

LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE – MANCHESTER 2014

LEWISHAM AND DEPTFORD CLP DELEGATE'S REPORT

1 THE LEADER'S SPEECH (UNCUT VERSION!)

“One Nation Labour has changed from New Labour – businesses have a responsibility to pay their taxes, respect their customers and treat their workers fairly” Ed Miliband, Manchester 2014

Former Downing Street Policy Advisor, John McTernan on the official Progress website calls the above passage (that Ed accidentally missed out), as **“toxic, divisive nonsense... a malicious ultra-left, quasi-Trot, smearing of the best British government...”**

Of course it is none of these things, but it does indicate the level of organised resistance the Leader of the Party has had to overcome to get us to where this year's Annual Conference left us: with the most distinctive, the most ambitious and most Labour offer to the electorate in over two decades. Something to reverse the disaster of 2010 when the “best British government...” was rewarded with Labour's second worst General Election result since World War One.

I shall come back to it later. But first what did I do as your delegate at Conference?

2 PLENARY SESSIONS

I attended three quarters of the plenary sessions in the main hall listening to presentations from representatives from the **National Policy Forum** and the **Front Bench on Our Global Role, Work and Business, Economy and Stability, Scotland, Transport Environment and Energy, Health and Social Care, Cost of Living Crisis.**

For me the highlights from the platform were **Ed's** speech, **Andy Burnham's** on health and social care and the contributions from Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, **Margaret Curran** and Leader of the Scottish Labour Party, **Johann Lamont** who reminded us that many **“Yes” voters** were Labour supporting working class voters who feel let down so we need to re-engage with that community and offer it real change. This is exactly the case with too many English **UKIP voters**, also disenchanted working class voters who currently do not feel adequately represented or looked after by Labour.

We must win back both communities to return a majority in May 2015

3 POLICY SEMINARS

I took part in two Policy Seminars led by our Front Bench and the NPF: **Foreign and Defence Policy; Economy and Stability.**

Although I was unsuccessful in being called to speak I did manage to collar **Glenis Wilmott, Leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party** and put to her the CLP's concerns about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. She told me our MEPs' current position is to negotiate the best possible version of TTIP – to exclude the NHS from its provisions and reform the Investor State Dispute Settlement – not to oppose it outright because it might get passed in the European Parliament even if they were to vote against. I said we could still veto it in the Council of Ministers. She replied only if we are in power.

Ed Balls defended his budget honestly but I felt his explanation for not reforming the regressive **Council Tax**, or even simply adding an extra band to get local Councils more revenue – he claimed the former was “too complicated and time-consuming” and about the latter said “only Tory Kensington and Chelsea would benefit”, were inadequate.

4 FRINGE MEETINGS

I attended four Fringe Meetings: on **Poverty, Housing, ISIS and the Kurds**, and **Europe**.

In the first meeting **Harry Leslie Smith** (who spoke so eloquently about life before, and our duty to preserve, the NHS. at the Plenary) spoke about poverty in the 30's while **Gill Thompson** (whose brother starved to death this year after a benefits sanction), **Len McCluskey** and **Tom Watson MP** compared it to the scandal of **poverty** existing in the hugely wealthy UK of today.

In the second meeting, **Lord Richard Rogers** championed the idea of Towns inside Cities i.e. regenerating brownfield sites not building soulless, expensive, car-dependent garden cities and said Labour must stop big profit-motivated Developers controlling Planning policy and return it to elected representatives. I asked Chair of Progress and New Labour peer, **Lord Adonis** to comment on four possible ways of regulating out-of-control housing market – reforming Right to Buy, taxing Buy to Let, a levy on Second Homes, restricting foreign ownership of London property – he did not answer a single part of my question (the woman next to me said she wanted to complain). Lord Adonis is the only person not to answer a question at all the meetings I went to. Ed Balls and Douglas Alexander both got asked tough questions on the deficit, child benefit, nuclear weapons and Israel and agree with them or not – they answered.

5 THE EXHIBITION HALL

The first stand you walked past as you enter was the “Business Sprinklers Alliance”, not encouraging. Luckily the **NUT** had a fantastic pamphlet on schools and education, 95% of which I would have as Labour Party policy. I spoke to NUT General Secretary **Christine Blower** who informed me how **Hammersmith and Fulham Council** would not have fallen to Labour without an NUT-organised campaign about a local school. A lesson in community engagement.

I also spoke to the Director of Communication of the **Association for Public Service Excellence** and am trying to get her an invitation to speak to the Labour Group of **Lewisham Council**. APSE have great expertise in local government initiatives under financial pressure – they look at Municipal entrepreneurship to raise revenue, Innovation to make savings without reducing services and Insourcing, getting services back in house and getting better value for money as a result.

6 CONTEMPORARY MOTIONS and NCC

I was allowed to vote for four motions to be debated at Conference and chose the ones on **Housing** (build more council houses and regulate private rented), **Wages and Job Insecurity** (ban Zero Hours, promote living wage) **NHS** (increase funding and stop privatisation) and **Rail** (Encourage public sector to bid for lines when the current franchises expire).

I got two votes for the **National Constitutional Committee** (Labour's internal disciplinary body) and voted for a man from England and a woman from Scotland but can't find their names in my notes. I hope that isn't a disciplinary offence...

7 DEBATE AND DEMOCRACY

Whereas Fringe Meetings and Policy Seminars present an invaluable opportunity for ordinary members from different backgrounds to make their diverse views known to people of influence and to hold them accountable by asking questions, the dialogue between platform and ordinary members in the main hall is not.

One reason is **who gets called** to speak from the floor which I (unscientifically) reckon to be 10% CLP delegates, 30% Trade Unionists (often senior officials) and 60% Prospective Parliamentary Candidates.

Secondly speakers bring along **prepared speeches** that neither respond to each other nor to the motions ostensibly being debated nor to the presentations from the platform.

Thirdly a large majority of the speeches from our **PPC's** (I listened to 25) were bland and clustered around the same soft targets. Partly this may be due to seeking local media coverage, partly due to formal Candidate-training that seems to iron out personality and imagination. I checked this was not just my subjective view with a couple of other delegates (one male, one female) and they used the words "vanilla" and "clones". Having said this, (i) our PCC Vicky Foxcroft is absolutely neither of those things and (ii) my favourite speech from the floor was Sutton and Cheam PPC (and Disability Rights campaigner) Emily Brothers whose rousing, mordant speech in the Health debate not only targeted TTIP's threat to public services but called for "putting socialism back into the NHS."

On another positive note, it was refreshing to have so many women's voices being heard compared to the past in (although it felt like over-engineering when of all people, Margaret Beckett was heckled while chairing a seminar, and instructed to call more women to speak. Margaret calmly replied she would but only one woman had put her hand up!)

I was delighted to see Ed Miliband appointing Lord Cashman as Labour's first international envoy on LGBT rights.

It still looks though that we need to work harder to encourage more participation from and make more prominent, working class and BAME members and potential members.

8 HAS LABOUR CHANGED ENOUGH SINCE DEFEAT IN 2010 TO WIN BACK LOST VOTES IN 2015?

Ed Miliband's is the best Leader's speech at Conference I have heard since Neil Kinnock.

The vocabulary of political discourse has changed a lot since Neil was leader (you rarely hear the words "class" or "socialism" within the party today) but if you unpack the principles behind this underrated speech you will notice several major shifts: a return to collectivism and away from individualism lie behind the Together slogan; the elevation of public service above private provision; the centrality of State intervention and not markets, a focus on addressing economic inequality not raw growth.

Compare that last theme with what New Labour's Peter Mandelson confessed in his July speech at the Inclusive Prosperity Meeting "Issues of fairness and equality are bigger issues now than they were for us in the 90's... we took it for granted that continuing economic growth will bring about a rise in living standards without.... interventions"

9 "BUT IS ED MILIBAND PRIME MINISTERIAL MATERIAL?"

The poison being spread about Ed Miliband not being "Prime Ministerial material" comes from two sources: (1) political mischief-makers - the Right and Centre in the media, rival political Parties and disgruntled Blairites (such as McTernan above, who was Policy Adviser to Tony Blair on Housing, yes *housing* that jewel in the crown of New Labour's legacy) (2) the hypnotized - those led to believe that leadership requires the arrogance and fake charm you get from wannabe-Alpha males like David Cameron and Boris Johnson. (I have no interest in discussing the man's voice, face or how he uses his hands - such debates are deliberate distractions.)

Ed has none of those characteristics, instead he is a thoughtful, compassionate, intelligent, genuine person with an understanding of both principle and detail and who not only listens (rare for a politician) but (even rarer for a politician) thinks long term - his speech laid out a ten year programme.

He is also very brave. Contrast Ed's truthful words in his speech at Conference "I stood up against Rupert Murdoch over phone hacking... I stood up against the Daily Mail when they said that my Dad hated Britain" with the following statement from Jonathan Powell, Chief of Staff to Tony Blair 1997-2007: "I make no apology for the efforts by New Labour [to cultivate Rupert Murdoch](#) and Lord Rothermere (owner of Daily Mail)".

Finally, after this Conference we can claim not only to be a clear alternative to the Coalition Government but also to the Labour we used to be (remember we lost 5 million votes between 1997 and 2010, 3 million of them *before Iraq*). It is abundantly clear that under Ed Miliband the Labour Party is going in a very different direction from the one rejected by the people at the last election.

I urge all members to follow him.

LUKE SORBA SEPTEMBER 2014