Reform Frustrated: The Grassroots

An outsider’s view of the Labour Party sees its elected members in parliament and elsewhere, its national conference and, perhaps, its NEC. But most of those who are active in the party engage with it primarily at a local level. Whilst national structures may change it is thus the organisation of local meetings, campaigns, social and other events that has greatest potential impact on most party members.1

Whilst those seeking to reform the party had competing visions, it was perhaps in the treatment of membership and local parties that these created the greatest barrier to change. Crucially even amongst the ‘modernisers’, drawn from the party’s right and soft left, there were many disagreements over such matters. On only one objective – that of building a bigger, more welcoming, party – was there real consensus from the early 1980s. Yet this proved to be extremely difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, there was no agreement on the more fundamental issue of what the role of party members’ should be, and thus what a ‘mass membership’ party should actually do. In addition the pure organisational complexity of redesigning the party at the grassroots, and the fondness of many members for existing practices, created formidable barriers to change. As a result, the long period of party ‘modernisation’ saw no single co-ordinated programme directed at local parties succeed.

Nonetheless, the reforms discussed in earlier chapters had a major impact at the local level – resulting in many of the traditional functions of constituency structures being gradually stripped away, whilst new technologies changed the relationship between members and the national party. But the fundamental questions about the role and purpose of party members, even today, remain unresolved.

The Purpose of Party Members

Before turning to discussion of events in the Labour Party it is worth briefly reviewing what political scientists have said about the different reasons why individuals seek to join parties, and why
parties, in turn, might want to attract members. These issues have been the subject of much academic discussion. Some of the same points made in these forums featured highly in Labour’s own debates from the 1980s onwards.

The classic analysis of members’ motivations for joining parties suggests that there are three distinct kinds of incentives to do this. First, ‘purposive’ incentives relate to the party’s ideological objectives – members will join if they are sympathetic with the policy direction the party seeks to take and want to help it achieve its goals. Second, ‘solidary’ incentives are those that members may enjoy as a group, such as the opportunity to meet other like-minded individuals, and engage in social activities with them. Finally, ‘material’ incentives are those of direct economic benefit to the member, for example gaining paid work through the party.

By the middle of the twentieth century academic analyses were suggesting that the mass political party was in decline. Changes to working patterns and availability of new leisure pursuits led to a weakening of the ‘solidary’ incentive, in particular. In the Labour Party many members had originally been attracted by local ‘Labour clubs’, but the advent of television, as well as growing disposable income, made these less important to local social life. This was almost certainly a causal factor in the declining Labour membership that was seen from the early 1950s onwards. If party membership shrank, it seemed likely that those remaining were more driven by the ‘purposive’ incentive – that is, that they were the more ideologically committed. This would present a potential difficulty for leaders, as these members might resist moderate policy positions with broad electoral appeal. Hence political scientists predicted that leaders would seek to free themselves from members’ influence, and might even want to dispense with them altogether (Katz and Mair, 1995; Kirchheimer, 1966; Michels, 1962; Panebianco, 1988).

Whether this occurred, however, depended on the other side of the equation – the reasons that party leaders needed members. One of the most obvious benefits that members brought was their ability to act as a campaign resource – to spread messages for the party and encourage others to support it. However, in the late twentieth century, given the growth of the mass media and leaders’ consequent ability to communicate directly with the public, some saw this role as increasingly redundant.

This is far from the only advantage that members can bring to leaders, however. Probably the most complete list of potential