**NEC meetings at Labour conference, 24-27 September 2016**

The NEC met three times during the party conference in Liverpool. Although I wasn’t physically present, due to being away on my honeymoon, the wonders of modern technology meant that I was able to participate by telephone and cast a vote on the one occasion when a vote was called by the chair.

The first meeting took place on the Saturday evening before conference began. Jeremy took the opportunity to express his gratitude to party members and supporters for giving him a renewed mandate as Leader. He hoped that the party could now unite and return to the job of challenging the government and presenting Labour’s alternative. He was pleased to report that productive discussions had been taking place between his office and representatives of the PLP on the system that the party would adopt for choosing the Shadow Cabinet but some further work remained to be done. In relation to the decision that had been made the previous Tuesday, to ask conference to agree seats with voting rights for Scotland and Wales on the NEC, he asked that this be deferred to the party reform ‘away-day’ that was planned to take place after conference, so that the proposal could be discussed in the context of other proposed changes to the NEC. A number of members supported this request, and I reiterated my concerns about the viability of the proposal as it stood, but the chair ruled that a decision had already been made and that the proposed rule change would be put to conference for agreement.

The ten point programme on which Jeremy had campaigned for re-election had been circulated to all party members following his victory and it was agreed that the Committee consider putting this formally to conference as an NEC statement, along with the statement on international trade that Jeremy had tabled; a decision would be made on this at the next meeting. Finally, the General Secretary told the NEC that materials were being produced for despatch to CLPs in England for a campaign day on education – specifically, opposing the government’s proposals on grammar schools – to take place the following Saturday. It was agreed to look at doing some similar campaigning in Scotland and Wales in the near future.

The second meeting took place on the Monday morning, before conference began for the day. It was agreed to put the two documents circulated by Jeremy to conference with the backing of the NEC. The main discussion flowed from the Conference Arrangements Committee report, which indicated that all of the proposed rule changes endorsed the previous week would be presented to conference as a single package, to be agreed in its entirety. Several members argued – rightly, in my view – that the proposals covered a diverse range of issues and it would be bad practice for conference to be asked to vote for them on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis. Others argued that those seeking that the changes be presented individually were simply attempting to derail the contentious proposal on NEC places for Scotland and Carwyn Jones – exercising his right to attend the NEC as an observer for the first time – emphasised how important this change would be. The chair did not put this to a vote but ruled that presenting the proposals as a package was consistent with the decisions made the previous Tuesday. This approach was challenged from the floor when the proposals were put to conference but the chair was again unyielding and the changes were carried.

The final NEC meeting at conference took place on the Tuesday evening and was the first occasion when newly-elected NEC members were invited to attend (alongside outgoing members): Claudia Webbe and Rhea Wolfson, in the CLPs section; Nick Forbes, representing Labour councillors; and George Howarth, representing backbench MPs. Carwyn Jones also joined the meeting by telephone.

Jeremy thanked the NEC for all its work over the previous year and looked forward to the work that it would be doing over the months ahead, including the campaign against the government’s plans for grammar schools. He said that the ‘away-day’ now planned for 22 November would present an opportunity to re-energise the party. He highlighted some of the challenges coming up, such as the by-elections in Batley and Spen and in Witney, the Council elections in May 2017, the Brexit process and the government’s assault on the Human Rights Act. He said that the party was now developing a ‘bottom-up’ approach to policy-making and that John McDonnell was working with Scottish Labour to set out a clear economic alternative for the Scottish people, exposing the inadequacies of the SNP’s approach.

Jeremy then paid tribute to those members who would leaving the NEC: Johanna Baxter and Ellie Reeves in the CLPs section; Ann Lucas in the councillors’ section; Angela Eagle, who had been a Shadow Cabinet rep earlier in the year; and his old friend , Dennis Skinned, who was stepping down after several years representing backbench MPs. All of these responded to Jeremy’s thanks and Dennis Skinner made some typically entertaining valedictory comments, ending with the need for the party to unite to defeat the Tories.

Carwyn was asked if he intended to take up the full NEC seat now allocated to Wales. He said that he would but would send a representative when unable to attend meetings in person. The Chair pointed out that substitutes are not allowed under the rules, so Carwyn said that he would take up the place for now but that its long-term future would be resolved in the next 24 hours.

The meeting then moved on to the election of a chair and vice-chair for 2016/17. A question was raised as to who would be able to vote and the outgoing chair ruled that new, as well as old, NEC members were entitled to take part, despite strong objections from at least one very longstanding member, who said that this was not the normal practice.

Two members were nominated: Andy Kerr of the CWU and Glenis Willmott MEP. It was agreed that one should serve as chair and the other as vice-chair. The Committee then voted on which should be chair. I voted for Andy Kerr but he was pipped at the post by Glenis Willmott (18 votes to 17) after all votes, including Carwyn’s, had been cast.

The outgoing chair, Paddy Lillis, then handed over to Glenis, who thanked the Committee for its support and said that we would meet again for the ‘away-day’ on 22 November.