

The Labour Leadership

I am writing to all members of the Pendle CLP to let you know my views on what is happening in the Party at the moment. There is great turmoil. Some MPs are challenging the National Executive Committee, which meets tomorrow, Tuesday, to send out the nomination papers for Leader of the Party. These used to be sent out routinely to MPs until the practice was stopped about a decade ago. The rule, however, still lives on in the rule book.

I am quoted, incorrectly, in a series of newspapers as being part of this group of MPs who broke cover a few days ago to call for a contest for Leader.

In fact, as you know, I set out my position publicly on 28 July this year. I told the General Committee on 25 July that I did not believe Labour could win the next election with Gordon Brown as Leader. My remarks came after the loss of Glasgow East - our third safest seat in Scotland - to the SNP on 24 July. That defeat followed earlier ones in Crewe and Nantwich and Henley where we came in fifth, trailing the BNP. We had also lost the London Mayoral election and had been hammered in the local elections. Pendle's results, where we took seats from our opponents, went against the trend.

I think many people in the Party are unhappy with Brown's leadership because he won it in an uncontested election. I was one of a handful of Labour MPs who pressed for a contested election precisely because I didn't really know the man - even after all these years as Pendle's MP - and I wanted to know how his approach would differ from his predecessor in policy areas that were important to me. However, an election, once triggered, would introduce huge new uncertainties. The wider Party would be involved, not just the MPs, and the outcome less certain.

The number of MPs needed to trigger a contest where there is a vacancy (40) is set way too high and is an almost insurmountable barrier to get over. And to challenge a sitting Leader takes a Soviet style 70. Even when Brown had enough nominations comfortably to get on the ballot paper, his team were still arm twisting colleagues to nominate him, to reduce the pool of undeclared MPs and make it close to impossible to get to the 40 threshold. In the end, 313 MPs nominated Brown in May 2007.

I believe our present problems are a direct result of the rusting up of the Party's internal democracy over the past decade. The furore over the nomination papers is one example but there are others.

In one of his first actions as Leader, Brown insisted there should be no votes on contemporary, or topical, resolutions at Annual Conference. Instead these were to be referred to the widely discredited National Policy Forum without a vote. This year we could see a debate but, incredibly, no vote on, say, proposals for a Windfall Tax. It would disappear into the black hole of the NPF.

We have this elaborate architecture of policy making which does not reflect the reality of what Members on the ground feel about things. How is it possible, for example, for the hugely damaging Post Office closure programme to go through when every person I spoke to here in Pendle and at Westminster told me it was disastrous.

And how on earth was it possible for the party to embrace the new generation of Trident? A phoney and manipulated Party consultation took place but no vote was allowed at Conference, even though Labour MPs would be voting on the issue a few months later.

And how can it be that the gap between the richest and poorest in Britain is widening, under a Labour Government? How did we ever allow the 10p debacle to happen? A motion was in front of last year's conference but, predictably, was ruled out of order.

Our policy making procedures have become so opaque and the leadership so dominant, no-one really knows any more how to influence and shape our policies. In a political party people need to know where the policy making levers are - and what happens when you pull them.

The Parliamentary Labour Party has also been marginalised. When I was first elected to Parliament there were regular topical debates at the PLP and votes. Now it is a wholly orchestrated affair - a presentation from a Cabinet Minister and certainly no votes. These would be "destabilising".

The procedures of the PLP stand in stark contrast to those of political parties in sister democracies such as Canada where the views of the Party Caucus (the MPs meeting in private) carry real weight.

When we are in opposition, Labour MPs vote annually for our Parliamentary leadership. When in Office, every member of the Cabinet (indeed, every member of the Government) is there as a result of Prime Ministerial patronage. The last time I voted for our leadership in parliament was in 1996. The result is a concentration of power focussed on the Leader with few checks and balances.

Even if Brown gets through the Manchester Conference unscathed, he still faces problems at Westminster. What is he going to do about 42 days detention without charge when his proposals come back to the Commons having been rejected by the Lords? Brown made this a totemic issue yet had to rely on the DUP last time to win in the Commons. Can he simply brush off a Commons defeat when he has made such a big thing of this issue?

And what about the upcoming Glenrothes by election? It is next door to his own constituency. Is he going to give it a wide berth, as he did Glasgow East (on the grounds PMs don't get involved in by elections) or is he going to campaign?

I believe elections confer legitimacy. After manoeuvring successfully to get rid of Blair, Brown made a fatal misjudgement in working so hard to ensure there would be an uncontested election. If ever there was a Pyrrhic victory, this was it.

I believe we cannot win with Brown as Leader. I would like to see a new Leader by Christmas - after a contested election.

Gordon Prentice MP
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