

# Labour Conference 2021 Fringe: Labour's Policy Roadmap: Stronger Together for a Green and Digital Future

SERA: Labour's Environment Campaign and Labour Business

11:00, 28th September 2021

## Panelists:

- Ed Miliband, Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Dr Melanie Smallman, Co-Chair, SERA
- Hamish Sandison, Chair, Labour Business
- Sue Ferns, Senior Deputy General Secretary, Prospect and Green Jobs Taskforce
- Maria Exall, CW Union
- Anneliese Dodds MP, Chair of Stronger Together (Chair)

## Overview

This discussion focused on digitalisation, targets towards net zero, digital skills and Labour Reports surrounding digitalisation.

## Opening Remarks

Anneliese Dodds MP, Chair of Stronger Together, opened the session by telling the delegates that Labour believed that if the UK took advantage of opportunities surrounding green technologies a 'just' transition to net zero would be possible.

Dr Melanie Smallman, Co-Chair, SERA, said that she was at an event celebrating the offshore wind farm that was powering 300,000 homes, equivalent to half of Sussex. She said this was the story of the future and should soon be a normal everyday story.

Maria Exall, CW Union, explained the CW Union's approach to the transition to net zero and a digital future. She said the union believed that state ownership of communication technologies was a necessity to move toward net zero. She said the privatisation of the telecoms network held back economic development and created unfair outcomes. The small tweaks and short-term thinking held back development of the network and was not benefiting private users and commercial businesses.

Hamish Sandison, Chair of Labour Business, said he was delighted to hear the Labour party tell voters that it was a pro-business party as well as pro-union.

Ed Miliband, Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, thanked Anneliese Dodds' review for being long-term in its view.

## A 'just' transition

On the report, Smallman said that without the recommendations in the report, a 'just' transition would be impossible. She said this situation had not happened by accident; it was down to a Conservative government that "did not care." She said that the transition to net zero was unfair, unmanaged and unplanned and noted that it was the exact same in reference to the transition to a digital future.

Sue Ferns, Senior Deputy General Secretary, Prospect and Green Jobs Taskforce, agreed that the transition to a digital future needed to be just and fair.

Miliband made three points about the green digital future: it was important to stress the opportunity that the response to the climate emergency could provide; there was no plan from the Government, alongside businesses in every area and sector; the transition to net zero had to be fair and not exclude or punish working class people.

### **Surveillance**

Smallman questioned how the UK could transition to a digital future without becoming a surveillance state, noting that data harvesting technology would lend itself to an authoritarian state. She added that e-currencies would soon contribute up to 20 percent of the UK carbon footprint.

On the digital agenda, Ferns said that digital skills were not just for people who worked in digital sectors. She questioned how employees were being surveilled whilst they were working from home, telling the delegates that her union had found that a large proportion of employees were being surveilled at home and that the union was now looking into data protection laws which could prevent this from happening.

Exall said that the digital divide affected people's life choices and that access to essential services had decided important things during the pandemic even as far as educational outcomes. She said the technological development posed questions about life values and if the wrong decisions were taken on development you risked making tech monsters.

Exall raised her concerns about the race to the bottom between firms, about who could produce the cheapest product and said that often that was not what customers wanted. She said the benefits of technology were not being felt, because people were now working longer hours.

### **Labour's strategy**

Ferns called for an accelerated development of a range of technologies built on a "proper industrial strategy" which must focus on increasing UK content in green technologies. She said ambitions should be centered around deployment, design, production and manufacturing. She said that the cost of production had been driven down too much and that there was no longer any funding for jobs and skills training for her members.

Miliband committed to a 'Labour Zero Carbon Transition Plan' which would go into every sector and investigate how the transition to net zero could be just and fair for everyone involved. He said the Party could seize this green and digital agenda through the policy review.

Sandison said there was an opportunity to put flesh on the bones of slogans such as being pro-business. He added that the Labour Party needed to engage with businesses of all sizes to really bring pro-business policies about.

### **Reflections on the report**

Sandison said the report, 'Labour Works', was good because it pointed to places in the country where Labour was in power and celebrated the work Labour was doing to tackle issues. He exemplified where the Labour party in Wales had banned fracking as well as codifying a Social Partnership Act, which required the Government to consult businesses and trade unions before rolling out policies that would affect them.

Sandison reflected on the 'Britain in 2030' report which highlighted the digital divide and said Labour Business strongly supported the motion on the digital divide. He said the divide was about job opportunities, because there were jobs which were inaccessible because of some people's access to digital technology, notably rural broadband accessibility. He said Labour Business had been working with banks on financial inclusion, which focused on ensuring that people, no matter their socio-economic background, had access to cash.

## Q&A

Asked about partnerships with business, Miliband reflected on the steel industry. He noted the massive challenges the industry faced and said Labour would partner with the steel sector to help it transition. He stated that the Government had given warm words but were prepared to let it wither away. He suggested it was necessary to have a permanent public engagement assembly to bring the public to the Government, allowing them to participate in the policy around the transition.