

Dear all

Below is my report of the first meeting of the newly elected Black Socialist Society ("BSS") Executive Committee (the "Executive") held last month at the Labour Party Headquarters in London.

As promised, I intend to regularly report back on my activities as a member of the Executive to BSS members. I have added your name to this email distribution list because you have asked me to do so or because I thought you would be interested to receive my reports. If you know of anyone who would like to be added to this distribution list, they can sign up to my BSS reports at [www.tmponline.org](http://www.tmponline.org), the new online political magazine for multicultural progressives which I edit and would invite you to visit. If you do not wish to receive these regular reports, please reply to this email with "unsubscribe" in the subject header.

### **BSS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING, 28 MARCH 2007**

The Chair, Ahmad Shahzad, commenced proceedings by welcoming those present and congratulating everyone on their election to the Executive following the BSS Executive elections on 10 March 2007.

He also thanked the Labour Party (the "Party") staff present – Alicia Kennedy (Deputy General Secretary), Roy Kennedy (Director of Finance and Compliance) and Sue Macmillan (Equalities Officer) – in addition to those who were not, such as Mike Griffiths (Chair of the NEC), for their help in bringing about the revival of the BSS.

### **NEC report**

Keith Vaz MP, the BSS' representative on the Labour Party's National Executive Committee ("NEC"), gave a report of his NEC activities since being elected. He said he would produce regular written reports of the same and would circulate them to BSS members in due course.

He attended his first full NEC meeting on 20 March 2007. He described how NEC meetings can last for up to four hours and usually start with a Leader's Report followed by questions and answers by NEC members, some of which can be quite critical. One of the controversial issues discussed was party funding, on which a range of views were expressed.

Keith said he has been appointed to the following NEC sub committees:

- Organisation – this sub committee is responsible for party rules and the constitution, ensuring parties are operating effectively throughout the country and it has overall responsibility for membership, investigations, selections, Conferences, electoral law, boundaries strategy and internal elections; and,
- Women, Race and Equalities – this sub committee is responsible for the recruitment, retention and participation in the party in elected office of women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, and lesbian, gay and bisexual people; it is also responsible for disability access and the increased representation and participation of members with disabilities; it has general responsibility for driving the party's equality agenda.

The Organisation sub-committee has imposed an all women shortlist on Ealing Southall Constituency Labour Party ("CLP") as that CLP selects a new parliamentary candidate to succeed Piara Khabra MP. Keith said he had opposed this move and did not feel it was appropriate to impose an AWS in this instance; he said he was supported in this regard by Michael Cashman MEP.

Keith pointed out that all women shortlists had failed to select ethnic minority women and we had the right to expect there to be ethnic minority candidates in seats such as Ealing Southall and Bethnal Green and Bow, where there are high ethnic minority populations.

With regard to parliamentary representation generally, Keith said the Party should aim to double the number of ethnic minority Labour MPs from 13 to 26 – so we need to find 13 new ethnic minority parliamentary candidates in safe seats between now and the next general election.

### **Labour Party Ethnic Minority Taskforce**

Keith was appointed as Chair of the Party's Ethnic Minority Taskforce (the "Taskforce") by Hazel Blears MP soon after she was appointed Party Chair in May 2006. Keith said that following the revival of the BSS, the Taskforce would take a back seat - though he said it would continue to galvanise ethnic minority involvement in the Party through public meetings, which he wished to get the BSS Executive involved with. The next such meeting is in Ruislip on 26 April 2007.

Keith said the Taskforce had carried out important work in pulling together the various Labour "friends of" and "for Labour" groups such as Tamils for Labour, Arabs for Labour, Chinese for Labour, Africans for Labour etc. and he was keen for that outreach work to continue.

### **Report from Roy Kennedy – Director of Finance and Compliance**

Roy Kennedy outlined the various rights enjoyed by Socialist Societies affiliated to the Party including:

- to send two delegates to the Party's annual conference ("Conference");
- to nominate candidates in the forthcoming Party Leadership and Deputy Leadership elections;
- to send delegates to the special conference held to select the new Leader and Deputy Leader;
- to put forward contemporary and emergency resolutions at Conference;
- to suggest amendments to the party's constitution.

Roy reminded us that BSS activities are covered by the provisions of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act which governs the registration and finances of political parties, donations and expenditure for political purposes and election and referendum campaigns, amongst other things.

The BSS will be registered as an accounting unit of the Party and already has a certain amount of funds in affiliation and membership fees. Roy said he will liaise with the BSS's Treasurer in relation to the setting up of a BSS bank account.

### **CLP Ethnic Minority Officers**

Under the Labour Party Rules, the officers of each CLP are the chair, two vice chairs, treasurer, secretary, women's officer and youth/student officer. Functional officers may also be appointed – CLP ethnic minority officers fall into this category. I said that members of my CLP's Ethnic Minority Forum were of the view that the ethnic minority officer should be reclassified as a full CLP officer and not a functional officer. This would show due recognition to the importance of ethnic minority representation and participation in local CLPs – it did not seem right that the youth and women's officers are treated as full CLP officers, while the ethnic minority officers are not. This was a view shared by other members of the Executive present.

Roy said that the BSS could write to the NEC and formally request that the Party rules be changed so that all ethnic minority officers become full officers of their CLPs. He said he thought it was something the NEC would be happy to consider and it was resolved that a formal letter of request in that regard would be drafted and sent to the NEC for their consideration.

### **Labour Party Race Equality Officer**

Enquiries were made as to whether the Party would appoint a race equality officer in the future, given that there have been holders of that post in the past. Alicia Kennedy, the Party's Deputy General Secretary, said a decision had been taken to amalgamate that role with the women's officer post into the equalities officer role currently held by Sue Macmillan. Sue is moving into a new position in the party and interviews are currently taking place for her replacement.

Alicia said that the Party could not afford to have a separate race equality officer at present due to money constraints, but if the BSS was able to raise sufficient funds to have a full time officer dedicated to the BSS and race equality she saw no reason why the Party should object and such a person could be integrated into the Party staff.

### **Parliamentary representation**

The Organisation sub committee of the NEC is keen to explore ways of increasing the number of ethnic minority MPs in parliament. Roy confirmed that the Party is taking legal advice in relation to the viability of hybrid shortlists, favoured some such as Sadiq Khan MP. "Hybrid" (i.e. all women or ethnic minority) shortlists operate on the basis that only women, or ethnic minority men and women, may be shortlisted for selection.

It was confirmed that the BSS would be able to make representations to the NEC Organisation committee in relation to parliamentary selections as and when necessary (Keith also said he would ensure the BSS' views were taken into account as a member of that committee).

The Chair asked about the possibilities of the BSS running joint training courses with the Party for ethnic minority members wishing to put themselves forward for parliamentary selections. Alicia said she had no objection to this and it was provisionally agreed that one such course would be run during the summer and another later during the year, after Conference.

### **Regional representation**

It was noted that there are presently are no ethnic minority members of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and it does not seem that this state of affairs will change following the May elections there. There was a discussion as regards the possibility of reserving places on all Party regional boards for the BSS and it was resolved that the BSS would write to the NEC asking that the Party rules be changed to allow for this.

### **Labour Party Conference**

It is estimated that ethnic minorities may make up more than 20% of the membership of the Party, yet this does not appear to be born out by the composition of those attending Conference. As a first step to increasing representation at Conference it was resolved that the NEC would be asked to consider giving all members of the Executive "ex-officio" status at Conference (whereby Executive members would be entitled to attend Conference by virtue of being Executive members).

While it was recognised that other socialist societies executives do not have the same "ex officio" rights, there is not - for example - a shortage of health professionals in attendance at Conference (Socialist Health Society) or environmentalists (SERA), but there is self evidently a lack of ethnic diversity there.

### **Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP – Labour Party Chair**

Unfortunately I had to miss the last part of the meeting (due to professional commitments), which Hazel Blears MP joined and addressed. I am told that she warmly congratulated everyone present on their election to the Executive and expressed her delight that the BSS was now fully functioning with well over 4000 members. She said the Party would do all it

could to help us ensure the BSS achieves its aims of increasing the participation and representation of ethnic minorities in the Party and beyond.

### **Future meetings and activities**

The next meeting of the Executive will take place on 16 May 2007 in London. There are plans a foot for a BSS Leadership and Deputy Leadership hustings. A BSS Conference is planned for the end of this year in Manchester. The next AGM is planned to take place in March 2009.

The Chair said he intended to set up difference policy working groups, to be headed by Executive members, to work on policy, produce reports and liaise with relevant Party policy commissions, the Party's National Policy Forum and government departments.

### **Chuka Umunna**

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**TMP is an online magazine and forum for the multicultural progressive – left leaning British Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. TMP aims to provide a vehicle through which multicultural progressives can come together and explore how we can build a more fair, free, equal and democratic world. TMP is intended to be of use not only to multicultural progressives, but also to those seeking to canvass their views or who are interested in the multicultural progressive perspective.**