



Germinal

The Brussels Labour International Branch newsletter

Reflections on the Manchester Conference

Keir Fitch

Manchester Conference took place in late September – the first time in many years that conference had not been at the seaside. This change was deliberate, reflecting the renewed dynamism of British cities, compared to the old-fashioned atmosphere of the traditional venues.

The timing of conference appeared to be inauspicious, occurring just after the attempted putsch by certain Brownities. And my first experience was discouraging too – with a two-and-a-half hour wait in the rain for my conference pass, even though I applied at the beginning of August. This it seems was down to ever more rigorous security, and staff cuts in HQ. Unlike many visitors, my pass was at least ready at the end of the wait.

So things now could only get better...

The conference location, right in the heart of Manchester, was excellent (except perhaps for the locals). My first evening, not quite able to escape the shadow of my day job, I attended a fascinating fringe event on relations with Russia, followed by the infamous Commission party – at which some somewhat merry speakers had to contend with broken microphones and intermittent lighting. Perhaps not the image of the EU that was intended.

Day 2 (Monday) saw the first of the big set piece speeches – from the heir apparent Gordon Brown. After a warm up act consisting of many hopeful party members speaking on



Tony Blair delivered his final conference speech as party leader in Manchester

(fairly obscure) resolutions, GB began. As you will have read elsewhere, it was a good speech, but one aimed more at appealing to the soul of the party than at presenting novel ideas for combating the biggest challenges we face. While the audience in the hall warmed to the speaker, I think we were left feeling we wanted a bit more. Maybe there was too much pressure on GB to deliver the speech

of his life. From our Brussels perspective of course, the lack of any reference at all to Europe or its possible role in the future was disappointing. It was amusing to see the various senior members of the party in full flow afterwards attempting to put their particular take on events.

The rest of the day consisted

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EDITORIAL



including the fringe event organised by Brussels Labour at the Party Conference.

Thanks to all those who have

Welcome to this New Year edition of Germinal, which contains articles on the branch activities which took place during the autumn,

contributed to this issue and to David O'Leary for the layout. Contributions to the next issue can be sent to rachel.buchanan@skynet.be by 22 April 2007.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you a Happy New Year.

Rachel Buchanan
Editor

1 > of a further selection from the vast range of fringe events on offer – this time with a mostly European theme, though including the chance to see a number of the deputy leadership candidates in action. It was also a chance to see more of the splendidly restored Victorian civic architecture of the city – particularly in the vast neo-gothic Town Hall.

Tuesday was of course the big day – not only for Blair, but also for Brussels Labour. Having a great line up for our fringe event including both our honorary president Neil Kinnock and David Miliband ensured a very full turn out, with over 150 braving the early morning security. Of course there were not too many competing events- except the PA system from a Northern Irish event next door. A full report on our event appears below this article.

Since the food ran out before any of the BL members present had had a



Gordon Brown
addressing the
2006 conference

chance to feed, we adjourned to the conference hotel afterwards for a well earned break.

The final highlight of my conference stay was of course Tony Blair's valedictory speech. Whatever the doubts about Iraq etc, this was clearly the work of a master – with humour to leaven the serious, a mix of review of the past and a very coherent view of the challenges for the future. Blair did

of course fully recognise the role of Europe in many of these –though also stressing the need for transatlantic cooperation. Though there were a few in the audience who were unforgiving, the great majority were clearly reminded of the qualities which had made him such a successful leader in the first place. Afterwards, we could again watch the press commentary in stereo – live and on the TV feeds.

CONFERENCE 2006

Brussels Labour fringe meeting

European Union — Environmental Union

Sarah Millar

Secretary, Brussels Labour

The fringe meeting was a great success with more than 150 people attending. Food and chairs ran out – which was just fine! Great speeches and chairing – Ed.

At Brussels Labour's third and most ambitious outing at Labour Party conference, the theme was the Global Climate Change Challenge – Europe's response. The outstanding panel of speakers included Brussels Labour's Honorary President, Neil Kinnock, Secretary of State for the Environment David Miliband, Eluned Morgan MEP and Secretary

General of ECOSY Ania Skrzypek.

David Miliband, the keynote speaker, explained that he had thought he understood the threats posed by climate change. However, he had been deeply shocked and scared by the scale of the climate change challenge since being appointed Secretary of State for the Environment five months ago.

He argued that catastrophic climate change would not be just a planetary emergency, but as Ania Skrzypek had noted, a humanitarian emergency first and foremost. In the way that the Global Call to Action Against Poverty had mobilised people, David Miliband believed that

climate change should be the cause to mobilise the European Union. In effect, an environmental union that connects with its citizens.

The EU emissions trading scheme, "the only game in town" according to Eluned Morgan, could be instrumental in delivering the most economically efficient reductions of greenhouse gases, if the European Union has the political courage to enforce and extend it. All the speakers agreed that climate change could not be tackled unilaterally by the UK, nor would the market deliver the urgently needed reductions in greenhouse gases without guidance and strong political conviction.

Is Europe heading left or right?

Stephen Kinsella

At the start of the meeting Belinda Pyke reported on the outcome of the local elections in Belgium. There was general agreement that an issue for the future is how to begin now raising awareness of the need to register early to be eligible for the next elections in six years time. Belinda also had the happy task of announcing the arrival of our latest group member, Nicolas Earnshaw-Wood.

Herwig began by saying he could not pretend to reach a firm conclusion on whether Europe as a whole is moving to the Left or Right, but there were some interesting experiences to share from the recent Austrian elections.

He began by acknowledging the disquiet across Europe at the rise of

Jörg Haider, which had broken the taboos and the old consensus between the centrist parties. However, by early 2006 the Social Democrats had felt they had a winning programme because the Right had split. Unfortunately, a scandal affecting a union-owned bank in February 2006 had allowed the right-wing parties to taint the Social Democrats with a perceived lack of economic competence and they had been behind in the polls throughout the summer.

The Conservative party had tried to make the elections a personal issue, relying on the perceived success of Schussel. The Social Democrats had tried to focus more on issues such as reducing unemployment, strengthening the economy, addressing pension expectations and welfare levels. They had also stressed the importance of integrating more recent immigrants which had been seen as a very brave and risky strategy. Interestingly, the EU itself had not been a major issue, probably because none of the parties saw any clear electoral advantage for them.

The result was a drop in support for the Conservatives of 8% (the second largest in their history). One could not really say the Social Democrats had “won” because their support also fell but only by 1.2%, so that the end result was that the “winner” was the majority party which had lost least heavily. The Greens and the FPÖ (a small right-wing party) had done well.

It is difficult to say that Austria is moving to the Left because not all Green voters can be categorised as left-wing. When put together, the right-wing parties would have a majority but they probably could not form a government and so there are negotiations to form a ‘grand coalition’. However, that would be difficult given the new dividing lines



Socialist Alfred Gusenbauer was eventually confirmed as Austria’s new chancellor on 11 January 2007

between Left and Right. In common with many other countries in Europe we see less engagement or faith in politics.


We followed with a lively round of questions. Herwig confirmed that the EU had not been a big issue in the socialist campaign but, as elsewhere, questions over free movement, immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment had been exploited by some on the Right. It was also interesting to note that Austria still has a high rate of party membership, even though that is declining significantly. What has increased, again as elsewhere, is the volatility of the electorate with perhaps 15% of voters still undecided just days before the election. Finally, unlike in the UK, the Iraq war had not really been an issue, though Austrians are very concerned at the moment about their neutral status.

Results


Austrian legislative elections 1 October 2006



 Social Democrats (SPÖ)
35.3%

 People’s Party (ÖVP)
34.3%

 Greens
11.1%

 Freedom Party (FPÖ)
11.0%

 Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)
4.1%

Dr Martin’s List
2.8%

Others
1.3%

The Left in the EU

Parties belonging to the Party of European Socialists (PES) lead governments in Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, and the UK.

PES parties are partners in coalition governments in Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Luxembourg.

Despite Laurette Onkelinx heading the list, the PS failed to win control of Schaerbeek town hall



Getting to grips with the local elections

Sue Bird

Ans Persoons (sp.a election candidate for Ixelles) and Anna Colombo (PS local election candidate for Schaerbeek gave us a bright account of the ins and outs of the technicalities and the politics of the Brussels 2006 local elections.

Ans began by saying that only 14% of non-residents in Brussels had signed up to vote. However, she noted that, once registered, failure to vote would lead to a fine of up to €50 (unless you had arranged a proxy)! Voting was to be undertaken electronically, and you would be able to choose to vote for a full list of candidates or for candidates individually.

Ans gave examples of her sp.a party's position on a number of issues. For example, they would advocate

offering transport alternatives in Brussels such as car-free zones, or more bike lanes. She mentioned the 23 locations that are now available in the city to hire bikes. Commenting on governance (and thinking of her audience) she said she thought that local commune administrations should be more welcoming, with clearer procedures and shorter waiting times, and that they should give a welcome pack to new arrivals.

Anna was one of the two non-Belgians standing for the PS in Schaerbeek, and she works at the European Parliament. She has been in Brussels for 19 years (in Schaerbeek for 17), and has been keen to encourage the integration of nationals of other countries into Brussels. She viewed that the local election results will have an impact on decisions to be taken on the make-up of a coalition

after the next federal elections. Few communes were likely to achieve an overall majority.

Schaerbeek is the second largest commune in Brussels, with a population of 110,000. Average earnings are only €9,000 per year, although some high-earners live on the periphery of the commune. Unemployment is at a high of 36%. Political interest and representation in the commune is high – the Deputy Prime Minister was standing for election, and if there was the opportunity, might step down from central government to become bourgemestre.

Anna mentioned that an agreement had been signed recently between Brussels-Capitale region and the Institutions, to attempt to improve relations between them. She said she has fought to change the law whereby non-Belgian nationals should have an automatic right to vote, and not have to register beforehand, which is the case now.

The speakers provoked several questions from the floor. Asked why shop windows have posters of all parties in Belgium (in the UK, shops would be seen to support one party), Ans said that Belgian shops tend not to want to show their hand, and in any case view what they do as a service to the community. Ans noted that people are more interested in politics in their own countries when they move away than in the country they have moved to. Anna confirmed that she thought emigrating socialists should be socialists first and nationals of their home countries second. In reply to another question, Ans assessed that the sp.a and the PS worked well together, a unifying



element being the need to deter right-wing radicals.

The statutes of the PS state that if you are a member of another EU socialist party, then you can be a member of the Belgian PS. This needed to be exploited...

Asked about what the European institutions should do to promote

better relations with Brussels communes, Ans and Anna agreed that the response had to come from both sides. The communes need to reduce bureaucracy, and non-Belgian nationals need to come out of their national groups and participate more in Belgian life.

All in all, a lively discussion covering the practical and the political. I must

follow up that contact in my local PS.....

Unfortunately, none of the speakers were elected though Ans Persoons missed by just one vote, with 388 preference votes in Ixelles. Ana Colombo received 249 preference votes in Schaerbeek, and Belinda Pyke got 52 preference votes in Woluwe St Pierre.

COMMENT

Belinda Pyke Chair, Brussels Labour

Communal elections: raising the vote

The communal elections on 8 October saw some good results for the Socialists across the country and especially in Brussels with major increases in the share of the vote in Schaerbeek (+ 13.41%), Koekelberg (+ 8.55%), Bruxelles (+ 7.95%) and Forest (+ 6.81%). (Source: www.ps.be)

The elections were not of course just for Belgians. While voting was opened up to all EU citizens in 2000, this year's elections opened it wider still.

Following a change in the law in 2004, the franchise was extended to immigrants from outside the European Union with at least five years of legal residence in the country.

7% of those able to vote in Brussels were non-Belgian, of which two-thirds (18 682) came from other EU countries. Although the vast majority of EU citizens entitled to register didn't do so, the share was higher than in 2000. Non-Belgians were entitled to stand as candidates too and, again in Brussels, 175 of them did – 10% of the total.

The next elections are in 2012 and we should aim to increase the level of non-Belgian participation. But we don't have to wait till then to vote in Belgium: we can do so already in 2009 in the European Elections.

Meanwhile: voting in the UK

When Hazel Blears met Brussels Labour in July, we took the chance to point out to her the unfairness of the current rules on voter registration for British citizens living abroad, especially elsewhere in the EU. We sent her a summary of our views and here is an extract:

British citizens living in Belgium since 1993 will not be able to vote in the next general election (assumed to be 2008/9). And they will not be able to vote either in parliamentary elections in Belgium. In effect, they are disenfranchised from choosing the governments that make the laws which they have to obey and levy the taxes they pay.

And most citizens of other EU countries will not be able to vote in the British general election, regardless of how long they have lived in Britain. Only citizens of Ireland, and of Commonwealth countries – which include Cyprus and Malta - resident in the UK share this right with British citizens. This means that we treat people from 3 of our EU partners quite differently from the other 21 even though the European Union is built on the principle of free movement and non-discrimination.

A Fairer System

An arbitrary time limitation on registration does not take account of the reality of UK emigration: some people leave the UK because they no longer wish to remain there. Others go for other reasons, often because of their work (their own or their partner's), but want to retain links with the country.

■ *It would be more straightforward to ask UK citizens after they have been abroad for, say, a year to declare whether they wish to remain on the electoral register and to repeat that declaration annually. This is less open to abuse than letting an expatriate decide to vote in the UK for the first time after 14 years abroad.*

■ *And agreement could be reached between EU governments to allow EU citizens to choose whether to register to vote for parliamentary elections in their country of origin or in their country of residence. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent the UK taking the initiative by passing legislation to allow EU citizens in the UK to vote in parliamentary elections on the same terms as they are already allowed to vote in local and European elections.*

■ *Finally, and longer term, perhaps the time has come to reconsider the nature of overseas voters' representation. At present, they vote in the constituency where they were last registered even if their UK links are now elsewhere in the country.*

Renewal in power: keeping on winning

Keir Fitch

John McTernan is Director of Political Operations at No 10, and is otherwise known as the PM's political secretary. He spoke on a packed meeting of the branch on "renewal in power" – or how we keep on winning.

He opened by explaining the benefits and disadvantages that reaching a third term for the first time has brought us in policy making. Essentially, we now have to take responsibility for everything that happens – it is no longer enough to refer back to what the Tories did, or might have done.

People hardly remember, and certainly are no longer interested. Equally however, ministers have gained greatly in experience since 1997.

Much new policy making was still going on – he felt the party had been "hammered" on anti-social behaviour



John McTernan

in the 2005 election (indeed we had lost many seats in the last week of the campaign on this issue), but we have now taken firm action encouraging "respect". We are continuing to fight for a vision of the future based on fairness, and detailed work is going on transport, planning, climate change and energy.

The Tories have certainly changed

since David Cameron's election, but John considered they had only done half of what was needed to make them electable – they have changed the brand, but not yet the substance.

By contrast Blair and Brown worked throughout the 1987 to 1994 period to change substance too, but the Tory party will not let Cameron and George Osborne do this. In any case, it was good for us to have a revitalised opposition – since this helps galvanise our own supporters too, and remind them why voting is important.

What else are we doing at present? John referred to the Queen's Speech, delivered earlier the same day, and suggested the greatest challenges still flowed from the end of the Cold War and opening of China.

Together, these events had doubled the size of the world economy, causing "globalisation". We should not shy away from this, but ensure we can derive full benefits from it – so we need to do more to make EU universities drivers of progress like their US counterparts.

Immigration had become a hot issue – and one that is always difficult for the Left. But it was vital progressives engaged with the debate – otherwise society's concerns will be articulated by the Right.

We should also recognise that while recent immigration has delivered considerable economic benefits, it has caused particular difficulties for the white working class. Since both these and many of the migrants are our supporters, we need to nuance the message very carefully. The new emphasis on integration is vital – the fact, for example, that two-thirds of Bangladeshi men work in restaurants

John McTernan said that the opening of China represented a great challenge



or minicabs, and only 20% of Bangladeshi women work at all (compared with 72% of all UK women) clearly leaves them isolated and vulnerable.

The final issue on which John considered the government has to be seen as responding to people's concerns is terrorism. The benefits of globalisation and an open world have also created a riskier world. As with terrorism, this tends to be an issue where the Right dominate, and vilify the Left as weak – see the experience of the Australian Labor Party and the US Democrats.

So we must be in control. This would be the key argument in the forthcoming debate on replacement of the nuclear deterrent. He pointed out that the UK had reduced its number of nuclear warheads by 30% since 1997, but considered that not replacing the deterrent would simply mean us sheltering behind the US.

Unilateralism had not worked in the 1980s, and was even less likely to be attractive amidst the proliferation of the early 21st century.

John closed by suggesting that we would not win a fourth term on the basis of what we have done – instead, we will win it because of the vision



'Being in control' would be one of the government's key arguments for renewing Trident

we offer. This victory, and the change it will give to really embed the changes we've made since 1997, would be Tony Blair's real legacy.

Following John's speech, we had a particularly lively questions and answers session. In answer to the suggestion that Merkel nearly lost in Germany by saying there were too many problems, and that we could do the same, John thought the key was to engage people in the discussions, and show that there were things they could do effectively to address problems such as climate change. It was also vital that we on the Left showed how collective action can make a difference.

While change continued to be vital – and sometimes painful – politicians had to do more than simply transmit the external forces – they had instead to ensure managed transition and show they empathised with people's concerns.

Regarding the Party's problems in London and South East England, John thought these flowed from our difficulties in dealing with the aspirations of sections of society there.

On renewal of the Party (rather than the government), he suggested that we could use the right of party members to vote in the leadership election to re-engage with many members.

Finally, in response to the challenge that we had effectively wasted much of the opportunity offered by the 1997 victory, John countered that we had moved on completely from the low tax, small government agenda of Regan and Thatcher – instead we have full workers rights, family tax credits, 43% of (a much larger) GDP spent on public services, up from 36%, and much lower unemployment.

Perhaps the problem for party members is that we haven't glorified in our achievements.



Labour was "hammered" on anti-social behaviour in the 2005 election

Labour International update

Gus Glover

LI membership secretary

At the Labour Party conference in Manchester last September, the Labour International (LI) executive met for one of its bi-annual meetings, where members of the executive committee report on the activities which have carried out over the past half-year and plan for the forthcoming months.

The previous meeting had been held in Rome, with the specific aim of helping to jump-start an Italian branch of LI. Tim Clapham, Chair of LI, reported on the success of recent developments among Italian members and expressed the hope that a fully-functioning branch in Italy would soon be established.

Labour International is also looking to develop a branch in central or eastern Europe. The establishment of a branch in France is also being explored, as there are a particularly large number of LI members resident there. These initiatives will be a priority over the coming months. The executive approved some modest

funds to help in this endeavour.

Membership numbers have dropped, but Labour International is still pleased to note that the fall is less sharp than that of the Labour Party as a whole. The membership officer also decided to handover the responsibility for maintaining the membership lists to me. It was agreed that we would seek to acquire more of our members' email addresses as we are currently over reliant on postal mailings.

The executive also discussed the creation of branch rules for all established Labour International branches. The Brussels Labour branch rules were held up as a model to be used, in particular given their approval by the NEC.

Finally, we were reminded that Labour International had a stand at the Party of European Socialist (PES) Porto event, hosted by Sylvia Sindamanoy, where she was able to share best practice with comrades from our sister parties. A report of this event is available on the Labour International website:

www.labourint.org.uk



LI was present at the PES Congress in Portugal



Monday 22 January 2007 at 19:30

John Fitzmaurice
memorial lecture

Geoff Hoon
Minister for Europe

The Centre, Avenue Marnix 22

Wednesday 28 February 2007

Branch meeting
Speaker to be confirmed

Arthur's, Rue du Trèves 26

Wednesday 21 March 2007

AGM & branch meeting
Speaker to be confirmed

Arthur's, Rue du Trèves 26

Wednesday 18 April 2007

Quiz

Venue to be confirmed

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