



# Johanna Baxter

National Executive Committee

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## Putting Members First

24<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Dear Peter,

### Response to Refounding Labour Consultation

I take very seriously the debate we are having now within our party about its future direction both in terms of policy and how we operate as an organisation. I stood for the NEC because, being an activist in the party for the past 16 years, I felt very acutely the difference in our relationship with our members, activists and the electorate and the changes that needed to be made to make us a more engaging and representative body. I love our Labour Party and want to do whatever I can to help in that process of change to enable us to be the best that we can be.

That is why when you asked us at the NEC to speak to members about the Refounding Labour consultation, to encourage debate and engagement I took that to heart. I have dedicated as much of my time as possible this year trying to raise awareness of the consultation and encourage my fellow members to participate – I have tweeted about it, e-mailed about it, put it on Facebook and have now visited 40 local Constituency Labour Parties across the country to discuss it with them.

Whilst some CLPs had no intention of making a submission before my visit others would have bitten your hand off at the opportunity. I hope that most of them will now have done so but in case they haven't had the opportunity I wanted to give you a flavour for the types of issues we've discussed and some of my own views as well and that is what my response contains.

Inevitably some of the suggestions I make would require a change to our party's rules whilst other suggestions relate to our culture and the way in which we do things. However contentious the former are they will be easier to manage in terms of our debate going forward - the NEC will I understand take a view about whether and which proposed rule changes are appropriate to be put to conference. The latter will take political will and I look to you, as Chair of the consultation, and Ed Miliband, as our leader for that.

I hope that in the end we have a consultation which has been robust and which represents the start of a conversation with our members rather than the end.

Thank you for all that you have done in leading this process.

Kind regards,

Johanna Baxter

## **A Response to Refounding Labour Consultation From Johanna Baxter**

### **Putting members First**

The Labour Party is a membership organisation – it is the members' party. That may seem an obvious statement but too often the very members we rely on so heavily feel forgotten.

Our policies and our principals may be what define us as a political party but it is our members who deliver our message to thousands of households up and down the country every day – they are our advocates and our voice. And our policies and principles will be meaningless without them. If we are to build and retain a strong activist base and be representative of our membership we need to start putting members first.

The days of entryism have long since passed and so with them the need for such a high degree of central control within our party structures. The necessity for unity in purpose should not necessitate the stifling of internal debate amongst our members. Our policies will be better with them. Our organisational capability will be better with them. But to get there we need to enable, empower and trust them.

We need a fundamental cultural change which respects and puts members at the heart of everything that we do. From our newest member to our most experienced activist they deserve our thanks and our recognition.

### **New members**

New members should be welcomed with open arms. We should not be proud of the fact that we are the most expensive political party in Britain to be a member of. We seek to represent the less well-off and then charge them almost £41 a year for the privilege. The reduced rate does not seem sufficient to capture those on the lowest incomes or eliminate the barrier for those without employment. Whilst understanding the party's financial position many members have expressed concern to me that our current subscription rates are preventing those on the lowest incomes from joining. Only last night a member in Reading told me of an unemployed supporter who delivered our leaflets on a regular basis, who wanted to join but just couldn't afford to do so. When he secured employment his Labour membership application was one of the first things he filled out. A few months on he is considering his resignation because he cannot keep up the monthly subscription. Graduated subscription rates according to level of income or a fixed subscription as a percentage of income would go some way to addressing this.

New members should feel that they have a relationship with the party from the moment they submit their application – an immediate acknowledgement of their application would give them initial contact with us and some confidence that it will be dealt with. That then needs to be dealt with promptly whilst their interest is still high. Many new members have said to me that they find the party's policies and processes just too confusing and, with no idea what a 'CLP', 'GC' or BLP is, many will never take the decision to go to one to find out. A new member welcome pack – with information about our current policies, a 'who's who' in their local party and an explanation of the role of their national representatives – could easily be sent with a welcome letter and their membership card to give them some understanding of where they fit in the party.

New member mentors have been suggested in a number of meetings and, whilst I am wholly supportive of the concept, I would guard against creating roles for the sake of it. CLP Membership Officers are, in many cases, already undertaking this work – the fact this has been raised as an issue is perhaps indicative that clarity of the responsibilities of this post and training for those undertaking it would be helpful.

Many CLPs have asked me how they get new members involved. Welcome packs and a friendly call from the CLP Membership Officer would go some way to facilitating this in my experience it is very

often the tone of, and personalities, at their first meeting that will determine whether or not they return. (See below)

### **Every contribution counts**

The difference between a member and a supporter is the desire to give more to our party than simply their vote. There is nothing 'ordinary' about being a Labour Party member - members contribute to our party funds, put time into campaigning and are the Party's frontline in engaging with the electorate.

We should recognise that to some members their subscription rate is their contribution and that they cannot do anything more. We should recognise that some members will want to be involved in everything we do. We should be able to accommodate both of them and everyone in between. There is too often a view that if you are not campaigning every weekend or where most of the work is done behind the scenes - CLP Secretaries and Treasurers for example - that your contribution counts less than others. Whilst campaigning is vital we need to ensure that we recognise the different abilities of our members and the different types and levels of contribution they are able to give. In my own branch our Social Secretary hates campaigning – he simply doesn't want to do it. But when we as a branch invite the local community to tea he cooks up a storm. That's Bill's contribution, and it's delicious!

I really believe we could make more use of the many talents of our members, and their different interests and ability to contribute. We could ask people on their membership application what they wanted to contribute to the party (without this only referring to money) and put them in touch with like-minded members in other constituencies – informal, non-constitutional, networks across CLPs that take you beyond local politics, rather like Facebook Groups (Labour Chefs, Labour Friends of Knitting...?!). This would also give members something in return for their commitment and could give the party much needed contacts for future fundraisers and events.

### **Our activists**

How do we get more members to become activists? We should make it as easy as possible for members to take on the responsibility of activism and remember that they also have a life (this is not unimportant – we need to remember that they are all volunteers). Yet we haven't always been very good at this. We don't always make it easy for our activists to understand what they should be doing, how to do it or even how they would find out either of those things - role profiles don't exist for all of the functional officers a CLP is expected to have and those that do are not exactly easy to find. We need to give people the tools to do their jobs as easily and as quickly as possible.

Membersnet should be a fantastic resource for this but is almost impossible to navigate. The site needs to be considerably reconfigured to make it more user friendly, resource rich and allow activists to 'talk' to others who have the same role as them.

CLP Secretaries and Chairs are the lynchpins of our local parties – they set the tone - and yet they get no training at all to do that job. If CLP's were given some indication at the start of the year what activities they should be undertaking in each month, e.g. a CLP Year Planner (Feb – AGMs, March – National Conference Nominations, October – Fundraising), it would allow them to better plan their activities. If all elections were held in February for example it would be easier to write to all newly elected Secretaries and Chairs shortly after the AGM cycle to invite them to an induction/training day. Training for these positions is vital and it's important the two roles work well together. So I would propose that each Regional Office held one full day of free training for these activists once a year. Running these from the Regional Offices will allow these activists to get to know the staff in their Regional Office and for relations to be built up, and best practise shared, between CLPs in that geographical area. Also, mentoring of CLP Secretaries by others with greater experience could transform the way CLP meetings are approached and the confidence of those expected to run them.

For activists who take on nationally elected role – members of the NEC/NPF – this is crucial to the democratic running of the party. These representatives take decisions affecting thousands of members so they must be informed and accountable. They must be allowed to be representatives in the truest sense of the word. That means communicating with their electorate, canvassing their views

and feeding back the progress of work on these national bodies. The current situation where they are refused any method of communicating with CLP Secretaries (or any other CLP officers) cannot continue. Whether it is access to e-mail distribution lists or the ability to have e-mails sent out centrally on their behalf they **must** be allowed to communicate with those they seek to represent – it is fundamental to our internal democracy.

In all of our internal elections all candidates should be treated fairly and equitably at all times. They should have access to the same information at the same time and should all receive the same information about the process. Money should not be a barrier to standing in any internal election so candidates should not be charged to receive a copy of the CLP Secretaries contact details in order to canvass for support. Whilst respecting the right of affiliates to campaign for their preferred candidates the candidate statements accompanying the ballot papers should not contain recommendations from candidates for other candidates and the outcome of internal elections should be communicated to all candidates at the same time.

### **Scotland & Wales**

The NEC is rightly a balance between the different constituent sections of our party. The section for CLP representatives, in which party members are represented, makes up 6 of the 33 seats available although there are currently no representatives in that section from any of our devolved nations. Scotland can have a parliament and Wales can have an Assembly but no one from the Scottish or Welsh Constituency Labour Parties has a seat at the table of our governing body? That just isn't right. I would advocate an increase to the total number of CLP representative positions to ensure that there were reserved seats in that section for the representatives from our devolved nations. I suggest these seats are filled through one member one vote ballot at the same time as the other CLP representative seats are elected and that whoever is elected to those reserved seats is automatically co-opted onto the respective Scottish or Welsh executive committee, if they are not already on it, to ensure clear communication between the two executives.

### **Recognition**

We need to be better at saying thanks. Whilst we all know that many people give much to our party, the huge range of CLPs I have visited have really stuck home to me exactly how many give so much of their time, their money and their effort and very often in difficult circumstances. Whilst the party gives out merit awards at each annual party conference there are generally only a handful available for the entire country, they are not widely discussed or publicised and the only people that can submit nominations for them are CLP Secretaries. Most CLPs I have visited don't know that merit awards exist and it strikes me that some of the most deserving will never receive one simply because they would be the ones who would have to submit the application.

We could so easily recognise the efforts of a greater number of those who have given us so much. Conference need not only have one session of conference dedicated to saying thanks – the first few minutes of each session could be dedicated giving out merit awards and a reception with the leader of the party could be put on to thank everyone who received an award that year. And individual members could be allowed to nominate fellow members for an award. Recognition need not be flash and need not be costly but would mean so much to so many of our unsung heroes.

### **How we organise**

The tone, layout, frequency and discussion at local party meetings are some of the key determinants of whether a member chooses to become involved in the party so it's important we get it right. Many within this consultation have mooted getting rid of CLP meetings altogether – to be replaced by campaign groups, leaving the 'bureaucracy' of the party to be processed by a different, smaller, group of activists. The feedback I've had from members across the country does not support this. A clear majority of members who have fed back to me say that they want a local forum they can attend in which they feel comfortable and valued and where they can discuss politics openly. The current difficulty is that too often they don't feel valued, and on occasion that they don't feel respected, and don't think that their discussions mean or change anything. Part of this relates to the current policy making process which I touch on below. The other part relates to how meetings are held and conducted.

All members have the right to be treated equally and with respect at meetings and in most cases there is no issue with this. There are however exceptions – where meetings are dominated by certain individuals that everyone is too frightened to question. In those CLPs attending a party meeting is not fun. We need a better way of being able to deal with those situations. Currently they only come to light if an official complaint is made to the Regional Office or the NEC but that relies on someone putting their head above the parapet. In the very exceptional, but worst, examples members just will not do this out of fear of the political or personal repercussions. I would propose that we introduce a system whereby if a certain percentage, say 10%, of members in the CLP wrote privately to the Regional Office expressing concern about how their CLP is being run that this triggers an investigation of the CLP from either the Regional Board or the NEC depending on the nature of the complaint. This would allow members to remain anonymous in the process and for the investigation to focus on the whole CLP rather than targeting particular individuals.

I would recommend 5 year term limits on CLP officer positions because it is sadly in those areas where some individuals have been in the same positions for a very long time that some of the bad habits set in. This would also give those members who have given of their time to do the more demanding roles a bit of a break because where there are bad habits there are also very good ones and that's usually where a good officer finds they have great difficulty in being able to step down. This would also depersonalise any significant change in officer positions and would encourage greater diversity in our CLP officers. Whilst we may have quotas for the number of women that should be on the GC/EC in 80% of the CLPs I've visited the CLP Chair was a man and the CLP Secretary was a woman. It is no reflection on those members, who are doing a very good job, to say that this is simply not right.

The other issues raised about how meetings are held and conducted have related to the agenda, the style of the meeting, the venue and the time of meetings. I believe that given the appropriate training of Chairs and Secretaries meeting agendas will become less rigid and bureaucratic – many of the best CLP's I've seen already clear most of their business in the EC so that the GC can concentrate on discussing political issues or hear from invited speakers.

The time of meetings can have a huge impact on attendance – I never thought it possible that so many CLP's could meet on a Friday evening but an alarming number of those I've visited do. We really have to ask whether a young member or someone who has been working hard all week would want to go to a meeting that started at 8pm on a Friday evening. I suspect the answer is that they wouldn't. Members and activists deserve a night off too. And I would suggest that any guidance given to CLP Secretaries on the arrangement of meetings reflects that.

Whilst the venue is not always something that can easily be changed – those CLP's lucky enough to have a Labour Club for example would I suspect want to take advantage of holding their meetings there – the arrangements for the meeting inside the venue can more easily be and can have a huge impact on the tone of the meeting. Many meetings I've attended have had theatre style seating with the Chair and Secretary at the front where there's a long agenda and little opportunity for two-way conversation - it's very formal. In contrast all of our branch meetings are held in one member's living room with coffee and cake, sometimes a glass of wine and a cat on your lap. We don't always stick to the agenda but we have a chat and we get everything done that we need to. The tone is very different. Participating in the party shouldn't be a chore and small changes in this area could make a huge difference to someone's experience in it - sometimes it's just about putting more of the party into the Party!

There are legitimate questions about whether GCs should be delegate based or open to all members within a CLP and whether constituency rather than local authority boundaries are the more appropriate units of organisation and what the focus of local meetings should be. Member feedback on this had tended to be determined by the size of the CLP both in terms of geography and membership – larger CLPs have tended to the existing arrangements where branches tend to play more of a distinctive role, smaller constituencies have tended to all-member meetings. A few have made representations that with the change to CLP boundaries impacting CLP size on a more regular basis local authority

boundaries take on more relevance and indeed a few already operate as District Parties. The concern expressed by larger membership CLPs has been the cost of holding all-member meetings which, for a CLP of say 1000 members may not be insignificant whereas those covering large geographies. Argyll for example, were concerned that all-member meetings rather than branches would involve round trips for some members of up to 150 miles. What is clear is that no one size fits all. Whilst the opportunity currently exists to make a request of the NEC to organise on different, e.g. District, boundaries this is not widely known. It would seem sensible to make a recommendation that CLPs moved to all-member meetings to maximise participation but on the understanding that they can make a case to the NEC to reach a different agreement if they believe they have exceptional circumstances which would make this impossible.

### **Internal democracy**

It struck me whilst attending a meeting of a CLP in an area where Labour were in third place in the polls, where we haven't had the parliamentary seat for decades and that had a very small membership as a result that these CLPs do very badly in terms of our internal democracy. They are asked to pay the same Euro levy for example as CLPs that might have double the size of membership but they have fewer funds to do so. They are subject to the same conference costs but have fewer funds to meet them. And because they are in an area where they don't have a Labour MP, and are unlikely to get one, few big names in the party ever visit them and so they find it harder to raise the funds they need. I was particularly struck at this meeting because the CLP were having a discussion about whether they could afford to send a delegate to conference. It was a genuine concern and was going to impact funds considerably. I sat there knowing that there was another CLP down the road who had ten times their bank balance at its disposal (even after paying their levy, for conference and for campaigning – it has a considerably higher membership and is excellent at fundraising). There is no process at present for that smaller membership CLP getting any help at all and for their members to play a full role in our party the odds are stacked against it. This is highly unfair. I propose that when we know a CLP has amassed large financial resource (this can be verified by the financial declarations they need to make in their annual accounts) that any over say £25,000, after payment of their own levy, conference fees and campaign expenses, should be donated to an internal democracy fund to be distributed to those CLPs with less that would not otherwise be able to send a delegate to conference because of the cost.

### **Policy Making**

Our policy making process has to change significantly if we are to re-engage our members and demonstrate the value of their membership. Members must be at the heart of our policy making process – each of them able to contribute individually and through their CLP.

Whilst its right that policy making should be deliberative, the current three year timescales are too long and don't allow for member input into policy decisions that need to be taken more quickly than this. The current process is too confusing and many members simply give up trying to participate. Even when they do they don't receive any response to submissions they may have spent many hours working on.

When the National Policy Forum was first introduced Policy Forum events were held across every region of the country – members attended, some non-members attended and policy was discussed with members of the cabinet. It was very positive. And this consultation on Refounding our party has engaged more members and activists than at any time since those Policy Forums took place. I know people have been excited to be involved and keen to contribute their ideas. A rolling series of policy consultation meetings would be a great and natural extension to this process which will continue our conversation with our members and take policy making back to our people. But by whatever means – motions to the NPF, petitions to the leader or community enquiries into specific policy areas - something would have to come out of it.

The process must fundamentally be transparent and accountable - those making submissions must receive a response. NPF representatives could be linked in better with this process to reduce the burden on party staff but this would be dependent on them receiving higher level briefings on the detail of our existing policy proposals. Information on the members of the Policy Commissions and the Joint

Policy Committee should be available to members and the Joint Policy Committee must refer back to the NEC for agreement before finalising any policy proposals.

In terms of conference – we could better use conference to deliberate policy in a series of policy commissions meetings which are held in closed session. Policy propositions put to conference should be able to be voted on in sections rather than as whole documents and any votes on policy agreed at conference should be binding and included in our manifesto wherever possible.

### **Campaigning**

We must embed campaigning into the DNA of our party and our elected representatives have a central role to play in this – they should set the standard to members and activists within their constituencies. Candidate contracts would be an easy way to do this but I suspect would be open to widespread abuse – once selected there is no way of ensuring adherence to the contract. I would propose a system whereby the CLPs or wards in which candidates were standing were asked for a review of their candidates campaign performance at the end of the election campaign. That information could then be given to any other seats in which the candidate choose to stand for selection enabling them to take that performance into account when making their selection.

I would also propose that we do more to encourage members to become campaign organisers and establish that as a career path within our party. The TUC have a very successful Organising Academy which would be a fantastic model on which to base this.

The issue which has been raised with me repeatedly from members who are willing to go out and campaign is that they would feel more confident in doing so if they understood some of our policy positions better. Not only would that help them better respond to issues that might get raised on the doorstep it is increasingly important to have a discussion with voters rather than simply asking them their voting preference - they want it and we look foolish if we seem reluctant to engage. The party circulated an excellent briefing on the economy recently which gave activists some of the key arguments they could use – more of those would be fantastic.

### **Engaging our communities and the rights of non-members**

At a CLP meeting the other evening a member said “for a political party to campaign, recruit and to make policy effectively it needs to be where the people are”. And he was right. This doesn’t just mean canvassing but actual involvement in community activity – getting involved in the local fete, volunteering at the local festival or organising shifts on the local allotment. We shouldn’t be embarrassed to wear our Labour heart on our sleeve in everything we’re involved in be that physically or virtually – it all has a value and reassures voters that we are from their community not simply seeking to represent it.

Whilst the majority of CLPs I have visited have favoured greater engagement with their community all of them have drawn a distinction between the rights of a member and the rights of a supporter. It is acknowledged that our policies will better reflect the people we seek to serve if we have actually asked those people what they want and expect from us. So whilst this is welcomed all of the feedback I have had is that members would be extremely uncomfortable with the decisions about those policy proposals, or indeed our leader, being made by non-members.

We cannot represent our communities if we do not put forward candidates to do so. One area in which this is a significant issue, which has been raised with me on a number of occasions, is that of our position in respect to standing candidates in Northern Ireland. I have visited our Northern Ireland CLP and a more dedicated bunch you couldn’t find. Their enthusiasm is infectious – they’ve doubled their membership since the last election, they’ve just got their own banner and are doing lots of work with the local trades council - and yet they can’t campaign for our party in their own CLP at all because we don’t stand candidates in Northern Ireland. It is to their credit that they travel across the water to help their comrades in other constituencies but I know that their one desire is to fight for their own communities back home. This was a unanimous view of all members I saw when I was there. The Refounding Labour document didn’t mention them at all. It’s time we reviewed our position on this and I would urge you to read the Northern Ireland CLP’s submission - their arguments are compelling.

### **Use of new technology**

New technology has transformed the way in which we can communicate with our members and the electorate but we don't seem to be using it to its full potential. As noted above Membersnet could be a fantastic resource but needs to be revamped to make it something that our activists would visit on a regular basis.

Our website needs to do more than simply give information – it needs to be integrated with social media so that members can easily post content to their Facebook or Twitter accounts. We also need to ensure that every online activity is driving off-line activity – it's no good simply telling members what our policy position is on something if we're not asking them to contact a voter about it, share it with a friend or lobby the government by sending off a letter. The SNP used this to great effect in the last Scottish Parliamentary elections – you can see more information on that here;

<http://www.notosh.com/2011/05/we-made-history-the-best-new-media-team-in-uk-political-campaigning/>

We could also better use our website and social media to take the temperature of members and the electorate on key issues of the day. Not only will this inform our policy position but through regular and timely tweets we can start to build a relationship with those individuals who will see us as engaging and responsive. All political parties are now using Twitter as a campaigning tool and we need to be in that space.