

Labour needs a programme of political education

James McAsh (3/8/16)*

This week, Owen Jones published a blog, 'Questions all Jeremy Corbyn supporters need to answer', which has caused a stir on the left. His ninth question was about how the mass membership of Corbyn's Labour can translate into votes. Here is one possible answer.

If you randomly select 75 people from the electorate one of them will be a Labour Party member. Soon this could rise to one in every fifty. Recognition of this astonishing transformation into a mass party must be central to any future strategy. As Paul Mason puts it "Labour is close to having an identifiable face in every milieu – in every pub conversation, every workplace, every college lecture, every group of mums with toddlers."

But a workforce is only ever as good as its tools. Over the past decade the Labour Party has

deployed its membership for two functions: fundraising and data collection. The #LabourDoorstep rarely involves political discussion or persuasion; its purpose is to identify how the household is voting so that they can be targeted by post, or encouraged to vote on polling day.

If this was ever an effective strategy, it is now utterly inadequate. Our society is becoming increasingly politicised and Labour cannot win an election, never mind transform society, on the basis of effective state-management. We will only win by articulating a positive and transformative vision for a fairer society. We can do this with savvy press strategy and effective use of social media but nothing can replace one-to-one, or small-group, conversations on the basis of mutual trust and respect.

This necessitates an active, political and articulate membership who can persuade those around them. How can we develop this?

Ultimately this is a long-term strategy. It means empowerment: giving people the self-confidence and the intellectual tools to analyse and change the world. But there are also short-term steps we can take.

- 1) Clear vision. This does not need to be policy-heavy but it does need to be tangible. If we cannot provide a rough sketch outlining life under a Labour government then what's the point? If our supportive members cannot explain this in a minute conversation in the pub then how can we expect more sceptical voters to be convinced when it is mediated through a hostile media?
- 2) Watercooler points. Across the country colleagues and friends will discuss, however briefly, current affairs over a pint, or by the office watercooler. Increasingly, there will be a Labour Party member participating in these conversations, but they're there with no support. We need to make regular, perhaps weekly, contact with our members to share key talking points and responses to criticisms. It is already someone's job to do this for an inner core of press spokespeople: we need to expand that core to over a million.
- 3) Break out of our bubble. The danger of relying on our membership is that we end up just speaking to ourselves. We need a conscious approach to avoiding this. This means supporting local members to have a presence in other spheres, and to organise outward facing events ourselves. This means book clubs, football tournaments, coffee mornings, yoga sessions, bingo nights etc.

Part of being a political activist is being able to analyse the world around you and produce ideas for how to change it. The existing Labour Party practice is that this work is done externally – by academics and thinktanks – and not by the membership. This is an elitist model which undermines the democracy of the party and makes it less effective.

Labour needs a programme of political education to empower members to better persuade those around them and to participate more confidently in internal debates on Labour's policy and direction. It can also contribute towards building more participative and less fractious local parties, where members better understand one another's perspective.

Access to political education is both minimal and inconsistent. If you are not at a university (and probably a posh one at that) then your only access to political education is likely to come through family or social connections, or self-guided reading. Unlike many of Labour's sister parties abroad, there is no

systematic approach to political education in Labour's youth wing or in any of the party's structures. Local parties or Young Labour groups might do some work – but it is possible to be active in Young Labour and the Labour Party for many years and never be invited to anything that resembles political education.

This needs to change. We must be under no illusions: this is a huge task which will require vast quantities of time and energy. It will also be entirely unglamorous. But it has one strength over the short-term suggestions above: we can start right now. We do not need permission from the leader, the party machine, or anyone else. We can just start doing it.

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