

Revitalise Scottish Labour

Few Labour Party members would deny that the Scottish Labour Party needs to be given a new lease of life. Declining membership, union disaffiliation and less active participation, particularly at conference, needs to be addressed. A strong campaigning party respects its members by giving them a meaningful role in policy development.

Peter Hain MP put in succinctly: *“Parties inclusive enough to manage debates are winners. Parties split by rancour, personality faction and division are losers. It is time to open up the system, loosen the control and re-empower the party”*

This year’s Scottish Labour Party conference has the opportunity to take some modest steps to re-empower our party when it considers a number of proposals to change the Scottish conference.



Policy Development

The 2006 SLP conference will be considering reports from the Scottish Policy Forum that will form the basis for the Scottish Parliament manifesto in 2007. Instead of having to accept or reject entire policy documents, CLPs and affiliated organisations should be able to submit a limited number of amendments to reports. This approach would promote a more structured debate at conference and give the Party as a whole greater ownership of the outcome.

SUPPORT the constitutional amendment to standing order 3(a)

SO 3(a) – add at end – “In a year when conference is considering the final stage documents from the SPF, CLPs and affiliated organisations may submit up to two amendments to the final stage documents.”

The Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) is likely to ask the movers of this amendment to remit the idea to the National Policy Forum (NPF). This body deals with the UK General Election manifesto and has no role in the Scottish Parliament manifesto. To remit to the NPF simply kicks the issue into the long grass.

Debating Westminster issues

Many members will recall the 2003 SLP conference dominated by the war in Iraq. With the support of the SEC the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC) claimed that SLP rules debar motions on ‘reserved’ Westminster issues. This meant that conference had to refer back the CAC report to force even a closed doors debate. It makes no sense that the party in Scotland cannot debate UK and international issues. Motions passed by Scottish Party Conference would send a clear message as to the views of the party in Scotland, but would still be fed into the National Policy Forum (NPF) process.

SUPPORT the constitutional amendment to SO 3(c)

insert after ‘topic’ - “(including devolved, reserved, European and international issues)”

The SEC is likely to propose a session in conference for reserved issues called ‘Scotland in Britain’. This is an improvement on the current position, at least giving delegates an opportunity to make a contribution. However, there will be no motions or other means of measuring the views of conference. As with the 2003 Iraq debate, the outcome will simply be a mountain of flip charts sent to London.

We can submit contemporary motions on Scottish Parliament issues - so why not allow conference to send a clear message to the NPF on reserved issues.

Constitutional Issues

Much has been said about the legality of rule changes – mostly as a smokescreen to discourage these amendments. The constitutional position is clear. Any changes to the SLP rules have to be approved by SLP conference and then by the National Executive Committee.

Coalition Accountability

The Labour Party has been in coalition government with the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament since 1999. In 2003 the coalition agreement was particularly controversial with PR for local government. The issue is how do we make sure that the party supports the partnership proposals that have been adopted?

Last year a number of CLPs submitted constitutional amendments providing for a special conference before a coalition deal is agreed. That would ensure a proper debate and collective ownership when hard decisions have to be made.

For a number of technical reasons these amendments were rejected by the CAC. It is likely that the SEC will propose to confer a role for the Joint Policy Committee (JPC). The membership of this body is not defined in the Scottish Party rules although the intention is that Scotland continues to adopt the UK practice of a small number of members of the SEC and the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party (SPLP) meeting as the JPC.

Whilst this is an improvement on the current position, the problem with the JPC is that its members are not directly accountable to a 'constituency' within the party. The objections to a special conference relate to the practicalities of managing a fluid negotiating process through the format of a large conference in the tight statutory timetable (28 days) for the election of a First Minister.



A better way forward might be to use the SEC together with a committee of the SPLP for this task. This is already the mechanism in Clause 15 of the SPL Rules for deciding which issues from the party programme go into the manifesto. SEC members are all elected and accountable to a party 'constituency'. If there was a particularly controversial issue the SEC has the power to summon a special conference (Clause 7) to seek a mandate from the wider party. Incidentally, a majority of affiliated party organisations also have the power to requisition a special conference – an important difference between Scottish and UK party rules.

This would require a rule change as follows:

Clause 15: Party Programme

Add:

“(c) In the event that the Scottish Parliament Labour Party is unable to command a majority in the Scottish Parliament and/or decides to enter into a coalition with another parliamentary group, that decision, together with the proposed coalition agreement, shall be put to a joint meeting of the Scottish Executive Committee and a committee of the Scottish Parliament Labour Party. The Scottish Executive Committee will define the attitude of the party to the principle issues covered by the proposed coalition agreement”.

It is important to emphasise that the constitutional decision to enter into coalition remains with the SPLP. This amendment simply ensures that they are left in no doubt as to the attitude of the party to that decision.

If party organisations wish to support this amendment they may submit it in lieu of a contemporary resolution on the orange form in the conference pack no later than **12 Noon, 23 February 2005**.

Conclusion

These proposals seek to steer a middle way between those who want a conference that is little more than a rally and those that would prefer to return to the 1970's. They make a modest contribution towards re-empowering the party as a strong membership based campaigning organisation.

For further information on the revitalise network visit the website www.revitalisescotlabour.org.uk
If you are attending Scottish conference there will be a fringe meeting on Friday 4 March in the Glamis Room, Queens Hotel, 160 Nethergate, Dundee starting at 12:30pm.