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Defend



the Link

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PARTY DEMOCRACY, NOT STAGE MANAGEMENT!

This article provides information about a serious procedural issue which may be raised at the start of conference

by Peter Willsman

This review was always a distraction from preparing for the general election. It started with a “consultation” conducted by Ray Collins, the results of which have never been published. From Ann Black’s forensic examination of responses, it is obvious that a large majority opposed the idea of the primaries.

On the voting procedure at the special conference, Ann Black asked at the February NEC about having separate votes on different proposals and was told that “this would be referred to the CAC”.

By normal precedent, there should be a vote on the Collins report, then two separate card votes on the

two rule changes – which are in different chapters of the rule book and are on unrelated subjects. Any previous conference delegate will probably be aware that separate rules changes require separate

votes.

No further CAC meeting has been arranged. They’d met prior to the report being produced and hadn’t known what would be in it. They didn’t agree a

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SAY NO TO PRIMARIES Defend members’ rights

Who could disagree with the statements in Lord Collins’ Interim Report that “Labour members are the lifeblood of our party” and that “it is essential that the rights which come with membership are recognised”?

But who believes that such rights are compatible with the imposition of a “primary” system in which the rights of paid-up party members are diluted by the distribution of equally-weighted ballot-papers to “supporters” who have chosen not to pay any

membership subscription?

Devaluing our party members in this way is not just unfair. It threatens the whole concept of a democratic party controlled by its members.... as opposed to a top-down structure in which the rank-and-file merely “support” decisions made by somebody else.

Lord Collins’ subsequent Review concedes (p.33) that the majority of submissions oppose the widespread use of primaries and notes (p.34) that it would

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THE COLLINS REVIEW:

by Jon Lansman

1 A drastic cut in party funding

The opt-in scheme proposed for trade union levy-payers will result, when union affiliations become tied in five years time to the numbers opting-in, in a drastic cut in party funding. Few trade union leaders seriously expect more than 10% to become “affiliated supporters”, which would mean the loss of £7million a year in affiliation fees, roughly a quarter of total party expenditure.

2 Opting in is no more democratic

This “opt-in” scheme is presented as more democratic, but it isn’t. Members will pay the levy either way. What would we think if trade union members had to tick a box to say they wanted to vote in union elections, and only got a ballot if they’d done so? Or if they had to say they, individually, supported the union’s political campaigns on the NHS or the Living Wage, and money could be spent on those campaigns only if it could be attributed to those who’d ticked a box? Or if members had to say that they, individually, wanted to take part in



strike ballots? “Opt-in” will reduce union affiliation numbers even if their members’ support for Labour rises. Many leading Labour MPs admit that they plan to use that reduction to cut union votes within the Party, which would be to the advantage of the Party machine, not of individual union or CLP members.

3 Why registered supporters?

“Registered supporters” of the party have up to now paid nothing. So few have been recruited (their numbers are secret) that they are to be ignored and recruitment is to start again. ‘Progress’ has always called for their involvement but they were supposed not to be involved in leadership elections until 50,000 were

recruited. Nevertheless, they are to be given votes in both leadership elections and a London primary with immediate effect, equivalent to the votes of individual members of the party who pay £45 a year.

4 Devalued votes, and lost votes

Some constituency members may be alarmed about a possible reduction in the value of their votes in leadership elections, as large numbers of trade union levy payers could in theory be recruited as “affiliated supporters” with a vote equal to party members. However, most trade union levy payers, including many who have voted in the past, will lose their right to vote entirely because they won’t have

8 REASONS TO SAY NO

previously 'opted in'. And unlike registered supporters, they will continue to pay a levy of roughly £7 a year on average, often for most of their working lives. Almost all that money funds the Labour Party.

5 Leadership thresholds

We may be relieved that the higher threshold proposed in the leadership elections – 15% rather than the current 12.5% – isn't higher still, as was originally proposed. However, it still would have meant that recent elections that did take place would have had fewer candidates (two not four when Neil Kinnock was elected and probably just two in the most recent election, both called Miliband).

6 We don't want primaries

The primary proposed to select a Mayoral candidate for London in 2015 against the wishes of the London Labour Party will virtually exclude trade unionists (who currently have 50% of an electoral college) because there will not be time to recruit many affiliated supporters with a general election in between. "Registered supporters" will be included, however, which is

a recipe for electoral fraud and manipulation by the party's opponents.

7 Administrative nightmares

The administrative problems of this package of proposals can't be over-estimated. Is there any sense in having four tiers of party membership or pseudo-membership: (1) Individual members. (2) Trade unionists who are "affiliated supporters". (3) Trade unionists who are box-tickers but not "affiliated supporters", which could happen for many reasons (administrative error or failure to pass on details; inaccurate details on the union database; people with more than one address; people eligible but not on electoral roll like 6m others). (4) "Registered supporters" who pay a minimal one-

off "administration fee".

Ensuring that the Labour Party's database is consistent with each of 14 union membership systems when people change address or jobs will be a permanent problem. This will be a constant source of ammunition for a hostile media when people get a ballot paper and shouldn't or vice versa. It is hard enough for unions to keep track of home addresses for internal purposes as they normally relate to members in the workplace.

8 Cutting membership fees would be better

If you were prepared to take financial risks and wanted a mass party with a working class base, the right approach would have been to slash membership fees from £45 – well above the reach of many of our voters – and make sure that our policies are much more attractive to working class people. As it is, the offer to trade unionists is not very attractive – to get a vote they already have and be allowed to attend meetings (never Labour's greatest attraction) without a vote. No real influence. No real democracy. Unlike in their unions where conferences & executives still make policy.



SAY NO TO PRIMARIES

(...) be “premature” (not “wrong”, please note) to use them to select Labour parliamentary candidates. Instead it’s asserted that the London Mayoral candidate selection “has been identified” (by whom?) as what Lord Collins calls “a test case for the first official use of a primary within the Labour Party.” The words “thin end” and “wedge” spring speedily to mind!

DO THE MEMBERS WANT THEM?

Primaries are not the choice of the Greater London Labour Party

(GLLP), whose regional board submitted that “primaries have been put into the public domain as the proposed way forward prior to any discussion with the GLLP”. The Board takes the view that existing membership rights “should not be devalued” and firmly concludes that “after careful consideration and on balance.....the board remains at this stage unconvinced by the ‘primaries’ arguments.”

SO STOP THIS DANGEROUS PRECEDENT!

Although verbal “divide-

and-rule” assurances have been put up saying primaries will not initially be used outside London or in parliamentary selections, the wording of the review makes it clear that such abuses have not been ruled out for the future.

Delegates are therefore urged to vote against the imposition of primaries, not just out of solidarity with tens of thousands of London members who stand to be treated like guinea-pigs but to prevent the future imposition of primaries in a parliamentary selection near you.

PARTY DEMOCRACY NOT STAGE MANAGEMENT!

(....) detailed voting procedure since they were unaware it would contain two separate rule changes - how could they? And they haven’t had a discussion since.

The delegates briefings in two regions regions were told (wrongly) that the NEC had agreed that there’d be just one vote which may be what happens, but it’s not been agreed by any elected body and is against custom and practice.

Several CLPs have submitted emergency motions asking “the NEC/CAC to ensure that there are separate votes ... on the report and on each rule change in line with normal procedure.”

The CAC should respond to these. Delegates should watch out for this or any delegates raising the issue, and support democracy!

Within an hour of the NEC on 4 February, delegates were invited to attend special briefings, with shadow cabinet members present, to have their ears bent about the wonders of Collins’s recommendations. And we had to endure the nonsense of a memo from Ed to all party members that afternoon about the words of “Paul” who had (allegedly) joined the party because of the ‘reforms’ just agreed by Labour’s executive, and because “until now the party never felt democratic. It never felt like one I could join.”

One of the main causes

of this whole business was that Ed’s people wanted him to have a “Clause IV moment”. I suspect that Ed himself has never been happy with the way the levy arrangements operate and has wanted it to be “more transparent”. Ed intimated this to CLPD when we met him during the Leadership campaign, after which we backed him as second preference for the post.

In private, none of the trade unions, except perhaps Community, are happy with these changes. The unions are voting for it because they don’t want to rock the boat in the run up to a crucial general election. Exactly the same attitude is expressed by the majority of party activists in the CLPs.

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