

OPEN LABOUR

**LABOUR PARTY DEMOCRACY REVIEW
OPEN LABOUR SUBMISSION - PART 1**

Introduction

Open Labour is a national grassroots membership organisation representing the open left, a tradition within Labour's broad left. Our politics are about economic and democratic transformation in the UK, but we are also realists. We start from the assumption that whilst most people share values which are socialist ones, most people do not see themselves as identifying with or being a part of the left and its movements. This means that we advocate a left politics which is based on pluralism, because different parts of our movement have different roles, and on listening and alliance building, because socialists have no majority without bringing new people on board with us. Open Labour has a number of aligned MPs and is historically rooted in a tradition best exemplified by the likes of Robin Cook, spanning from the centre of the party to its left and including sections of the trade union movement.

Our tradition within the party has acted as part of a broader left, fighting alongside some aligned organisations such as CLPD as part of the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance in the 1990s and 2000s. The object of this was to push against New Labour's centralism, for greater transparency, membership power and democracy – values which we still believe in. Our membership has also pushed for much greater involvement of affiliates both as collective voices and as individuals, with most in opposition to the Collins review despite the general support of the open left for Ed Miliband during his period as leader. We have broadly supported the theme of a 'federal' Labour Party, in which both members and affiliates are at the forefront and given roles within the party which recognise them as different types of stakeholder. We believe that even in the current context of Labour's expanded membership there is value in this theme and idea.

Since the regrettable polarisations which accompanied the 2015 leadership elections, we have been active in the struggles against anti-Semitism and more widely against bullying behaviour in local Labour Parties. We believe that it is completely possible to include and empower our members new and old whilst also taking tough action against behaviour which discriminates against or deliberately excludes others. We do believe that central action and enforcement as well as greater support for victims is a necessary part of that. Even more seriously, we believe that power-enabled abuse is a serious problem in a range of arenas which also include gender and disability; most seriously of all with the example of sexual abuse in the party. We also call for easier reporting and safeguarding as well as a transparent approach to such incidents, depending on the agency and preference of victims.

Finally, many of those involved in setting up Open Labour in 2015 have been active in the party's youth structures via Young Labour, Labour Students, or as members of the non-official factions of the left in student politics. During the involvement of these members, almost all of them were involved in campaigning within the youth movement for more support, political independence and democracy, and for a rebalancing towards young people as workers rather than only as recipients of education. We remain committed to those goals and call for a wholesale reform of our youth structures.

Overall we very much welcome that this review is taking place. The rapid expansion of Labour's membership has been great news – we have an opportunity to empower these people by making Labour a less top-down party and one which trusts its members more. It will be crucial that we do this in a way which strikes the balance between keeping the party rooted and stable, making sure

it can change and modernise, and making sure that everyone feels welcome and empowered to take part, regardless of both their background and their support or non-support for any Labour policy or faction.

Without liberation, pluralism and mutual respect (an 'open' political culture), democratic reform alone will never fully deliver on its potential.

About this submission

We are making this submission following debate at our National Committee, which functions as the executive of Open Labour. This submission is the collective view of that committee, but we should point out that we have not consulted our wider membership, which we would expect to shape any wider political response should proposals for changes be made. We do hope to remedy this for the next stage of the submission, however.

We are aware that the review process will have three stages and this is our response to the first. In the spirit of transparency our responses will be collated and published.

Diversity and participation

How should Young Labour be organised nationally, regionally and locally?

Young Labour reform is long overdue. Since its Chair was first elected, young people have had to fight for the election of other officers, for the right to contact their own members, for policy making rights, for the right to run their own conferences, and for the simple right to have the rules of the present rulebook taken seriously and adhered to.

Young Labour should receive the same level of independence and support as Labour Students, and that the best way to bring this about would be a) the creation of Young Labour as a socialist society, subject to the same membership requirements as presently operate b) a commitment on the part of the party to fully resource this for at least the next five years by allocating at least one paid officer, and by putting in place a job description clause and governance structure to make sure that they are accountable to the committee foremost, regardless of their employment.

We believe that the issue first raised in 2007 of elected officers being denied contact access to those who elected them must end. When officers are elected a simple norm of democracy is that they are able to speak to their constituency, and they are accountable to them. There is no sensible legal rationale for the party denying this access, particularly if contact details are kept within the party.

There should be a clear written policy making process which allows amendments, a code of conduct, and safeguarding support. The allocation of and support for Young Labour groups is too ad hoc. There should be model constitution and mode of operation for local groups. There should be a presumption in favour of them being allowed to operate when a member seeks to start one. Groups should be given official representation in YL's voting structure as part of an electoral college with affiliates and individual members.

How can your local Party better reflect the local community?

We feel that party membership is still too white and too middle class. Membership fees are prohibitively high for those from low income backgrounds, but we also feel that it is imperative that the party puts organising effort into recruitment in safer areas for Labour, with national campaign days directed towards this type of activity and best practice developed and spread. We feel that CLPs in safer, more working class areas should be set targets for membership recruitment in the same way that CLPs are set campaigning targets – in many parts of the country a lack of activity and low recruitment has created political inertia and in some cases, complacency.

How should Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority members and organisations be represented in the Party?

We feel that BAME Labour nationally should become more reflective of BAME people in CLPs and an organisational link needs to be drawn between these and BAME Labour. We feel that members should be asked if they self-define as BAME (or any other liberation group) and that the NEC BAME representative should be elected by an OMOV vote of these members - rather than representing a vastly smaller number of people in BAME Labour, this rep should represent BAME members overall.

How should women's organisations operate and be represented in the Party?

We are generally supportive of current rules for Womens Forums, but we believe that Womens Officers in CLPs need greater support in terms of potential activities, running political meetings, training and recruitment – making a pack of resources and activities which officers can run would help with recruitment and lead to more women rising into positions of power and influence.

What role should Women's Conference have?

We call for Womens Conference to be given more power to contribute directly to party conference. Womens Conference or a new event with a similar function should take place in time for submissions to policy debates and rule changes to be submitted to party conference. Womens Conference should be given privileges at Annual Conference as a proposer – at least one rule change and one policy motion should be given an automatic space to be heard and debated. This should also be extended into the substance of proposals at NPF sessions. Election processes to Womens Conference should be made clear, with all CLPs entitled to a minimum delegation.

How do we improve the number of women candidates, and increase women's representation and the involvement of women in the Party?

We support current rules on AWS for general elections and see no reason to change these. We believe that selection panels should be mandated centrally to make sure that at least 1 candidate from 3 running for any given council ward should be a woman, and we feel that selection bodies responsible for shortlisting should start from a panel which is at least 50% female, provided that enough women come forward. In addition to the above, we would emphasise that the best way to become more gender balanced in office would be to recruit and involve more women members, hence our point above about support for Womens Officers.

How do we improve the number of candidates from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds and increase the representation and involvement of people from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds at all levels of the Party?

Panels and final selection results should be reflective of the profile of the local area, with a national target of at least 13% for BAME representatives elected. Regional boards should be obliged to audit selection panels and results to make sure that the profile of candidates matches the local profile of ethnicity; this way we can achieve the goal of being a reflective party whilst taking into account that some areas do have a low BAME population, for example. Whilst it would not be legal to adopt quotas, we do feel that at a regional level we should set aspirational targets for local parties long in advance of selection cycles beginning.

How would we make it easier for people with disabilities to be involved in the Party?

We call for a full audit of the types of adaptations members with disabilities feel they would like to see – people with disabilities should be seen as the first and most important voice. In terms of what is already evident, we feel that a national access and development fund and some allocated officer time at the party centrally would be a good place to start. We also feel that there is a need for a political forum for members with disabilities, who have been singled out and targeted with austerity policies. Finally, we feel that CLP officers should be issued with guidance on common mental health barriers and how these can be mitigated in meetings. We may also seek to find ways in which stresses can be removed from meetings and commonalities stressed instead – we would urge the party to complement the common practice of resolution based debates with models such as collaborative policy making and active listening.

How do we improve the number of disabled candidates we have and increase the representation of people with disabilities in the Party?

As above, we believe that a national fund for access and development would be helpful for this, as would some central staff time. We also believe that specialised candidate training for members with disabilities could be opened up in a similar style to the training currently provided under the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme.

How do we improve the representation and involvement of LGBT+ members in the Party?

We feel that LGBT+ organisation and autonomy in the party is in a good state generally. As we would also say with regard to members identifying as women, BAME, or members with a disability, we feel that an option on membership forms allowing details to be passed onto LGBT Labour as the relevant socialist society would be of use.

We are concerned about the barriers of often unconscious homophobia or transphobia. A basic piece of party guidance on this matter would be a useful guide for new members, as many joiners who do not define as LGBT+ often have a less developed understanding of the issues involved. We believe that conscious homophobia and transphobia should be treated with zero tolerance on similar lines to anti-Semitism.

How do we improve the number of LGBT+ candidates we have and increase LGBT+ representation in the Party?

We do not feel that evidence on this is made available to a level which is sufficient, though we do accept that many LGBT+ and people still do not necessarily feel comfortable about being 'out'. First steps can only be taken on this issue once the party has a better understanding of what the current circumstances and potential challenges are.

What other groups should we focus on?

- People from industrial and manual working class backgrounds
- Immigrant workers and other groups who may not visibly BAME e.g. traveller communities
- People without stability of income ('precarious workers') who might work random shift patterns, have roles in the 'gig economy', apprenticeships etc.
- New joiners generally, where we feel that there may be a lack of information on the party's structure, history, intellectual traditions etc.

