

Political strategy

CONSULTATION REPORT



Introduction

In 2015, PCS launched a strategic review in response to the new challenges we face. The central aim of the review is to ensure that PCS is reconfigured to operate effectively and provide the organising strategy, industrial tactics, staff structures and finances to grow our membership again, and to fight and win concessions and improvements for our members in this new, hostile environment.

We have already consulted on various aspects of the strategic review during 2015 and 2016 including on our organising and bargaining strategies, membership participation and representation in the workplace.

As a key part of our overall review, it is vital we have every campaigning option at our disposal as part of a modern and flexible political strategy. We have a majority Tory government, and are dealing with the consequences of the vote to leave the EU. But we are also seeing a break-up of the longstanding political consensus over cuts and privatisation by the new anti-austerity Labour leadership, as part of a wider movement against austerity.

In light of this new political context, and as part of our strategic review, we launched a consultation with

branches and groups on all aspects of the union's political strategy in October 2016, as agreed at annual delegate conference in 2016.

The consultation was an open invitation for branches and groups to express views on a range of issue and areas including: parliamentary groups; Make Your Vote Count (MYVC); proportional representation; the devolved areas; standing and supporting candidates; and relations with the Labour party.

It was also an opportunity for branches to share experiences of what has worked, and what could be done better to make our union more effective both locally and nationally.

This report summarises the responses received to the consultation, providing a general overview of the responses, as well as a more in depth look at each of the key areas outlined above.

The responses to the consultation will inform a debate on PCS political strategy at ADC 2017. The NEC's motion to ADC is attached as an annex to this document.



Mark Serwotka
General Secretary



Janice Godrich
President

Overview

The consultation ran from 3 October 2016 to 6 January 2017, following an extension of the original 30 November 2016 closing date. The NEC decided to extend the consultation period in response to requests from regional committees and several branches, and in light of the concurrent CSCS ballot and the demands of that campaign.

Responses to the consultation came largely from branches, with branches in the devolved areas well represented. A number of regional/national committees also submitted responses, including both Scotland and Wales.

The questions that made up the consultation (included throughout) were designed to encourage detailed responses rather than simply yes or no answers, and as a result, the majority of responses included a range of views and opinions, reflecting the discussions and views of the branch. While this means that many questions did not illicit results quantifiable via percentages and figures, it provides a far more nuanced and detailed understanding of the opinions of branches and groups.

The most detailed and varied comments were seen in response to the questions about our relationship with the Labour party. These questions saw the widest range of issues identified, while providing some of the clearest indication of branch opinion.

Political campaigning

Since the election of a Tory government in 2015, the Labour leadership elections and the EU referendum vote, the political context has changed. The consultation sought to ask branches their views on new ways we might adapt our campaigning to better represent our members' interests in this new environment.

The consultation included two general questions on political campaigning, before asking branches to consider key aspects of PCS political campaigning and activity.

Questions

- How do you think participation in political campaigning can be improved?

- What impact has the new political context had on how we campaign?

Summary of responses

The broad and open nature of the questions resulted in a wide range of responses across a number of different topics. Many responses focussed on relations with the Labour party at this stage, as well as under the section of the consultation covering the Labour party (detailed on page 6).

Communications with members was identified by a number of respondents as a key area, with a focus on emails and online as a way to connect with members that could be better utilised. Many respondents expressed a wish to receive more information, including further information options enabling members to explore issues further if required. Accessibility and additional needs were highlighted.

Several respondents highlighted the growing differences in the political situation in the devolved areas, particularly Scotland, and the importance of producing campaigning and other materials that reflect and are relevant to this. This was expressed in more detail in the devolved areas section (see page 5).

The importance of local campaigning, and the ability to tailor materials to the specific needs of local campaigns was also highlighted by respondents.

MYVC

PCS has run a Make Your Vote Count (MYVC) campaign at election times to raise our issues directly with candidates and political parties. The principles of MYVC centre around approaching all parties equally and asking candidates questions based on our members' interests.

As a key component of the union's political campaigning, MYVC has been useful and has had some considerable successes, particularly in the devolved areas. MYVC has enabled us to ask candidates in Scottish parliament, Welsh assembly and general elections in England, Wales and Scotland about their views on our core campaigning issues of the state of public services, job cuts, privatisation, social security and national pay.

The MYVC campaign has aimed to increase the number of members participating in elections. However, since

the election of a Tory government in 2015, the Labour leadership elections and the EU referendum vote, the political context has changed. A key aim of this consultation was to ask branches for their views on new ways of engaging members and increasing participation, in light of the new political context.

Questions

- Considering MYVC, can you give examples of what has worked well? What aspects are less effective?
- What level of participation did your branch have on recent MYVC campaigns?

Summary of responses

There was a consensus in responses that although MYVC has worked and seen some considerable success in the past, it is no longer as relevant or as effective.

Several responses also emphasised the need to look at updating and adapting our campaigning in response to changes in technology and the need to modernise our communications.

Similarly, several responses highlighted how the current MYVC is outdated and in need of review, both in terms of the methods and campaigning tools it uses, and in terms of the current political situation. A large number of responses indicated that MYVC has increasingly suffered from a lack of participation and engagement as a result.

The exception to this was in Scotland, and specifically the independence referendum in 2014, which saw a well-received campaign with relatively high engagement and participation.

A key aim of this consultation was to look at new ways of engaging members and increasing participation, building from the bottom up in line with the aims of our strategic review. Recent experience shows that a more flexible and localised approach to political campaigning would work best, while also maintaining strong national campaigning. Many responses expressed support for campaigning on issues specific to local and devolved areas, with PCS industrial aims at the heart of such campaigning.

Parliamentary groups

Since their inception our parliamentary groups, both in

Westminster and in the devolved administrations, have been an invaluable political tool for the union, providing us with ways of getting our interests raised in parliament, including interventions by MPs, AMs, MSPs and MLAs, questions to governments and public bodies, and the use of tools like Early Day Motions.

Questions

- Would your branch or group be interested in having access to the PCS parliamentary group report?
- How regularly and in what format do you feel this information could be presented?
- Has your branch had experience of working with our parliamentary groups?
- How can the working relationship between parliamentary groups and branches improve?

Summary of responses

It is clear from the responses that our parliamentary groups could benefit from more involvement from branches informing their work.

There was an overwhelming desire from branches to receive more information about the groups, and know more about potentially engaging with the groups. Almost three quarters of respondents stated they would like to receive the parliamentary group report, with the majority of these wanting this through quarterly email updates.

More information about our parliamentary groups being made available to branches may benefit our campaigning and engagement with members.

There was a lack of knowledge about the parliamentary groups, particularly the Westminster group, from many respondents, with the majority of branches not having had any direct engagement or experience. Branches in Wales and Scotland were more likely to have engaged with the groups in their respective devolved administrations and these experiences were reported positively.

There were very positive responses from those branches who had engaged or had knowledge of the Westminster group. This engagement had primarily come through specific campaigns, for example the Land Registry campaigns.

Devolved nations

Our union represents members in all nations and regions of the UK. Some of our members working in devolved areas are covered by UK-wide terms and conditions, but others have entirely separate arrangements. Others still have some terms set at UK level, while others are devolved.

As part of our wider strategic review we are reviewing our structures, bargaining arrangements and campaigning strategy in the devolved areas. This consultation considered our political strategy, and is in conjunction with similar work focusing on reviewing PCS structures in the devolved areas.

Changes brought about by devolution have already had a considerable impact on our political campaigning, and it is clear that in the coming years, particularly post EU referendum, we are likely to see more devolution and these issues are going to intensify.

Questions

- How might PCS adapt its broad political campaigning to reflect the significant strength of the SNP over all other political parties?
- How aware and involved is your branch in the work of the devolved parliamentary groups?
- How can political institutions in devolved areas be used?

Summary of responses

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of answers to these questions came from respondents in the devolved areas. Respondents were generally happy with how things currently work but many responses from Scottish branches emphasised the need for more recognition of political and policy differences.

The responses to the consultation emphasised that the political and industrial situation in the devolved administrations is quite different from the situation in Westminster controlled bargaining areas and that this must be recognised in all our campaigning materials.

Several respondents highlighted the differences in the political situation in the Scotland in terms of the dominance of the SNP and the unpopularity of Labour.

A large number of responses focused on the need for

campaigning and other materials to reflect the differences in both the political climate and the legislative one, and to focus on and be more specific in the materials produced.

Responses emphasised how recognition of differences goes beyond the political makeup of the devolved administrations, and must be shaped by policy and legislative differences. For example, in devolved administrations, protections have been achieved over facility time and check-off.

Several responses referenced devolution in relation to PCS structures. This is covered under ongoing work by the NEC devolved areas committee with further information and engagement planned.

Proportional representation

Under the current voting system, the number of seats gained by a party is disproportionate to the number of votes won. The Electoral Reform Society described the 2015 election “the most disproportionate result in British history”, with huge differences in the number of seats won by parties and their share of the vote. In addition, different votes have different weight with voters in ‘safe seats’ having less sway than those in marginal seats.

Recent political developments have put PR back at the centre of the political debate. The fragmentation of the old two-party system, the rise of the SNP and changes in the Labour Party mean it is more important than ever that we have a proportional system that reflects and represents the scale of opposition to austerity, privatisation and cuts in the country.

Since the general election, the government’s majority has allowed it to pursue austerity and attack the trade union movement, despite winning with the votes of just 24.4% of the electorate. Westminster looks increasingly out of touch, as millions of people have used proportional electoral systems for years in the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, European elections and for the London Assembly.

Questions

- How aware are members in your branch of PCS’s policy on PR?
- Does your branch have any views on how the union can do more to promote our policy on PR?

- Given that we already have some form of PR in the devolved nations, what can be done to use this experience in a UK-wide campaign?

Summary of responses

The majority of responses were aware of PCS's policy on PR, but had little additional knowledge. There was evidence that while many reps were knowledgeable about PR, PCS policy had not always filtered down to membership level. A lack of information, and campaign tools specifically focussed on the issue were cited as a key reason for this.

A majority of responses expressed support for the policy and a desire for more information. Several highlighted the current political situation as an opportunity to increase campaigning around the issue and a desire to become involved.

In 2015 PCS was successful with a motion (with NAPO) to TUC Congress that called on the General Council to launch a campaign for PR for Westminster elections to bring it in line with most other elections in the UK. Respondents were not always aware of our campaigning to date, and the need for a renewed PR campaign was clear.

Responses from Scotland (and to a lesser extent Wales) were understandably more detailed given the direct experience of PR in all of the devolved areas. These experiences have generally been positive, and a belief that this led to increased engagement was expressed. Several respondents representing Scottish branches raised some concerns around the reality of the current situation there, with a dominant single party (SNP) despite the system being designed to prevent this. The specific types of PR and the preferred system was an area that saw a range of views expressed.

Relations with the Labour party

This section considered key aspects of our relationship with the Labour party in the context of recent changes to the political climate. PCS campaigns politically, but we are non-affiliated and politically independent of any political party.

Our starting point in how to engage with the current political climate is our democratically agreed policies on campaigning for the alternative to austerity and for decent jobs, pay, pensions and public services.

PCS has always been anti-austerity. We have always been consistent in promoting the interests of our members in our political campaigning, fighting against cuts and for an economic alternative. Previously none of the major national parties opposed austerity- Labour agreed with most cuts and did not challenge the ideology of austerity.

The Labour party now has an anti-austerity leader, and has seen a huge influx of new members as part of a broader political shift. At ADC 2016, Jeremy Corbyn proposed to restore national pay negotiations in the civil service and pledged to oppose further cuts to pay and redundancy terms, as well as to repeal the Trade Union Act and improve workers' rights.

The current situation presents the union with an opportunity to promote our anti-austerity policies and engage with the Labour party leadership on key issues including decent public services, jobs and pay in ways that were not possible before.

Questions

- What are your branches views on the issues that come with affiliation to the Labour party?
- Notwithstanding the above, how can we maximise support for the anti-cuts policies of Corbyn and McDonnell?
- Does the union need a different approach in the devolved nations?

Summary of responses

These questions saw a large number of responses, particularly to the first question, with a large majority against affiliation to the Labour party.

Reasons against affiliation were consistent with previous discussions on the issue, and reflected the debate at ADC 2016. The most frequently cited reason against affiliation was the issue of importance of neutrality, linked to the union's historic independence from any political party.

Another key reason highlighted by many respondents was the political situation in Scotland and the impact affiliation could have on our membership there, with branches making it clear a significant numbers of our members are supportive of the SNP. The cost, and relative benefit of affiliation was also listed by several respondents as a concern.

While responses did not support affiliation with Labour, the majority of respondents were happy with the current level of support for the Labour leadership, citing the NEC's statement of support for Corbyn's leadership as an example, with a number of respondents suggesting the union could do more.

Several responses emphasised the potential to further the union's industrial aims through the union's long-standing relationships with the current Labour party leadership.

While many responses demonstrated a generally supportive attitude to working with the current labour party leadership, some made a distinction with the Labour party itself.

Standing and supporting candidates

Members voted in a ballot in 2012 for a policy that gives the union the authority to stand or support candidates, in exceptional circumstances, where it could advance campaigns to defend members' jobs, pay, pensions and public services.

We have not implemented this policy to date. Given recent changes in the political context – notably the development of an anti-austerity Labour leadership and wider political movement – this consultation asked branches to consider whether changes are needed to ensure this aspect of our political campaigning still works to advance the industrial interests of our union and its members.

It is clear that this policy was developed in a very different political context to the one we are now in – one in which all the leaders of the main parties supported cuts to our members' jobs, pay and terms and conditions and supported austerity to some extent. The consultation asked branches what these changes could mean for the policy.

Question

- How does standing and supporting candidates fit into the new political context?

Summary of responses

Responses to this question saw the broadest range of views, with little consensus. There was a slightly lower response rate to the question compared to previous questions.

Some responses expressed opposition to the policy itself, citing issues of political neutrality or raising concerns about how it could be interpreted. Many of those opposed to it highlighted concerns it would be used to support the Labour party as distinct from, and as opposed to, individual Labour candidates. On the other hand, some responses indicated support for the full policy, with the largest number of responses expressing support for supporting candidates, separate from standing candidates, in the context of the current political situation. Of those who expressed support, the need to adapt the policy to the current political context was emphasised, as was the desire to keep it flexible in light of potential future political changes.

Approximately 50% of respondents indicated either support for the current policy of both standing and supporting candidates, or indicated support just for supporting candidates but not standing them. 33% indicated they did not support the policy at all.

Conclusion

The consultation on PCS political strategy was an opportunity for branches to share experiences and thoughts on how to make our union more effective both locally and nationally. The responses to the consultation offer a unique opportunity to help inform and develop our political strategy to ensure we have every campaigning option at our disposal as part of a modern and flexible political strategy that fits the new political environment.

The NEC fully discussed the responses to the consultation, and agreed to publish this report to branches. The report is intended to facilitate a discussion at ADC 2017. Branches are urged to read the report and circulate it as widely as possible in advance of conference.

Annex: NEC motion to ADC 2017

Conference notes that ADC 2016 instructed the NEC to conduct a consultation within the union on political strategy as part of the strategic review.

Conference welcomes the responses to the political strategy consultation from a wide range of branches and regional committees. The consultation focused on six key areas: parliamentary groups; Make Your Vote Count (MYVC); proportional representation; the devolved areas; relations with the Labour party; and standing and supporting candidates.

Conference notes that the consultation responses welcomed the success of the PCS Westminster parliamentary group and the engagement of many branches with the group. Conference recognises the clear demand from branches for more information on its work on behalf of members.

Conference notes many consultation responses recognised that while PCS's Make Your Vote Count campaigning has been successful in engaging with political parties and candidates, and has been imitated by other unions, the campaign is no longer as effective in the current political climate and that it needs to be more responsive to local issues.

Conference notes the positive responses to the union's policy on proportional representation and the call for more information on PR systems.

Conference notes that the NEC's Devolved Areas subcommittee is consulting on structures and policy making processes for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Conference notes that, while affiliation to the Labour party was clearly opposed by the majority of respondents to the consultation, Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the Labour party was welcomed by many as an opportunity for PCS to promote our alternatives to austerity and exert more influence on Labour's policy development.

Conference welcomes Corbyn's commitment to restore national pay bargaining in the civil service, and to ending the 1% public sector pay cap, and notes that John McDonnell, as shadow chancellor, systematically proposes alternatives to the Tories' cuts in public spending.

Conference agrees that PCS members' interests are best served by a supportive working relationship with the current labour leadership in opposing the Tory government's policies.

Conference notes that the consultation produced a variety of responses to the union's current policy of standing or supporting candidates in exceptional circumstances when it would help our campaigning work over local office closures, cuts, and members' jobs.

Conference instructs the NEC to:

- Circulate the parliamentary group's quarterly report to branches in an accessible format,
- Ensure MYVC is relevant to changing circumstances, and prioritise flexible campaigning that enables branches to engage politically at a local level,
- Develop a new national campaign on PR and produce new campaign materials for members,
- Ensure campaigns materials reflect the changing political context in the devolved areas appropriately,
- Continue our support for Corbyn's and McDonnell's anti-austerity policies as part of our campaign against the Tory government's cuts and attacks on trade unions.

Conference agrees to reaffirm the policy of standing or supporting candidates in line with the principles endorsed by the 2012 membership ballot and retain it as a campaigning tool in the current changing political circumstances.