

The Changing of the Praetorian Guard? The Size, Structure and Composition of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and the Enduring Importance of Labour's Trade Unions

CHRISTOPHER MASSEY

Abstract

This article investigates the history of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee. It argues that the party's trade unions, outside a brief period of left-wing NEC control between 1972 and 1981, formed a Praetorian Guard at the Executive around the party leader from Labour's foundation until 1997, and have continued to serve in an enlarged Praetorian Guard since then. From 1900–97, the unions maintained effective control of over half of the NEC's seats. Although widespread changes to the Executive in 1997 shifted the unions into a minority on the Committee, they continued to guard the leader. However, following the election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015, factional disputes led to a breakdown of the Praetorian Guard during heated battles for control of the NEC. Since this period, it is argued, Labour leaders have built new guards in which the unions continue to serve, but which also include soldiers from across the labour movement.

Keywords: Labour Party, National Executive Committee, trade unions, Britain, the left

LABOUR'S NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (NEC) is the governing body of the party and the highest source of internal power for the leadership, trade unions and activists. Control of the NEC is crucial for Labour leaders and competition for places on the Executive is fierce. This article argues that until 1997, the trade unions served as the Praetorian Guard to the party leadership on the NEC, outside a period of left-wing ascendancy between 1972 and 1981. Owing to changes in the Executive's structure in 1997, the unions shifted into a minority on the Committee, but largely continued to guard the leader. However, it is argued that Labour's ideological divides from 2015 and further alterations to the NEC in 2016, 2017 and 2020, have forced Labour leaders to cast their nets more widely in search of a majority at the party's top table.

An NEC alliance between the party leadership and the unions has afforded Labour leaders incredible stability for much of the party's history. The trade unions held a *de facto* majority at the Executive from Labour's foundation until 1997 and held one-third of the

seats thereafter. In 1964, Robert McKenzie claimed that the unions acted as a 'Praetorian Guard' to protect the 'parliamentary party from overt attempts by the "activist" element', but this was challenged in 1978 by Lewis Minkin, at the height of the left's ascendancy inside the party.¹ However, this article argues that the Praetorian Guard reformed by the mid-1980s as the unions returned to their supportive role, shielding the Labour leadership from left-wing constituency opinion until 2015.

Following the election of Jeremy Corbyn, both he and his successor have had to forge alliances from across Labour's internal spectrum. Between 2015 and 2020, prominent trade union representatives at the NEC shifted to the left to form a new alliance with left-wing constituency members at the Committee, as they had in the 1972–81 period, creating a competing centre of power to the parliamentary party.

¹R. McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, London, Mercury Books, 1964, p. 597; L. Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, p. 121.

Consequently, upon his election in 2020, Keir Starmer could no longer rely solely on the unions for a majority. Instead, Starmer and his supporters built a new Praetorian Guard by breaking the left's hold on the constituency section alongside securing the support of some, but by no means all, trade union members at Labour's top table.

Structural changes, 1900–2021

The NEC oversees the direction of the party, the manifesto, and the policy process, whilst sub-committees of the Executive deal with discipline, the rulebook, and finances. As the party's conference usually meets only once per year, the NEC is the key director of day-to-day operations. However, despite the significance of Labour's Executive, examinations of the body's role are mere footnotes in the historiography of the party. Four excellent analyses do extend beyond this. Robert McKenzie, Martin Harrison, Lewis Minkin, and Meg Russell all devote chapters to the composition, membership and work of the Executive, but these, in turn, only investigate the NEC between 1900 and 1953, 1935–59, 1956–60, and 1979–2004, respectively.²

The NEC's structure has changed throughout its history, but at its core remains a mixture of politicians, activists, and senior trade union members. The Committee traces its roots to the Labour Representation Committee's twelve-member Executive in 1900. In Labour's 1918 constitution, the NEC was enshrined as the party's 'administration authority' and its membership was set at twenty-three members: thirteen from affiliated organisations, five constituency representatives, four women, and a treasurer. Although numbers on the NEC have increased since 1918, the broad sections in which members are elected and, crucially, the working majority of the trade unions, remained largely consistent until Tony Blair's 1997 changes as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Between 1900 and 1997 the trade unions controlled the appointment of a majority of

seats on the NEC and from this position served as the Praetorian Guard of the party's leadership. This provided stability for party leaders outside a period of left-wing ascendancy from 1972 to 1981. Between 1929 and 1997, the unions directly appointed twelve union places and indirectly controlled a further six seats (the five-seat women's section and the post of treasurer). These six places were elected at party conference where the union bloc vote was worth 90 per cent of the conference total until 1993, and 70 per cent between 1993 and 1995. This gave the unions a huge majority on the NEC, which featured only twenty-three (1918–29), twenty-five (1929–37), twenty-seven (1937–53), twenty-eight (1953–72), and twenty-nine (1972–97) members, respectively.

The non-union seats, before 1997, comprised five (1918–37) and then seven (from 1937) in a constituency section, one each for the leader (from 1929) and deputy leader (from 1953), one from the socialist societies (from 1929), and one from the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) (from 1972). The constituency section was, from 1937, directly elected by local party delegates. The left held a majority in this section between 1952 and 1963, 1967–89 and 2014 to date.³

The structure of Labour's Executive was radically altered in 1997 under Blair's 'Partnership in Power' reforms. In this package, the NEC was realigned with its membership increasing to thirty-two. The unions lost their majority on the Committee with the deletion of the five-seat women's section and the addition of three seats each for the PLP and Shadow Cabinet, alongside two seats for local government and a seat for the European Parliamentary Labour Party (EPLP). A further seat was assigned in 1997 to the Black Socialist Society when their membership reached 2,500. This occurred in 2007.

From 2015, Corbyn's leadership saw the NEC become a battleground between the party's left and right. Constituency and trade union support for Corbyn's leadership allowed him to build a fragile majority. Yet, tweaks to the Executive's structure were made

²McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, pp. 516–531; M. Harrison, *Trade Unions and the Labour Party since 1945*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1960, pp. 307–323; L. Minkin, *Labour Party Conference*, pp. 242–70; M. Russell, *Building New Labour*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 172–89.

³P. Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Left*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987, p. 207; P. Seyd, *The Labour Left*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1986, p. 63; Labour Party, *Conference Reports*, London, Labour Party, 1952–1990.

Table 1: NEC composition 1900–1997

	1900-01	1901-02	1902-09	1909-12	1912-18	1918-29	1929-37	1937-53	1953-72	1972-97
Trade Unions	7	7	9	11	11	13	12	12	12	12
Trade Councils		1	1	1	1					
Treasurer						1	1	1	1	1
Socialist Societies	5	5	3	3	3					
CLPs						5	5	7	7	7
Women						4	5	5	5	5
Leader							1	1	2	2
Youth										1
TOTAL	12	13	13	15	16	23	25	27	28	29

in 2016 and 2017. In 2016, seats for the Scottish and Welsh Labour Parties increased the size of the Executive to thirty-five, with these appointments wresting control of the NEC away from Corbyn. In 2017, the left reclaimed their grip over the Executive with the addition of one trade union and three constituency places, taking the number of members to thirty-nine. In 2021, as shown in Table 2, the NEC continues to have thirty-nine seats with the EPLP seat replaced by a new disability representative in November 2020.

The NEC before 1970

Despite left-wing dominance of the constituency section in the 1950s and 1960s, a change of attitude in the union section was required to alter the political balance of the NEC and to break the Praetorian Guard. Before 1956, no major trade union leader supported the left until Frank Cousins was elected as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). However, by the mid-1960s, the previously loyal unions were beginning to slowly shift away from the leadership. In the latter half of the decade, left-wing leaders were elected to lead four of the six largest affiliated unions.

The election of left-wing trade union general secretaries did not lead to immediate advances within the NEC's twelve union seats. Most general secretaries held a place on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, which, owing to a party rule, prohibited them from also sitting on the NEC. Moreover, traditionally, eight of the trade union seats were assigned to the same, often large, unions in this period.⁴ Thus, changes within the NEC union section were rare and often involved either the replacement, or retirement, of one small union by another. Significantly for the left, Alex Kitson of the Scottish Commercial Motormen's Union, and Len Forden of the TGWU, were elected to the NEC in 1968. These shifts saw the Praetorian Guard begin to fracture. This was evident in defeats for the Labour leadership's position on nuclear defence, unemployment, the Vietnam War, and incomes policy at party conferences in the 1960s.

⁴Minkin, *Labour Party Conference*, p. 250.

Table 2: NEC composition 1997–2020

	1997-2007	2007-16	2016-17	2017-20	2020-21
Trade Unions	12	12	12	13	13
Treasurer	1	1	1	1	1
Socialist Societies	1	2	2	2	2
CLPs	6	6	6	9	9
Leader	2	2	2	2	2
Youth	1	1	1	1	1
Cabinet	3	3	3	3	3
PLP	3	3	3	3	3
EPLP	1	1	1	1	
Local Govt	2	2	2	2	2
Scottish Labour			1	1	1
Welsh Labour			1	1	1
Disabled members' representative					1
TOTAL	32	33	35	39	39

The NEC 1970–81

The ranks of the Pretorian Guard were breached in the early 1970s when several unions shifted to the left and formed a new alliance with left-wing constituency members at Labour's Executive. In the 1970/71 parliamentary session, only eleven of the twenty-eight members of the Executive identified as left-wing; however, from 1971, shifts in the trade union, women's and constituency sections began to tilt the balance.⁵ The start of a realignment can be seen during Tony Benn's chairpersonship of the NEC across the 1971/72 session of Parliament. Whilst the NEC's overall chair was a rotating position, Benn's year in charge saw him use the chair's casting vote to break significant ties. In March 1972, after four 14:14 ties at the NEC, the left-leaning Ron Hayward was appointed as the party's General Secretary after Benn used his casting vote.⁶

By October 1972, further shifts in the union section ended the party leadership's alliance with the unions. The addition in 1971 of John Forrester, of the Technical Administrative and Supervisory union, to the NEC's union section, and in 1972 of Joan Maynard, of the National Union of Agricultural Workers, to the union-controlled women's section, signified the breakdown of the Praetorian Guard. A further left-wing member, Peter Doyle, joined the Executive with the creation of a new seat for the LPYS in 1972. These changes established a loose majority

for the left. By 1974, the left had secured a stable majority with the victory of Sam McCluskie, of the National Union of Seamen, in the union section. In this period, a newfound, left-wing, majority of NEC constituency members and the unions can be seen through the elections of Ian Mikardo as Chair of the International Committee in 1973, and Tony Benn as the Chair of Home Policy in 1975.

The left's ascendancy continued in September 1975 with the defeat of the Chancellor Denis Healey in the constituency section and his replacement by Eric Heffer. The 1976 NEC elections saw further gains, with Norman Atkinson taking over the treasurership, on the votes of the trade unions, following James Callaghan's election as leader. Furthermore, Heffer was elected as Chair of the Organisation Committee in 1978, giving the left control of a third NEC committee.

The newfound alliance between left-wing trade unions and constituency representatives established the NEC as a competing power centre to Labour's leadership. During these years several motions were passed at the NEC deploring the actions of their own Labour government. However, in policy terms, although Labour made a decisive turn left after the publication of *Labour's Programme 1973*, many radical commitments struggled to find a place in the party's 1974 and 1979 election manifestos owing to the control exerted by the parliamentary leadership independent of the NEC. The use of a leader's veto by Harold Wilson and Callaghan over conference-approved left-wing policies, such as the

⁵Seyd, *Labour Left*, p. 93.

⁶Labour Party, NEC Minutes, 29 March 1972.

nationalisation of the twenty-five leading companies (1974) and the abolition of the House of Lords (1979), created animosity between the leadership and the NEC.

Following Labour's 1979 defeat, the left-wing union and constituency majority on the Executive secured not only a shift in the party's policy position, but also fundamental changes to the party's constitution.⁷ Between 1979 and 1981 the left used its NEC and conference majorities to change Labour's constitution, introducing mandatory reselection and the electoral college, and to shift the party's policy positions behind unilateralism, public ownership and withdrawal from the European Economic Community.

The NEC 1981–86

Between 1981 and 1986 control of the NEC was on a knife-edge. However, by the end of this period, a majority of trade unions had shifted position to take up their posts as part of a renewed Praetorian Guard under Neil Kinnock. In 1980, the left held a staggering majority of 19:10 at the Executive, owing to a left-wing union-constituency alliance, yet this was gradually reversed between October 1981 and 1983.⁸ The unions were again key in the shift in the NEC's ideological position. Increasingly perturbed by the impact of Thatcherism and Labour's own failures after 1979, the unions distanced themselves from internal constitutional debates and sought to bring peace and stability back to the party. By 1979, the major unions were swinging back towards the centre. From late 1981, the St Ermin's Group of right trade unionists began to organise—with a great deal of success—to wrestle control of the NEC from the left. Furthermore, in January 1982, the Peace of Bishop's Stortford—between a wider group of trade union and Labour leaders—drew a line under the party's constitutional changes.

Despite the unions' work, Labour's new leader from 1983, Neil Kinnock, could not count on a reliable NEC majority until the inquiry into the Militant Tendency in Liverpool was completed in February 1986. In

1983, the Executive remained tightly divided, 15:14, in Kinnock's favour. At the 1984 NEC elections, the leadership increased its majority to around 16:13 on most issues, but in 1985 the margin narrowed again to 15:14.⁹ This precarious balance, at both the NEC and the party conference, led to defeats for Kinnock, in particular over one member, one vote (OMOV) for candidate selection in 1984.

By 1986, Kinnock had established clear control of the Executive owing to the split of the party's left into 'hard' and 'soft' factions. Crucially, four soft left NEC members gravitated towards the leadership following the Militant inquiry of 1985–86: Tom Sawyer, Deputy General Secretary of the National Union of Public Employees; Eddie Haigh, TGWU Assistant General Secretary; David Blunkett, leader of Sheffield City Council; and Michael Meacher MP. The two trade unionists played decisive roles on the Liverpool inquiry itself, siding with the right unions over the hard left and allowing a majority report to be created.¹⁰ Following the conclusion of the Militant inquiry in February 1986, Kinnock could count on a majority of 20:9 on most issues against the left. The Praetorian Guard had been rebuilt.

The NEC 1986–97

From 1986 to 1997, the party leadership maintained a stable majority at the NEC through the return of the trade union-party leadership alliance. Across this period, the main alterations to the NEC involved changes to the voting procedure in the constituency section in an attempt to end left-wing dominance within these seats. In 1989, the now leadership-friendly NEC recommended that local parties should ballot their whole membership for the selection of the Committee's constituency representatives. This seemed to have an immediate impact, with the left's Ken Livingstone losing his seat. In February 1990, the requirement for local parties to ballot all members was made mandatory. This again led to a shift to the centre. At the 1992 NEC elections, Heffer

⁹C. Massey, *The Modernisation of the Labour Party*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, p. 56.

¹⁰C. Massey, 'The Labour Party's inquiry into Liverpool District Labour Party and expulsion of nine members of the Militant Tendency, 1985–1986', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, p. 317.

⁷Minkin, *Labour Party Conference*, p. 349.

⁸D. Hayter, *The Fightback of the Traditional Right in the Labour Party 1979 to 1987*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2004, p. 129.

lost his seat on the Executive, whilst Benn was removed in 1993, after thirty-five years' continuous service. At the 1993 Labour Party conference, a national OMOV ballot was established for the constituency section, taking the responsibility for conducting the elections away from local parties. Across these years, the left remained an insignificant minority on the NEC, despite the re-election of Dennis Skinner in 1994 and the election of Diane Abbott in 1995, under the new rules.

In 1989 changes were also made to the youth seat in an effort to further shift power away from the left. From its creation in 1972, the seat reserved for a youth representative at the NEC had been voted for by members of the LPYS and every successful candidate had been linked to the far left Militant Tendency. At the 1988 Labour conference, this rule was changed with trade union support, so that the representative was chosen by an electoral college, weighted one-third each for the LPYS, National Organisation of Labour Students, and the trade unions. Militant's hold on the youth seat was broken at the next NEC election in 1989.

The NEC 1997–98: 'Partnership in Power'

The 1997 'Partnership in Power' reforms rebalanced the NEC and threatened the status of the trade unions. Despite shifts in the Executive's ideological position, the structure of the body remained largely stable from 1972 until 1997 when Labour's General Secretary, Sawyer, launched the Partnership in Power process. These reforms pushed the unions into the minority on the NEC for the first time in the party's history. In the year before Partnership in Power, the unions effectively controlled 62 per cent of the NEC's appointees, whereas after the reforms they controlled only 40.6 per cent. This change meant that, from 1997, Labour leaders would have to build a majority on the NEC between the trade unions and other sections. Sawyer states that 'the whole Partnership in Power package was aimed at uniting the leader, PLP, members, and NEC: which it does providing the unions perform their traditional role.'¹¹ For Blair,

¹¹Lord Tom Sawyer, Interview with author, 2 February 2021.

creating such an alliance was simple: he could count on the two seats reserved for the leadership, alongside his three Shadow Cabinet appointees and three PLP representatives, the union section, and others, to achieve a large majority. However, building such an alliance has proven more difficult for contemporary Labour leaders.

Partnership in Power altered the eligibility criteria for the constituency section, preventing MPs from standing in these seats, and reduced the number of places by one. All seven members of the section in the year prior to the reforms had been parliamentarians. The package also deleted the union-controlled women's section with minimum quotas established for women across the whole NEC, guaranteeing at least twelve seats, created in its place. In addition, the reforms allocated places for the first time to local government (2), the PLP (3), Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet (3) and EPLP (1), increasing the size of the Committee to thirty-two. The alterations to the constituency section gave the left an unexpected boost. In a heated contest, the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance (CLGA) upset the Blair-sponsored Members First slate by winning four of the six constituency places in 1998. Yet, the unions continued to provide a stable majority for the party's leader alongside his own appointees. Indeed, across the 1998/99 session, the four left-wing constituency members were often the only ones to ever oppose the leadership at the Executive.¹²

Other reforms in these years also took powers away from the Executive.¹³ In particular, a new Joint Policy Committee took over the NEC's role as the gatekeeper of policy development and sub-committees of the Executive were granted delegated powers. In addition, Labour's National Policy Forum was repurposed and inherited many of the NEC's policy-making functions, although Executive members were automatically appointed to the NPF.

The NEC 1998–2015

The Partnership in Power reforms stabilised the composition of the NEC until 2016. A

¹²S. Hannah, *A Party with Socialists in it: A History of the Labour Left*, London, Pluto Press, 2008, p. 208.

¹³Russell, *Building New Labour*, p. 183.

minor change was made in 2007 with the addition of a seat, promised in 1997, for the Black Socialist Society (now BAME Labour). This increased the size of the NEC to thirty-three. A small alteration took place in 2001 when, citing high costs, the NEC determined that elections to the body should only take place on a biennial basis.

Ed Miliband's election as Labour leader in 2010 looked to signal broader changes. Miliband won the leadership largely owing to the votes of trade unionists in the electoral college formula. Surprisingly, no alterations to the NEC's structure took place under Miliband, despite his pledge to add seats for the Scottish and Welsh Labour Parties.

The NEC 2015–20

Following Corbyn's election in 2015, Labour's leader could not count on the unwavering support of the party's NEC for the first time since the early 1980s. Despite Corbyn gaining support from six of the eleven trade unions to nominate a candidate in the 2015 leadership campaign, including the two largest affiliates, Unite and UNISON, the trade unions and party leadership alliance no longer held the balance of power. The left-wing background of Corbyn also struggled to sway the traditional right unions to the leader's cause. In addition, he could not press home the advantage of Labour's new left-wing mass membership until the next round of NEC constituency elections in 2016. Consequently, Corbyn had to construct carefully a majority across the unions, constituencies, and his own Shadow Cabinet appointees to capture control of the Executive.

Four key changes in the first year of Corbyn's tenure established a narrow majority for his leadership on the NEC. Firstly, John Healey's appointment to the Shadow Cabinet led to his replacement in the PLP section by Skinner. Secondly, in September 2015, Corbyn removed Hilary Benn from the Executive and installed Rebecca Long-Bailey in one of the three seats reserved for the Shadow Cabinet appointed by the leader. Thirdly, at the 2015 conference, the moderate union Community lost its place on the NEC to the left-wing Baker's Union, after Unite and the GMB switched their support to the latter. Finally, in June 2016, Jon Trickett replaced Angela

Eagle in one of the Shadow Cabinet seats after the latter's resignation in protest over Corbyn's leadership. These four changes shifted power at the NEC towards Corbyn and the left.

The left's majority was in full view in the run-up to the 2016 leadership election. Before the contest, the NEC determined by eighteen votes to fourteen, against the party's own legal advice, that Corbyn had an automatic right, as the sitting leader, to be on the ballot paper without having to gain nominations.¹⁴ However, the leader's majority at the NEC on other issues in 2015/16 was fragile. On the same day, Corbyn was defeated on two key issues, after he left the room to celebrate his place on the 2016 ballot.

Corbyn could not advance on his narrow NEC majority over the course of the next year. Whilst Kate Osamor replaced the moderate Jonathan Ashworth as a Shadow Cabinet representative in October 2016, this gain was offset by George Howarth replacing Skinner in the PLP section. Although the left secured all six constituency places at the 2016 NEC elections, increasing their representation by two from the 2014 result, controversially, an additional two seats were created on the Executive: one frontbench member from the Scottish Parliament and one from the Welsh Senedd. This change was widely seen as an attempt to wrestle control of the NEC away from Corbyn.¹⁵ The Scottish Labour leader, Kezia Dugdale, and the Welsh leader, Carwyn Jones, were both public critics of Corbyn's leadership. The NEC approved the two additional places by the narrow margin of sixteen to fourteen, with the changes confirmed at the 2016 Conference.¹⁶

Between 2017 and 2020 Corbyn built his own Praetorian Guard on the NEC and secured the left's first stable period of

¹⁴A. Black, NEC Update, 15 July 2016; <https://www.annblack.co.uk/nec-update-15-july-2016/> (accessed 8 February 2021).

¹⁵J. Elgot, 'Jeremy Corbyn loses majority support of Labour NEC', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/27/jeremy-corbyn-expected-to-lose-majority-support-of-labour-nec> (accessed 8 February 2021).

¹⁶A. Black, NEC Update, September 2016; <https://www.annblack.co.uk/nec-meetings-september-2016/> (accessed 9 February 2021).

Executive control since 1981. Firstly, in November 2017, Dugdale was replaced on the Executive by the new, pro-Corbyn, Scottish Labour leader, Richard Leonard. Consequently, by late 2017, the NEC finally had a reliable pro-Corbyn, left-wing, majority.¹⁷ Secondly, in September 2017, the NEC unanimously agreed to increase its membership by four, adding three constituency places alongside an additional trade union seat. This took the NEC's membership to thirty-nine. Thirdly, elections for the four additional places were held in January 2018 where the left swept all three of the new constituency seats. However, the additional trade union seat went to the traditional right union, USDAW. Finally, in March 2018, victory for the Momentum-sponsored candidate, Lara McNeil, in the youth representative elections, shifted this seat from moderate to left. Controversially, the rules for this election were changed in the run up to the contest, with the trade unions playing an increased role. The youth electoral college, in place since 1989, was replaced by a 50/50 split between an OMOV ballot of members under 27 years, and the trade unions.

Corbyn's new guard maintained its hold on the NEC at the September 2018 all-out elections where the #JC9 slate won each of the nine constituency places. In December 2018, the balance tipped further towards the leadership with the replacement of Jones by the left-wing Mark Antoniwi in the Welsh Labour NEC seat.

The NEC in 2020/21

The election of Keir Starmer as Labour leader created another scramble for control of the party's Executive. Starmer acted quickly and decisively to build a majority. In addition to Starmer's own seat, in place of Corbyn, his deputy Angela Rayner, who began to distance herself from the former leader during her campaign, replaced John McDonnell. Moreover, Starmer immediately removed the three left-wing Corbyn-supporting Shadow Cabinet MPs from the NEC (Long-Bailey, Jon Trickett and Diane Abbott) and replaced them with soft leftists or centrists (Jim McMahon, Jo Stevens and Jonathan Reynolds).

¹⁷L. Panitch and C. Leys, *Searching for Socialism*, London, Verso, 2020, p. 223.

Starmer solidified his grip at Labour's top table at the April 2020 NEC by-elections. At this contest, his supporters won all three seats available, two in the constituency section and one within the BAME section. Crucially, during these elections, the left slate split significantly between Momentum, CLGA and independent left candidates for the first time since Momentum's foundation in 2015. This allowed the united Progress and Labour First moderate slate to win all three seats available. The importance of this result cannot be understated. In May 2020, Starmer was able to appoint David Evans as the new General Secretary of the Labour Party by twenty votes to sixteen.¹⁸ Without the three by-election victories, it is likely that the left-favoured candidate, Byron Taylor, would have been appointed to Labour's top internal post.

In June 2020, the NEC changed the format for elections to the Committee within the constituency section to the single transferable vote. Left-wing unions Unite, ASLEF, BFAWU and FBU resisted this move, but Starmer's alliance with moderate unions, local government representatives, Shadow Cabinet, and PLP appointees pushed through the changes. At the November 2020 elections, Starmer slightly improved his position on the Executive. Whilst the results for the constituency section were mixed for the new Labour leader, with the left slate picking up five of nine available seats, the election of three candidates from the moderate slate strengthened Starmer's position. The November 2020 results increased the number of Starmer's supporters on the NEC by two. The gain of one seat in the constituency section from the April 2020 by-election position, alongside the return of Carwyn Jones in the Welsh seat, meant that from November 2020, Starmer could count on the loyal support of nineteen individuals alongside, on most occasions, an additional four soft left members, from across the moderate unions, PLP, Shadow Cabinet and local government. This compared to the left's sixteen seats in the constituency section, youth and disability sections, and from left-wing unions.

¹⁸S. Rodgers, 'David Evans named Labour's new general secretary', 26 May 2020; <https://labourlist.org/2020/05/david-evans-named-labours-new-general-secretary/> (accessed 8 February 2021).

Conclusion

Across many changes to the NEC's size, structure and electoral systems, an alliance between senior trade unionists and the party leadership built a Praetorian Guard around the party's leader for ninety of the party's first ninety-seven years. Since major changes to the structure of the Executive in 1997, the unions have moved into the minority at the NEC, albeit a significant one, but have, in the main, continued to support the party's leader, despite the shifts in Labour's ideological position. In general, an alliance of traditional right trade unions and the party leadership has maintained relative stability at the Executive, outside two periods of left-wing ascendancy in 1972–81 and 2015–20. However, even in this latter period, the NEC's shift to the left coincided with, and complemented, a left-wing leadership.

From 2015, the leader's majority on the Executive has had to be more carefully built. With the expansion of the NEC between 2016 and 2020, and the diminution of the union's role since 1997, contemporary Labour leaders have had to manage their way to a majority. Slight changes in the position of some unions, coupled with successes in an expanded

constituency section and other small victories shifted the NEC's position to the left between 2015 and 2020. However, since Corbyn's resignation, the Executive has swung dramatically behind Starmer, owing to his appointments and the fightback of moderate groups in the constituency section.

The trade unions served as the Praetorian Guard of the Labour leadership for the party's first century, apart from a small period of left-wing opposition between 1972 and 1981, and have played a decisive role within an enlarged Praetorian Guard since 1997. Despite changes in the way Labour leaders build majorities at the Executive since Blair's Partnership in Power reforms, a majority of trade unions have continued to provide core stability despite internal factions within the NEC. In the present day, however, the unions no longer guard the leadership on their own; they have been joined by other allies under the careful management of different party leaders.

Biographical note

Christopher Massey is Senior Lecturer in History and Politics at Teesside University.