

Britain: The party transformed? Labour under Jeremy Corbyn

Tuesday 2 January 2018, by [MOORE Susan](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2017).

2017 has been a remarkable year from Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, writes Susan Moore. Labour did so much better in the general election than anyone, including Labour activists, expected - impelled by both an excellent manifesto and a powerful campaign. Corbyn and his team went on to have a successful party conference in Brighton in October.

At conference, as well as afterwards, Labour made clear it was ready for a further general election whenever it comes. With the Tories in deep disarray over Brexit - but also on other key issues such as Universal Credit and the housing crisis, especially as we mark six months since the horror of Grenfell. Such an election, likely to see Corbyn in Number 10, cannot come soon enough for all opponents of austerity and war. The outcome cannot be taken for granted, but Labour is showing much better in the polls than when May called the snap election earlier in the year. A campaign which repeats the impetus of the last manifesto and develops it further are likely to see a Labour government elected.

That's why, despite the depth of the Tory crisis, May is hanging on for now and none of her many opponents on her own benches are dealing decisive blows against her for now.

In the meantime, the Labour left has a further challenge. Labour Party conference agreed to begin a democracy review and formally launched it on November 6. Corbyn understands that it is necessary to further develop party democracy in order to consolidate the gains made under his leadership. The left needs to make maximum use of the opportunity it presents.

The review will operate at many different levels [\[1\]](#), taking submissions on a variety of questions from both individuals and collective structures within the party. There are different deadlines for submissions on different questions, with the first falling on January 12 and the third in late June.

The review is led by former Scottish MP Katy Clarke [\[2\]](#). The other members of the review team are NEC members Claudia Webbe and Andy Kerr so it is firmly on the left. This doesn't mean that there aren't concerns about its scope and methods.

There are some obvious areas which the review doesn't address full on. The most obvious of these are the functioning of the compliance unit and the selection of candidates to stand as councilors, MPs and other elected representatives. There are no specific questions dealing with these essential matters. I have no idea whether these were omitted as compromise made in order to get the proposal through the NEC, but for the 'Corbyn revolution' to be complete, fundamental changes need to be made here as well as in other aspects of party democracy.

The party needs structures which gives power to the membership. We need representatives that are accountable - to party policy and to the membership. Yet we know that at the minute many supporters of the current leadership are kept out of the party by the compliance unit. Others are kept off panels for councilor candidates, MPs or other representatives.

The compliance unit should be scrapped and all internal issues of party discipline dealt with by elected representatives. There should be no “automatic exclusion”, but suspension in serious cases pending the outcome of an enquiry and hearing, with a right of appeal. The General Secretary is a position that should be elected, along with other senior posts such as Regional Secretaries.

On selections, the existence of trigger ballots should be scrapped and everyone should automatically face reselection. Chris Williamson MP explains it well here in this interview for the *Clarion* [3]. As he points out “when we had mandatory reselection previously under the reforms spearheaded by Tony Benn, and there were actually very few deselections (although I wouldn’t call it deselection, but rather mandatory reselection). MPs, in my view, should be able to command the confidence and respect of the members of the party where they are standing”.

We need to challenge the notion that representatives are above those they represent and the arrogance that assumes they can do – or not do – anything they like and remain impregnable. Reselections should be seen as good for everyone – including those who may see their mandate renewed – and even strengthened.

People should find ways of making these points or similar points to the review itself to show the weight of feeling. (Points about the compliance unit probably best belong under Phases 2 and 3 i.e. under recruitment, involvement and participation of members and under regional structures, while points about reselection best belong under governance of CLPS, involvement and participation of members, regional structures and local government.

The left needs to use the opportunity opened by the review to discuss these questions, and to fully explore what sort of party we want and how best to get it. There has been a huge transformation of the party in regards to policies, breaking with decades of neoliberalism. Now we need to start the transformation of the structures and the “soul” of the party so that it becomes a more useful and effective organisation “for the many not the few”. A “Labour Party Transformed” should be a democratic and campaigning party, supporting the struggles of communities and trade-unions and able to mobilise the millions in independent action. A democratic and campaigning Labour Party would be an essential ally in helping create the conditions for an anti-austerity Corbyn-led Government to implement its manifesto and make significant inroads into the power and wealth of the ruling class.

In Momentum and the Democracy Review: A Brief Explainer [4], Momentum explains out that it will set up a digital platform to discuss what its collective view should be on the questions in the review – taking views from both individuals and local groups. The timetable has not yet been fixed but local Momentum groups need to plan meetings now for the New Year to participate in the process.

Momentum has also produced Democracy Review: Ideas from Grassroots Activists [5]; a useful summary of a lot of discussion by the left on the various questions concerning the review. In some areas the concrete proposals made are too modest for the kind of transformation of the party we should be fighting for while on other questions there is no real coherent direction coming from the proposals made. So the document is a useful starting point but not the place to finish.

There is no much time between now and January 12, the deadline for the first phase of the review, so in the rest of this article I will focus on the issues being addressed in that tranche.

Building self organisation

The three areas in the first phase- Bame Labour, Young Labour and Women’s conference – all relate to self-organisation of the oppressed – although this also comes up in different ways in the other

phases and doesn't deal with disabled or LGBTIQ structures. This makes it harder to make political points about what they have in common and how they interrelate while having these in the first tranche gives less time for collective discussion at this point which is frustrating.

The left needs to champion self organisation of the oppressed at every level of the party as a key aspect of transforming the party.

Labour Women's Conference

Gutting the Labour Women's organisation of its power was a key part of Blair's attack on Labour Party democracy. Restoring the sovereignty of Women's conference is key to making Labour under Corbyn the party it needs to be to fulfil the promise that has seen the party growing so much.

From that point of view what Momentum says on this question is inadequate:

The Role of Labour Party Women's Conference

This year, Women's Conference was returned policymaking powers for the first time in a number of years. However, Women's Conference still lacks adequate power to represent the demands of women in the Labour Party, and lacks clear procedures which would allow it to feed into Annual Conference. In Brighton, Teresa Clark and Jean Crocker were both elected onto the Women's Conference Arrangements Committee on a mandate to ensure that Women's Conference becomes a meaningful forum for the development of policy and party activity by women delegates. This could be advanced through the following proposals:

- A clear process for CLPs to elect delegates to Women's Conference which is effectively communicated to all CLP Secretaries.

If Women's Conference was a standalone Conference, potentially hosted in the spring, it would be far easier for it to feed into Annual Conference in a meaningful way.

CLPs could be explicitly entitled to a minimum number of delegates to Women's Conference.

The draft completely underplays the importance of restoring sovereignty to Women's Conference. We need proposals like these:

- Labour Women's Conference should be a standalone event over two days organised so that its decisions can feed through to Annual conference
- Labour Women's conference should have the right to submit a motion and a rule change to Annual conference

Secondly the Momentum submission ignores the role of the women's organisation itself. Labour Women's conference needs to be the collective voice of women in the party, expressed in the CLPs through women's forums as well as involving the unions This means we need proposals such as:

- CLP delegates to women's conference should be elected through women's forums or by the women at all member meetings or GCs.
- All circulars about Women's conference will be sent to Women's officers as well as CLP Secretaries
- All CLPs will pay towards the costs of Women's conference whether or not they send delegates

Finally the Momentum submission only talks about what happens in CLPs, ignoring the role of the unions in the women's organisation. So we need this proposal:

Voting at women's conference will be organised in such a way as that CLP delegates have 50% of the vote and trade unions the other 50%.

In addition to these overall proposals for the future, it's generally accepted there is insufficient time to organise a standalone Women's conference in spring 2018 and cancel the one-day event planned for September 2018. There is a proposal from the Democracy Review to hold a specific event to maximise input from women members to the Democracy Review - which would be great.

Jean Crocker and Teresa Clarke, elected to the conference arrangements committee of Women's conference in October are arguing for the following

Two events in 2018:

A Women's Democracy Day in about May 2018

- to debate the future organisation of Annual Women's Conferences with input from views submitted to the Democracy Review
- a delegate conference to give it legitimacy and its decisions weight, with delegates chosen as for AWC.
- decisions will feed into the Democracy Review documents, AWC 2018 and LPAC 2018
- In addition, a debate on other structures, e.g. Regional Delegate-based Women's Conferences (accessible and interactive events for the women of the region), and the role and status of Women's Forums

In terms of things about women in the party/women's organisation that belong in phase two of the review there are a series of things that need to be dealt with including

- Making all LP meetings accessible to those with caring responsibilities - overwhelmingly women. This could to measures such as providing finance to pay for care at home, making provision for collective care, varying or changing times of meetings to make them accessible to those with caring responsibilities, welcoming those being cared for to meetings together with their carers....
- Organising political education through women only meetings or women only groups in mixed meetings
- Mentoring of newer women by those with more experience in the party (or trade unions)
- Labour Party regions organising women' meetings on a quarterly basis might also be a useful proposal
- A strong message throughout that women's position is complemented by LGBTIQ, BAME and disabled rights - and specific measures to ensure that meetings and other initiatives are accessible to women who are also part of one or more of these other groups
- Support for measures to ensure that women are represented at all levels of party structures. These to include formulas of "at least" throughout so that they deal with situations of uneven numbers. And these should be motivated as positive action not the woolly notion of "equality".
- Support for women only shortlists at parliamentary and council selection level

Young Labour

As explained in this useful [6], if somewhat pompous paper from Red Labour's Max Shanley, the creation of Young Labour in 1993 after the managed undermining of the Labour Party Young Socialists, the youth wing of the party which had considerably more autonomy than its successor – for example electing its own representative on Labour's NEC during most of that period. The LPYS tended to be a base for the left and from the 1970s until they were expelled was a stronghold for Militant (the predecessor of today's Socialist Party).

As Shanley points out, although the Corbyn surge was particularly driven by huge support from young people, this has not resulted in that much increasing involvement in Young Labour, because of the inadequacy both of the structures of the organisation and the politics – the anti-Corbyn politics – of its leadership.

The situation is further complicated by the existence of a further structure which involves some young members of Labour – Labour Students. While Young Labour is the party's youth organisation (for members from 14-26), Labour Students is an affiliated socialist society. If Young Labour has not reflected the Corbyn surge through increasing dynamism, Labour Students has remained firmly in the control of those adamantly opposed to the politics of the current labour leadership.

After the creation of Young Labour that organisation elected a member to Labour's NEC from its annual conference (That person has to be a woman at least every other term). However Labour students had a third of the votes (this wasn't in the rule book, but came as far as I can work out from an NEC decisions) and the trade unions had no input.

Labour's NEC away day on November 26 changed the election process. The Youth rep will this time be elected via an electoral college with 50% of the vote going to Young Labour members in an OMOV ballot and 50% to affiliates, weighted by size. (Nominations will open on 8 Jan and close a month later and the ballot will run from 19 Feb to 16 March.)

Pete Willsman explains the NEC discussion like this:

It was pointed out that for some years the trade unions have been pressing for a procedure which is more representative of the two wings of our party, the industrial and the political. In particular, an electoral college consisting of 50%, young party members voting by OMOV, and 50%, affiliates – using their own mechanisms to reflect the views of their young members. After lengthy discussion, this procedure was agreed for the 2018 scheduled election. It was noted that this matter is covered by the Democracy Review and thus, in due course, the new arrangements could be amended.

The Momentum submission doesn't deal with the NEC place at all, even though this needs to be supported – or changed – through the review. Shanley's position was to increase Youth representation on the NEC to two – one trade union rep and one representing Young Labour. This isn't a good spilt in principle, and makes even less sense in the context of what the NEC just agreed. And while increasing youth representation shouldn't be excluded in the long term, there other matters in terms of making Young Labour effective are probably a higher priority.

Momentum says:

The Role of Young Labour

Despite having more members than the Conservative Party, Young Labour only has one member of staff working for it on a part-time basis and no significant budget, limiting both its potential for growth and ability to reach out into working class communities to draw in the next generation of party activists and leaders. Submissions for Young Labour should focus on increasing the autonomy, financial sustainability, and infrastructure of Young Labour so that it can support younger members

and supporters of the Labour Party to become committed grassroots activists. Activists might consider the following: a) At this year's Conference, Blackpool North and Cleveleys remitted a rule change for Young Labour to have its own Constitution and standing orders. Establishing the autonomy of Young Labour, with its own constitution and standing order, is a key prerequisite for any successful building up of youth politics in Labour;

b) As with Bame forums, there is currently no constitutional requirement for the Labour Party to organise into youth forums. Again, requiring CLPs to organise youth forums could strengthen the organising of young members.

Both these proposals make sense – and are in line with what Shanley argues. A proposal that regions organise Young Labour meetings on a quarterly basis might also be useful.

Shanley's other make focus is on political education. It make sense both to make sure CLP wide political education is accessible to young members and invites speakers/facilitators likely to be of interest to young members and to specifically organise political education for Young Labour members and or youth workshops as part of CLP wide initiatives.

It would also be useful to suggest that the privilege that Labour Students currently seem to have, of selling speeches made from the platform of Labour conference, to delegates should in fact go to Young Labour.

BAME Labour

The fight for black sections was a key cutting edge of the Labour left in the 1980s strongly supported by the Bennite left. Black sections was an inclusive organisation which used the term black politically to describe all those affected by racism. BAME Labour is a much less political organisation. Its mission statement [7] doesn't even use the term black until more than two thirds of the way through, preferring the term "ethnic minority". Even more significantly, it doesn't mention the question of racism until still later.

Momentum says:

The Role of Bame Labour

Bame Labour has failed to adequately represent Bame party members or fully harness their full potential in recent years. At present BAME party members do not automatically become members of BAME Labour, despite it being funded, resourced and run by the Labour Party. As a result, Bame Labour only has 731 members, even though it was supposed to have 2,500 in order to gain a seat on the NEC in the first place. The signup process is complicated, drawn out, and a number of Bame activists have expressed grave concerns about the inability of the institution to represent members effectively. Submissions on Bame Labour might consider the following proposals to strengthen BAME organising in the party:

a) Making all self-defining BAME members of the party automatically members of BAME Labour could allow for increased participation in the party by some of the most marginal and dispossessed communities in Britain.

b) There is currently no constitutional requirement for the Labour Party to organise into Bame Forums, so requiring CLPs to organise BAME forums could strengthen Bame organising. These proposals should certainly be supported but more is needed. The Chakrabarti report (which has been removed from the Labour Party website!) talked about the way putting parties into special measures and leaving them to rot for decades– most notably in Birmingham – had silenced black members of the party.

Labour's position as the party automatically supported by the black community fell between 2010-2015, according to this article in the *Guardian* [8], falling from 90% to 68%. The article doesn't analyse whether the shift is across all sections of the black community and to what extent it represents a growth in the Tory and other non-Labour votes or a fall in voting all together. It's never the less significant - and I have not been able to find anything more recent.

Further I haven't been able to find anything about the number of black/BAME members of the party or the number of functioning BAME forums locally.

Given all of this I would argue it's important that submissions on BAME involvement to the Democracy review makes proposals this should be the first step in a developing discussion.

Socialist Resistance

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/the-party-transformed/11288>

Footnotes

[1] <https://labour.org.uk/about/democracy-review-2017/>

[2] who explains its work here:

<http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2017/12/04/enthusing-members/>

[3] <https://theclarionmag.org/2017/12/02/chriswilliamsonmponwhyweneedmandatoryreselection/>

[4] https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/momentum/pages/2260/attachments/original/1509814074/Democracy_Review-Explainer_to_Members_%281%29.pdf?1509814074

[5] https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/momentum/pages/2260/attachments/original/1509814079/Democracy_Review-Ideas_from_Grassroots_Activists_%281%29.pdf?1509814079

[6] <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ix7lo1lq0fk3o5f/towardsanewmodelyounglabour.pdf?dl=0>

[7] <http://www.bamelabour.org.uk/about>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/07/tories-party-ethnic-diversity-labour-bame-mps-race>