but to pressurise their MPs, and through them their government, to be more egalitarian, more radical. They will also campaign on local issues: the local bypass, an incinerator, the expensive contract for a new hospital, the inefficiency of the local council (and local residents) in dealing with litter, or the apparent inability of any agency to deal with disaffected young people.

These latter issues shine light on a particularly important aspect of the changed role we envisage for local parties. In order to make noise about the right issues, they have to position themselves as the kind of political hubs that can attract people with grievances and concerns, and then play a key role in giving them decisive momentum. Moreover, in many cases, reductively defined campaigning – petitions, demonstrations and the like – may be less effective than positive engagement with Labour's MPs and councillors and, through them, the wider party and central and local government. As things stand, the dominant methods of achieving such a connection (a visit to an MP or councillor's surgery, and/or a letter or email) can often seem restrictive and arbitrary, with no guarantee of any meaningful engagement. In this area, local parties are ideally placed to make a big difference.

Particularly in the context of our proposed Democracy Force, they could act as a real bridge between people and organised politics. As mentioned above, the vision is of partly of a kind of politicised Citizens Advice Bureau – a reliable social presence across the UK that would create ongoing contact between the Labour Party and the people it aims to serve. On this model, the kind of interaction that defines surgeries would no longer be restricted to one set occasion each week or fortnight. Local parties could develop their work in monitoring the successes and failures of particular policies – from Asbos to SureStart, the New Deal to pension credits – and bring their observations to Labour's decision-making bodies. Ideally, organised meetings between councillors and MPs and local populations would be regular affairs, based around more lasting contact than mere electioneering – less like a hustings, and more in line with the idea of a community forum. And with any luck, Labour's renewed social roots would be reflected in a reversal of the downward trend in membership and activism.

It would be easy to caricature this vision as necessarily entailing a reinvention of Labour as a sectional party of the disadvantaged, with no role to play in more affluent communities. By way of a pre-emptive response, there are two answers: first, that there is nowhere in the UK whose everyday life does not throw up all kinds of issues that local parties should consider and perhaps campaign on (consider, for example, the tangle of issues, from post office closures to the decline of agriculture, that dominate the British



countryside), and second, that boosting Labour's work in some of Britain's most socially deprived areas does not imply an abandonment of the party's appeal to the middle class. New Labour's stealth politics have been built on the idea that defining the party's public face in terms of its egalitarian work will necessarily repel the more comfortably off voters Labour needs; as proved by the rise of David Cameron, replete with serial visits to housing estates and talk of compassionate Conservatism, we do not believe Labour has nearly as much to fear as some people believe.

The central point is this. In redefining Labour's local role in terms of politicised community work, the party would be realising some of its fundamental democratic and egalitarian ideals. Indeed, given the double alienation of large sections of our society – taking in both economic and political deprivation – this sea-change is more urgent than ever. Labour needs to reach out with all the zeal that informed its original foundation, not just to individuals and families, but the organisations that are already carrying out amazing campaigning, like London Citizens (see 'London Citizens' on page 26). At a time when the party's sense of its mission is so clouded by inertia, doublethink, and the sense that more than a few people at the top are trying to accomplish the final severing of the party and its abiding philosophy – a vision, to use the old New Labour formulation, that seems to be all modern setting and no traditional values – this aspect of renewal could not be more crucial.

### Local party organisation

Labour's local structures are currently caught between an outmoded past and an uncertain future. As is usually pointed out in examinations of possible reform, the basic machinery of local parties dates back to the early 20th century. The institution of the constituency General Committee was invented as a means of reflecting the party's federal structure – an idea that, as we have said throughout this pamphlet, needs both renewing and defending, though exclusively basing a CLP's activities around a monthly GC meeting is undoubtedly one factor that often serves to place a gulf between local parties and potential members. The broken-down state of hundreds (thousands?) of ward parties is an indicator not only of membership decline, but an aspect of Labour's organisation that may well have reached its sell-by date. Against this backdrop, many CLPs have seized the initiative and remodelled the way they work – reducing their number of ward parties, reinventing GC meetings as all-member gatherings, and holding regular meetings that supportive members of the wider public are encouraged to attend.

According to official party publications, Dartford CLP leaves day to day business to its executive committee and 'every other GC is a policy discussion open to all members'. The party in Paisley and Renfrewshire South 'now meets bi-monthly with meetings open to all members, and branches meet on alternate months'. South Cambridgeshire CLP has

apparently gone over to 'single-branch, all-member meetings with invited speakers'; Bosworth now 'alternates between a formal all-member meeting one month, and a fish and chips social evening the next'.

In an era of increasing top-down party control, this may well represent a heartwarming example of decentralised decision-making; certainly, when considering the future shape of local parties, this partly accidental flexibility should serve as a model. Simply put, local parties should adopt arrangements that suit their circumstances. In many cases, ward branches might be retained solely for the selection of council candidates, though in the context of the boosted community activity mentioned above, local members may think some kind of ward organisation is crucial. That said, council boundaries may sit uncomfortably with the geography on which campaigning is based – creating a case for ward mergers or, more radically, local meetings that draw on self-defined areas. On the constituency level, the two-tier membership implied by monthly GC meetings – along with their accent on arcane procedure – may well serve to put people off, and gatherings

open to all members, emphasising policy debate and campaigning, will be much the better option.

*'The vision of local parties is partly as a kind of politicised Citizens Advice Bureau; a reliable social presence across the UK that would create ongoing contact between the Labour Party and the people it aims to serve.'*

In response to a local remodelling of Labour's structures, the party should avoid setting out a centrally formulated model, but it should propose a set of minimum requirements, so as to safeguard flexibility being extended into the kind of amorphousness that would reduce CLPs' strength in the wider party. If maintaining a full GC is proving either difficult or unpopular, CLPs should be free to build their detailed decision-making around a much smaller executive committee, subject to the usual annual elections, whose deliberations have to be subject to at least to

an annual general meeting, and one other yearly business meeting open to all members. In this context, given that loosely defined local structures might seem to impact on Labour's federal ideal, local parties should also be particularly mindful of the importance of the union link, not least with reference to campaigning and electioneering. As Peter Hain argues in *The Future Party* (2004):

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.

## A proposal for reform - local parties

### London Citizens: a case study in community campaigning

In 1996, a group of people gathered in the basement of St Monica's Catholic Church in Hoxton, East London, to talk about the local opening of a new Holiday Inn Express, and what its use of low-paid agency workers said about the capital's labour market. Over the last ten years, the organisation – first called TELCO, or The East London Communities Organisation – has expanded into south and west London and mushroomed into London Citizens: a coalition of churches, trade union branches, mosques, schools and other community organisations that campaigns on live issues of social justice.

'Our membership structure is unusual, in that it's based on institutions in the community,' says Catherine Howarth, one of the organisation's handful of full-time organisers. 'But they have a lot of strengths in terms of organising people and drawing on pre-existing networks of relationships.' Over 85 local organisations – from Plaistow's Foursquare Gospel Church and the London Buddhist Centre, to the T&G's London Hotel Workers' branch – are now drawn into campaigning on issues like low pay, the rights of migrant workers, access to transport and environmental health. If you are a member of an affiliated group, you are automatically a member of London Citizens.

The organisation aims at hosting community assemblies for its members every two or three months, as well as regular delegates' meetings, in which London Citizens' key activists gather. Both play a role in democratically deciding the organisation's campaign priorities, ideally via listening to first-person testimony. Catherine described how at one west London delegates' assembly:

a group of people from Southall came in and talked about being plagued by rats, and fly-tipping, all these appalling environmental problems. One woman waggled her keys and said, 'This is what I have to do to scatter the rats when I walk out of my house in the morning.' People were moved by that and felt it was really important. And that ended up being the campaign – essentially, taking on Ealing Council – that got the most votes.

Such issues are navigated onto London Citizens' agenda via regular 'Listening Campaigns' – set periods during which members make a point of registering the things that are making the most impact on their communities. 'As much as possible, it's all done face-to-face. We're looking out for ideas, issues, local problems – and also, we're constantly looking for new leaders, because we're only as strong as the number of people willing to do something.'

During elections for borough councils, the Greater London Assembly and the capital's mayor, London Citizens has pioneered 'accountability assemblies'. This is something much more organised than a Q&A event: it's intended to reverse the logic of the traditional hustings, whereby politicians lay out their ideas, and aim instead at confronting them with proposals developed at the grassroots. Catherine said:

The agenda is set democratically before the event takes place, inside the membership. All the candidates get the questions three weeks in advance. In the case of the mayoral event, they're standing there in front of 1700 people, BBC London television are there, and they're on the spot. They don't have to say yes to our ideas, but we're trying to create a new dynamic, where politicians understand where their power comes from: people. And those people also have the right to their own kind of manifesto.

As a result of London Citizens' work in the build-up to the last mayoral campaign, Ken Livingstone adopted its proposal to establish a Living Wage Unit at City Hall. Government, however, is only one focus of the organisation's activity – as important is the attention given to lobbying and engaging with public sector bodies like health trusts, and private companies and corporations. In 2003 London Citizens scored an incredible success in a campaign to make HSBC pay contract ancillary staff a living wage at its global headquarters at Canary Wharf – partly thanks to buying shares in the company and turning up at their AGM. 'It began to get incredibly embarrassing for HSBC: people getting up saying, "Can we not just have a bit of a pension? Can we not have a living wage to bring up our kids?" And eventually, they gave in. They now pay a living wage to their cleaners.'

Of late, London Citizens has been campaigning to persuade the new owners of a vast shopping development in White City not only to pay a living wage of £7.05 an hour, but to provide childcare for retail staff, and ensure there are adequate public transport links. Meanwhile, one of its most eye-grabbing campaigns has focused on the hotel trade – and in particular, the Hilton chain, whose rooms are serviced by cleaners paid a jaw-dropping £2.50 per room, irrespective of the state in which it is left. 'We had a lot of fun recently at the Metropole on Edgware Road,' says Catherine. 'We got a map of the inside of the hotel, and inside 20 minutes, a team of ten people had put a leaflet under every single door saying, "Hilton luxury is housekeeper pain".' At the same time, a demonstration took place outside the hotel; as a result, the action was the lead item on that night's BBC London news.

While such high-profile activity makes the headlines, London Citizens offers its members leadership training, in such areas as negotiation skills and research techniques, so as to ensure that protest and direct action are always mixed with positive engagement with the people and institutions that make decisions. As important is the complementary creation of a culture in which regular contact between their members is the norm; as far as Catherine is concerned, if London Citizens moved to any kind of 'virtual' model, it would effectively cease to exist. 'The kind of culture we're trying to generate,' she says, 'is one where people are physically together. People get a buzz out of meaningful engagement with other people. And 1000 people in a hall in London may seem like a drop in the ocean – but amazingly, if they're mobilized, they can really begin to shake things up.'

**For information about London Citizens, visit [www.londoncitizens.org.uk](http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk).**

One other aspect of local party activity would help to bolster and develop the union link. As many CLPs have discovered, meetings open to all members are often best built around discussions of specific topics, usually relating to areas of national and local policy. Where possible, this discursive aspect of local parties' culture can be bolstered by ad hoc discussion forums that might range across all kinds of areas – education, health, social exclusion, the environment – and be open not just to union members, but people and organisations from outside the party, particularly those with a direct interest in the subject matter they discuss. With a view to linking their debates to CLPs, they should pass on recommendations and conclusions for wider discussion, and – particularly with reference to constituency submissions to the NPF – play a role in giving the contributions of local parties to national debate that bit more clout. Clearly, such subject-specific groups also have a big role to play in local campaigning.

There is a wider point to be made here about the importance of working with a network of organisations outside the party. For example, in different parts of the country – East London, West Yorkshire, the West Midlands – a new popular-front politics has been developing over the last couple of years, as groups from across society have come together to confront a renewed threat from the far right. New alliances are being formed; old structures are being revitalised. As one of the author's ongoing experience with a new organisation called Barking & Dagenham Together – a coalition led by the anti-fascist group Searchlight, including such trade unions as the GMB and Unison, a wide range of faith groups, residents' associations and even sports clubs – proves, a new assertive politics is being fashioned out of this process, based on much broader and deeper alliances than those of the traditional Labour Party. In Barking and Dagenham, this has actually catalysed an against-the-grain revival of the local party, reflected not only in membership, but the age profile and ethnic diversity of members, candidates and councillors. Across the board, activism has returned; simply put, we have more people on the streets.

In many of the working class communities where the BNP is an emerging threat, the Labour Party is often moribund. Yet within these communities a renewed political formation is being created. It might be off the radar of New Labour while it camps out in middle England, but hundreds of people are being mobilised. Labour has a lot to learn from organisations

like Searchlight. In their emphasis on new forms of local campaigning and street-level engagement, there lies a pointer to reconnecting with many people the party has ignored and taken for granted for too long.

The Supporters Network and why primaries are a bad idea In the letter-cum-press-release about party reform signed by

*'Labour needs to reach out with all the zeal that informed its original foundation, not just to individuals and families, but the organisations that are already carrying out amazing campaigning.'*

Tony Blair (and 'sent' to Hazel Blears) in May 2006, one particularly important section is devoted to the Labour Supporters Network. It said:

We know from the last election that there are many people who support the party, share our values and who are willing to campaign actively for us. Some become members, but increasingly many do not. We established the supporters network at last year's conference to provide a home in the party for these people. The network has already built up to over 100,000 and we are developing specialist networks in health and education. Though as yet relatively small they have already been engaged by ministerial teams in policy discussion, particularly over the Education Bill. Building on this work is critical.

As with so many of the party's recent schemes – the Big Conversation and recent Let's Talk exercise spring to mind – the composition and status of the Supporters Network is rather uncertain. For a start, its supposed 100,000 names undoubtedly include thousands of people who are already members of the party. Throughout its first year of existence, local parties were frustrated by the failure of national HQ to give them information about registered supporters in their areas, which underlined the fears of those who believed the network was threatening to amount to a shadow party, jealously run from the top (worries perhaps furthered by the above mention of discussions on the education bill, whose central proposals, as proved by a Compass/YouGov poll, were opposed by a clear majority of Labour members). Some of these issues were at least partly resolved at the NEC meeting in May this year – when, according to an online report by the NEC member Ann Black, it was announced that 'the addition of postcodes to e-mail addresses now allowed them to be allocated to constituencies'. Her account went on: 'One member reported receiving only five responses, all negative, from 50 e-mails ... [and] it was confirmed that many of the 100,000 names on the LSN are current party members.' To be fair, at the core of the Supporters Network is a perfectly reasonable idea. It grew out of the local innovation of Labour supporters clubs, as in the constituency of Reading West – whose members, between 2001 and 2002, used canvass returns to build a supporters' organisation of around 1000, four times the size of the local party membership. From such seeds sprang the idea of a loose national organisation, launched in 2005, and now placed at the forefront of Labour's national identity. Signing up to the LSN apparently 'keeps you in touch with Labour campaigns and activities', and involves the prospect of joining 'issue based networks' – Education, International, Health and Community have already been established, with Women and the Environment to follow. The LSN's patron is the actor Patrick Stewart, whose support of the scheme is flagged up on the Labour website via the claim that 'It doesn't take the captain of a starship or a superhero with special powers to change the world. It takes people like you.'

Taking issue with all this could easily look churlish. As the Blair letter says, countless local parties are surrounded by an outer ring of semi-detached supporters who may campaign for the party without wanting necessarily wanting to join. There

## A proposal for reform - local parties

is nothing wrong with developing the party's relationship with people who are occasionally willing to stuff envelopes and put up posters. In the age of tactical voting and campaigning across party divides – and the kind of important community campaigning mentioned above – the idea even looks timely. The problem is the scheme's context: a creeping sense that senior Labour figures wish to put the network on an equal footing with the membership, and the idea's consequent whiff of the ad hoc, ill-defined pseudo-democracy that the more ardent elements of New Labour have always preferred to the kind of firm structures that might, at least occasionally, hold them in check. At least one Labour MP has written of the drive to build up the LSN increasingly amounting to a 'subtle disenfranchisement' of the membership. As recent episodes suggest, this has its political uses: as happened during the debate on proposals for 90-day detention, the leadership has already reduced complex questions to a 'yes/no' email sent out to supporters, and thereby attempted to couch some of its most questionable actions in terms of a very dubious legitimacy.

Of late, there have been proposals that seem to make suspicion of the motives behind the LSN look well founded. In February this year, the reliably iconoclastic Stephen Byers suggested that future leadership elections might be decided by a selectorate that included not only Labour members, but supporters (Labour's federal electoral college, it seemed, would be cast aside). His proposals, replete with a suggestion that an initial array of candidates could be whittled down to two or three front-runners via US-style primaries, tapped into fashionable talk about the British embrace of this American practice, also seen in the Conservatives' currently uncertain plans to open the selection of their London mayoral candidate. Here, it is alleged, is a possible way to rejuvenate our political system by involving voters in an entirely new experience.

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that primaries could easily end up having the opposite effect. As proved by the American experience, primaries – particularly of the 'open' variety – tend not to focus on issues and debate, but the cheaper currency of name and face recognition. Given that primaries are chiefly played out through the media – and television in particular – specific policy stances are far less important than an incisive grasp of PR; and, as the process rolls on, the bandwagon effects of endless opinion polling. As proved by the kind of war-chests that propel successful US candidates from an initial declaration to eventual success, nothing is more important than money. Thus, in the states, primaries are an integral part of the stifling consensus politics that has actually conspired to hack down political choice and leave people feeling even more disconnected (a reasonable case study in this, his 'I have a scream' speech notwithstanding, is Howard Dean's failure to triumph over the centrist dullness of John Kerry). And for parties battling a decline in membership, they would presumably have very adverse effects: in opening the choice of leader or candidate to those who simply register, they would surely end one powerful reason for joining a party in the first place.

When plotting the future of the Supporters Network, Labour should be mindful of all this. As a way of establishing new

dialogues, boosting election efforts and creating a first step towards party membership, it's a good idea – but to create an incentive that might push someone from one to the other, the privileges of carrying a party card should be left intact.

Perhaps most crucially, the network should be administered and controlled by local parties. The clumsiness of predominantly top-down management has already been proved by complaints about blanket national emails which pay no heed to sensitive local circumstances. According to some accounts, brutal portrayals of the Lib Dems ('are they on the side of hard working families or on the side of the bullies, yobs and vandals?') have actually succeeded in driving away people who might support and vote for Labour. Moreover, as one of Ann Black's NEC reports says, 'today's customers demand prompt and personalised attention and not standard auto-replies', so emails from 'Gordon Brown' that begin 'I wanted to email you straight away' can easily look rather silly.

What underlies our entire critique of the Supporters Network scheme boils down to a contention that runs through this pamphlet. If constituency parties are to exert a strong influence not just within the Labour Party, but also on wider politics, blurring their definition will only serve to hamper their work, and make any attempt to turn the party into top-down monolith far easier. The idea of massively developing the campaigning role sketched out earlier only reinforces the point. Like all effective political organisations, local parties need *shape*.

## Conclusion: Labour's culture and a vision of the future

If many of the recommendations above focus on ideas for Labour's organisation, it does not diminish the fact that our vision of the future party is as much bound up with its culture as its formal architecture. The last 20 years of Labour's history, and the abrupt break with a narrative of democratic reform that occurred under Tony Blair's leadership, point up one thing in particular: no matter what structural change is accomplished, its proper working will always be under threat if Labour does not have a strong collective belief in democracy as an end in itself. The party's machinery is not there to be cynically manipulated or even cheated and bent; any change has to be based on a boosting of Labour's pluralism and democracy rather than the serving of a particular policy or project.

At present, partly because of a false choice between strangled control and the kind of internal warfare that marked the party's long years of opposition, Labour's culture is deadened, often to the point of near-silence. Not least because of the fact that the Blair era is drawing to a close, there are spirited debates going on within progressive circles about the environment, the revival of the idea of equality, our relationship with the developing world and much more besides – but too often there is a sense of the party's organisation shutting the conversation out. Particularly when it comes to the recruitment of the next generation of Labour members, activists and politicians, this threatens to create the kind of problems that could easily impact on the party's long-term viability.

In October 2004, one of the authors spent a day at the European Social Forum, the annual gathering of what is these days termed the Global Justice Movement, which that year was being held in London. As is often the case at such gatherings, there was occasionally a sense of having to push through an outer layer of ultra-left antics before encountering much more interesting ideas – but after a few hours spent listening to discussions about common worldwide experiences of privatisation, the politics of the Middle East, the future of trade unionism and all kinds of visions for Africa and the developing world, the thought became inescapable: why is there such a vast contrast between this kind of occasion and the quiescent atmosphere that these days dominates events organised by the Labour Party? Part of the answer, it might be countered, might lie in the sober responsibilities of government, but this is hardly sufficient. At the risk of sounding hopelessly idealistic, we would counter that power, and the opportunities it brings for change, might just as well bring vibrant conversations and debate, underpinned by the optimism that comes from knowing things might be just be achieved.

Debate need not be sectarian; argument does not automatically entail oppositionism. In our vision of the party's future, policy-making would remain deliberative and non-confrontational, but Labour would belatedly catch up with the kind of politics that it has actually played a key role in creating. The point is this: after nine years of government, with the nightmarish '80s at two decades' remove, and faced with a society in which multiple dialogues and meaningful participation are now basic expectations, we believe that

Labour can – indeed, must – do all kinds of things: re-embrace debate, encourage the kind of campaigning that may well put members more than a few steps ahead of government, and promote a vision of a party with the kind of social roots that would make it much more than an electoral machine.

*'After nine years of government, with the nightmarish "80s at two decades" remove we believe that Labour can – indeed, must – re-embrace debate.'*

That said, we are mindful of the central tension that will always define much of the debate in any credible party of the left: crudely put, that between principle and power. During Labour's lost years, too many people put the former before the latter; in recent years, the problem has either been reversed – or, it has to be said, re-created, though this time in the form of market fundamentalism rather than left-wing impossibilism. And here lies a very important point: in the ongoing accommodation of these two competing demands, we believe a renewed federal structure will be an asset rather than a hindrance. Certainly, building the third force of elected representatives into the party's decision-making would ensure that the imperatives of power were never far from Labour's collective thoughts. For a party that sets such store by its place in civil society and benefits from its direct line to millions of working people, the union link – among its other benefits – will always represent a means of ensuring that policy chimes with the reality on the ground. And overhauling the party's socialist societies and allowing them more of a formal role could bring all kinds of vital debates – many of them focused on exactly the power-principle trade-off – closer to the party's core.

One of Compass's most oft-cited maxims is Gandhi's exhortation to 'be the change you wish to see in the world'. If we want a society characterised by multiple centres of debate and collective empowerment – in the words of the new Clause IV, if we believe that 'by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone' – we will need a party that puts those ideas into everyday practice. Moreover, as in wider society, for any discussion to be meaningful, it will have to take place inside firm, consistent structures. In our view, there is no future in the ad hoc cynicism of the pseudo-democratic monolith model because that is not what the wider future of our society either should or will look like. The best resolution of the current debate about party funding would also reflect that. If political disconnection is at least partly based on the disjunction between a devolved, pluralistic society and a distant, centralised political elite, the public funding of parties would surely be best aimed at firmly reviving democracy at the grassroots.

Naturally, if the Labour Party is to be rejuvenated, this implies not just change at its base, but also a cultural shift in Labour's upper echelons. If the recent emptying-out of the party

## Labour's culture and a vision of the future

teaches us anything, it is that a style of politics in which leaders define themselves against the very strands of opinion and organisations that provide their bedrock has proved so ill-advised as often to look almost suicidal. Lasting change depends on deep-seated support, the kind of support, needless to say, that a vibrant party can offer.

In the context of these and other changes, it is not hard to arrive at a new vision of the life of a Labour member. At home, they would regularly visit the party's website and download political education documents about issues as diverse as, say, the Finnish education system, the pursuit of the Respect agenda in Manchester or the debate about the revival of the UK's nuclear power programme. They would read blogs by delegates to the National Policy Forum and post comments and establish dialogues based on what they have to say about ongoing issues. In the run-up to conference, they would peruse manifestos posted by candidates to the NEC and NPF; during local and general elections, they would survey national and regional requests for help in marginal seats, and direct some of their activity accordingly. Their online relationships would be just as horizontal as vertical; they would receive information about the party's actions in government, but also take their place in a web of communication that included members of other CLPs and trade unions, and progressive-minded people from all over the planet.

In their local area, their activity as a Labour member would include meetings, though they would be more likely to be based on discussion about issues and policies than matters of procedure. The blurring of the line between political activity and voluntary work – aided by the work of a new Democracy Force – would be demonstrated via all kinds of campaigning: joining with union branches to pressurise, say, a local supermarket to pay a living wage; demanding action from their council on affordable housing; or forging alliances with other groups on issues like international trade reform and the cutting of carbon emissions. While that kind of work went on, they would regularly connect people with the party's MPs, councillors and candidates. All told, their political focus would range not just across layers of government, but across organisations and corporations – and from live issues in their immediate area, on to matters of national policy, and out into the wider world.

As we said earlier, on the broadest level, all this would create a Labour Party with a genuine role in supporting and thereby legitimising the leadership, while simultaneously holding it – and the party's policy framework – to account within Labour's institutions. The party would not be an inconvenience, best held in check and occasionally cajoled into knocking on doors and stuffing envelopes, but a real asset: the means by which the exercise of power would take place in the context of not just popular discussion and debate, but sure knowledge of everyday reality – an idea which, thinking about it, contains within it one of the most essential aspects of democracy. In taking on an increased political weight, the party would also give Labour that bit more leverage in the ongoing debate about our society's direction of travel; given the formidable forces – from the tabloid press to multinational companies –

that endlessly push for free-market individualism, a renewed party-on-the-ground might just play a key role in the creation of that much-discussed Progressive Consensus.

Now more than ever, these are the kind of ideas that need not just discussing, but decisively putting on the road to being realised. It would not be too dramatic to say that Labour's future depends on it.

*'Labour members' online relationships would be just as horizontal as vertical; they would take their place in a web of communication that included members of other CLPs and trade unions, and progressive-minded people from all over the planet.'*

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## About the authors

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