

What the NEC elections reveal

Damage control at start of Labour Party Conference in Britain

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Even before the British Labour Party's annual conference began on Sunday, Prime Minister Tony Blair had to mount a damage control operation. Four of six seats on Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC), opened for election by the party's new constituency section, had been won by members of the 'Centre Left Grassroots Alliance'.

This group is made up of a broad coalition of forces critical of Blair's erosion of inner-party democracy and his right-wing policies. Its successful candidates were Mark Seddon, editor of the *Tribune* newspaper; Liz Davies, a supporter of *Labour Left Briefing* who had been deselected by Blair as a party candidate prior to the general election; Cathy Jamieson, a leading light in the Scottish Labour Party; and Pete Willsman.

Blair supporters had set up an alternative slate known as 'Members First' to combat the Grassroots Alliance. Only two of its candidates were elected--Michael Cashman and Diana Jeuda. The Grassroots Alliance candidates polled a total of 342,000 votes compared with 311,000 for Members First.

The poor turnout for the NEC elections--just 35 percent of Labour's supposed 382,000 members--is the most significant feature of the entire affair. Neither Blair nor his opponents could whip up any real enthusiasm for their candidates or policies in the party.

This did not lessen the Labour leadership's concern over its own candidates' poor showing, however. The announcement of the NEC results was moved forward to Sunday, so that it would not overshadow Blair's main conference speech on Tuesday.

On Sunday, Blair held an open 'Question and Answer' session with delegates that was stage-managed to enable him to attack his critics and reject calls for

wealth redistribution made by the Grassroots Alliance. 'The fact that the Labour Party is not seen as an instinctive tax and spend party is a good thing for us, not a bad thing,' Blair said. The choice is not between the present Labour government and the 'one of your dreams,' he warned, 'The choice is between the Labour government you have got and a Tory government'.

The panicky reaction of the Blair leadership to the NEC election result is at first glance inexplicable. The constituency-based elections account for just six places out of fifty on the NEC, which is, in any event, a toothless body. All aspects of policy are decided by think tanks under Blair's direct control, or in Cabinet.

Yet Members First was run as if the fate of the party depended on its victory. Up to a quarter of a million pounds, raised from the AEEU engineering union and individuals, was spent on mail-shots and telephone canvassing. A private marketing firm, Personal Telephone Fund Raising, was paid at the rate of £1 a call to urge thousands of Labour Party members to vote for the Blair slate. They utilised a database provided by the magazine *Progress*, which is supported by government Minister Peter Mandelson and the lobbyist recently disgraced in the 'Cash for Influence' scandal, Derek Draper.

Prior to the vote, Labour's headquarters sent out ballot papers to almost 100,000 lapsed members in an attempt to garner support for Members First, and had to apologise for this 'administrative' oversight.

A witch-hunt was mounted against the Grassroots Alliance slate. The grand old men of the *Tribune* group, including former Labour leader Neil Kinnock and Chris Mullins MP, were wheeled out to attack their contemporaries. Kinnock, now European Transport

Commissioner, warned party members not to let 'Trotskyites, sectarians and other selfish parasites' win election to the NEC by covert means, and accused Seddon of being a dupe of the extreme left. Kinnock recalled fondly the purging of the Militant Tendency in the 1980s and his struggles against what he described as the 'politics of the perpetual sneer.'

The media joined in, depicting the NEC elections as a battle between 'Old Labour' and 'New Labour'. Yet the Grassroots Alliance candidates are all long-standing party members who have stressed that they do not intend to mount an all-out political challenge to Blair's leadership, but are rather seeking to influence it. Seddon responded to Kinnock's onslaught by saying that the latter had a 'splendid record on the Tribune left for radicalism and dissent'. He asked plaintively why those who have followed Kinnock should be, 'criticised for doing what he did in his youth.' On winning his place, Seddon said that he would be 'grit to the wheel of the leadership.'

The only group in the Alliance that claims any association with Trotskyism is Labour Left Briefing, whose remoteness from the revolutionary program of Trotskyism is demonstrated by the fact that it has functioned loyally within the Labour Party for decades. Its supporter, Liz Davies, responded to the success of the Grassroots Alliance by meekly suggesting it serve as a message to the leadership that Labour be a party, 'where voices of the grassroots are listened to with respect'.

The prime mover behind the scenes, Ken Livingstone MP, was also at pains to point out that all potential candidates for the Alliance slate were screened to keep out 'nutters' with links to 'ultra-left' groups. 'That is why I know Liz Davies is not a Trot,' he added.

The Grassroots campaign was motivated by a desire to preserve the Labour Party's authority, not undermine it. More than 100,000 people have left the party, or not renewed their membership since Labour won office. Many of these were the new recruits whom Blair said would help to 'revitalise' the party.

This disenchantment within the party is only a pale reflection of the situation developing outside its ranks. Over the past several weeks thousands of jobs losses have been announced in Britain as the global recession begins to make itself felt. Blair's response has been to tell workers nothing can be done. Moreover, after 17

months in office it is becoming clearer that Labour's vague commitment to education and health was simply a cover for deepening the attack on public services and living standards.

An ICM poll, conducted for the *Observer* newspaper last week, found that two out of three respondents think Tony Blair listens too much to 'company bosses' and too little to 'ordinary working people'. The same proportion believes that businessmen are buying influence with donations to the party. Fewer than half of those polled think that Labour has kept its election promises on health, education and taxation, and the ratings of most Cabinet ministers have gone sharply down since the spring.

The Grassroots Alliance campaign was intended as a warning to Blair that this would have perilous consequences for his government and the party. Its supporters cautioned that Labour must try and stem the flood by adopting 'the kind of redistributive policies necessary if we are to tackle poverty and unemployment in our society'.

Blair's government was not prepared to countenance such warnings being voiced openly and was violently hostile to the solution proposed. To mention 'wealth redistribution' in Britain today, not least within the Labour Party, is considered beyond the pale. The mildest criticism of the existing social set-up is enough for someone to be branded a revolutionary extremist or 'left-wing dinosaur'. The ruling elite fears that any such talk will not only highlight the deepening division between rich and poor, but encourage working people to seek a political solution to the social problems they face.



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