



Conferences 2015

Connect's round-up of the
2015 Party Conferences

 connectcommunications

conference round-up

As the Tories gathered in Manchester for their first post-victory conference since 1992 some predicted a jubilant atmosphere. Instead the conference had a calm and serious feel to it, with the Prime Minister and Chancellor keen to convey a sense of a government getting back down to work. Last year the Tories were high, geed up for the coming election – as one journalist told us, “we can see you’re in good spirits, but we think you drunk the kool-aid”. In contrast the 2015 conference moved at a steady pace to the drumbeat of Security-Stability-Opportunity.

The Chancellor, burnishing his credentials for the top-job, unveiled bold policies such as the devolution of business rates to local councils. In a calculated manoeuvre to signal the Tory pitch to the centre, he appointed a prominent Labour ‘Blairite’, Lord Adonis as head of the newly created National Infrastructure Commission. Boris Johnson remains the conference darling, sounding a dissenting voice on tax credits – an issue that is

making some MPs anxious – and a harder line than Cameron’s on the EU. Theresa May’s tough talking on immigration might have pushed the right buttons for some delegates but went down badly in the media, who portrayed it as a tilt to the right and out of keeping with the general tone of the conference.

As the party moves from a surprise election victory to a phase of implementation this was a conference for a political force that doesn’t want to lose power any time soon. Tory excitement at winning is tempered by the knowledge that unpopular decisions lie ahead. They know that they remain unliked by many voters, and are still sensitive to the charge of being the ‘nasty’ party. Most opponents in Manchester were peaceful but publicity focussed on more extreme elements who hurled abuse and eggs at conference attendees. The Tories in contrast struck a less confrontational tone this week than in some previous years.

Brighton 2015 was always going to be a big week for Labour. Having lost the general election, and lost it badly, then electing Labour’s biggest rebel as their new Leader, this was their chance to put his pitch to the country. In a Leader’s Speech delivered under a slogan of “straight talking, honest politics”, Corbyn focussed heavily on foreign affairs. He walked a delicate tightrope between responding to the left-wing idealism of his supporters and the pragmatism of some in his Shadow Cabinet and wider party who hold fundamentally different views on key issues.

Trident was the clear exception as Corbyn made it very clear that he will oppose renewal, a position he followed up on the Today Programme, when he said he would never use nuclear weapons. It would have been unthinkable in the days of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown for a Shadow Defence Secretary to directly contradict the Leader, but that is what we heard in

Brighton. There was a similar novelty in the Shadow Foreign Secretary setting out Foreign Policy with seemingly more authority, on issues like the future of the EU, than the party Leader. Hilary Benn’s decision to stick his neck out may explain why he was quietly removed from Labour’s ruling National Executive Committee by the new Leader.

Centrist big beasts like Tristram Hunt and Chuka Umunna toured the fringe – with Chuka telling a packed out event that voters had a right to know what Labour stood for. Both left the conference early, along with Liz Kendall.

The conference wasn’t filled with the thousands of new members and supporters who had backed Jeremy Corbyn. It may be different in Liverpool 2016, where the stage could be set for an ideological showdown, but this year, there was a greater degree of calm and unity than anyone would have expected.

Given that it was billed as the “biggest Liberal Democrat conference ever”, this was a surprisingly quiet affair. In fact, it was biggest only in the number of members who attended. Lobbyists and exhibitors were thin on the ground and only a couple of stands in the exhibitor hall were taken by organisations not trying to sell things to constituency offices.

The membership were remarkably upbeat considering the terrible election results for them on 7 May. Nick Clegg received a standing ovation ahead of what might be his last conference speech, one that was filled to the brim with the Lib Dem’s new mantra: look at what the country has lost without us in government. Speeches throughout conference were full of

praise for the work that the Lib Dems did in the Coalition, and how the Conservatives were now undoing that good work. It’s an argument that even those in the party who opposed the Coalition, those who spent Spring Conference saying the party would be better off out, could get behind.

In truth it was the plight of the other parties that created much of the cheer. Delegates mocked in equal measure Labour for electing Jeremy Corbyn and the Prime Minister for the revelations about his alleged university porcine liaisons. But while the former heroes of the Coalition popped their heads in, it felt like it will be a long time before this conference is taken seriously by the world outside the party.





David Cameron used his speech to set out his agenda for the next five years. It was a programme from a Prime Minister conscious of his political mortality as he set out a vision for the rest of the decade.

Cameron's aim, he said, is to build a nation that is "decent, sensible and reasonable... and [the British people] just want a government that supports the vulnerable, backs those who do the right thing and helps them get on in life." Cameron sees himself as a "man with a plan" but he eschews the ideological and rhetorical flourishes of Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher.

The Prime Minister declared war on poverty, pitching to the liberal left to say that he would tackle inequality and discrimination wherever he finds it. Unusually for a Tory leader he even called for more effective rehabilitation in prisons. He

made clear his frustration with the EU, but he will be leading the campaign to stay in when it comes. On extremism Cameron struck an authoritarian tone, saying that "we need to confront – and I mean really confront extremism." Other policies announced will herald a "national crusade" to deliver housing and improvements to the care system.

The speech was strategic rather than rousing, workmanlike to a fault. But its tone conceals a programme that is large-scale and ambitious. Steve Richards of *The Independent* was just one left-wing commentator (in a group that included George Eaton and even Owen Jones) to praise the speech: "Cameron is a much underrated leader – he leads a government of the radical right and manages to convince some that he is on the left: Genius". For Cameron now knows that it is history, not the electorate, that will make the next judgement on his leadership.



Jeremy Corbyn's speech was full of the leftwing buzzwords that catapulted him to the Leadership. He was resolutely anti-austerity, spoke a great deal about poverty in Britain, and majored on human rights issues in his foreign policy discourse.

He spoke with trademark self-deprecation and humour, and deliberately avoided self-congratulation or triumphalism. He still seems as surprised as everyone else that he is where he is: at the helm of Her Majesty's loyal opposition despite his views and track record. Corbyn spoke more to the activists in the Hall than voters in the country. As such, this was not a 'breakthrough' speech but it did enthuse his supporters who gave him a prolonged standing ovation. The new leader

showed he is not going to compromise on his strongly held beliefs, but he was careful not to provoke opponents. The delivery was not slick and the speech suffered from being too long. However, there was no defining banana skin - even the picture of Corbyn with a marrow confirmed an allotment-loving image that he won't try to change.

There are two messages for public affairs. Firstly, Labour policy development will not be the same again - it will be very much more open in the future. Speaking to a frontbencher is probably less important now than having a Twitter or Facebook campaign that connects to the grassroots. Second, Labour's lurch to the left is not a temporary aberration but a new course that may survive the tests of the key elections next May.



Tim Farron's first speech to the Liberal Democrat Party Conference as Leader was well-received in the hall and beyond. Like Jeremy Corbyn in Brighton it was a speech designed to rally the party faithful, but it also struck a chord with commentators. His manner is part cheeky chap, part passionate preacher – Farron was at his best when

speaking movingly of the need for a credible response to the refugee crisis.

Although Farron is seen as on the left of his party, he resisted the temptation to put distance between his party and the Coalition, going out of his way to praise Nick Clegg. Claiming the heritage of the old Liberal Party as a middle way between the "two old parties", the speech had echoes of the SDP/Alliance's attacks on the extreme left and Thatcherite right in the 1980s.

There were few radical policy announcements as Farron sought to introduce himself to the wider public and present himself as a moderate. In a pitch to disillusioned Labour supporters he made clear that government remained his objective - 'you cannot change people's lives from the glory of self-indulgent opposition' – a not-too-subtle attack on the idealism of Corbyn's supporters. He also drew on the experience of Coalition to paint the Liberal Democrats as a force for moderation on the Tories in power. Beyond the wider sell of the Liberal Party there were specific pledges on new housing, transport infrastructure and renewable energy.

Farron certainly passed the test – impressing hardened political journalists with his mixture of the personal and political. He sounded like a man with a mission – but given the election result it's one hell of a mission.



the issues

ECONOMY		
David Cameron said that the Conservatives had delivered “economic success” and will continue to cut public spending in order to abolish the deficit, and plan to run a budget surplus by 2020.	Labour is now the “only anti-austerity party” and will abolish the deficit without public sector spending cuts. National Investment Bank to fund infrastructure.	Committed to abolishing the deficit by 2017-18, but “not on the backs of the poor”.
WORK		
David Cameron declared that the Government would ensure that “work always pays better than welfare” with the New National Living Wage rising to £9 per hour by 2020.	Will implement “a proper Living Wage for all”, and expand statutory maternity and paternity pay to self-employed people.	Tim Farron said Liberal Democrats are “on the side of business” and announced a Start Up Allowance for new businesses worth over £2,500 over 6 months.
WELFARE		
Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith said the limit on child tax credit to two children and the benefits cap is “responsible and fair.”	Labour will make the case for “an efficient and compassionate Welfare State” by opposing the Government’s Welfare Bill “line by cruel line”.	Oppose the Government’s planned cuts to tax credits and housing benefit.
PENSIONS/OLDER PEOPLE		
Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt said that a “rapidly ageing population” made integrated health and social care “vital”, but that the Better Care Fund meant it was “finally becoming a reality”.	Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Owen Smith will investigate the Government’s new pension freedoms.	Funding for social care is “vital” and local authorities should be free to raise additional funds to ease social care funding pressures.
EDUCATION AND SKILLS		
The government will open 500 new free schools and make “local authorities running schools a thing of the past.” Schools will be expected to provide childcare for a “full working day”.	No more free schools would be opened under a Labour Government, and academy chains would be made more accountable to local authorities.	Families should be able to take children out of school during term-time.
HEALTH		
Jeremy Hunt declared his intention to make the Conservatives “the party of the NHS” with the introduction of 7 day NHS services. Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne said there will be no cuts to NHS funding.	No more private sector provision in the NHS and want to see more emphasis on mental health and social care services.	A new tax to fund the NHS, with local councils able to raise additional funds for local health and social care services.
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND DEVOLUTION		
George Osborne re-iterated his commitment to the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ devolution project, and announced that local government will be able to keep all income received from business rates.	Pledged to end “Britain’s top down politics” by reducing centralisation and encouraging the voices of “real people” to be heard.	They would give councils borrowing power to fund housebuilding, and the ability to raise taxes to ease local health and care pressures.



HOUSING

David Cameron pledged a “national crusade” to get homes built and announced that the Government will replace the requirement of property developers to build affordable homes to rent and instead will be able to offer affordable homes to rent and buy. He said the policy would turn into “Generation Rent to Generation Buy”.

Proposed a large council house building programme with a target of 100,000 new council houses and housing association homes per year by 2020.

Set a target of building 300,000 homes per year, creating 10 new garden cities and establishing a housing investment bank.

INTERNATIONAL

David Cameron said that Britain “must play its part” in the defeat of ISIS. He also pledged to “resist ever closer union” with the EU and would concentrate on “Britain’s prosperity and Britain’s influence”.

Labour will support giving UK air assistance to the Iraqi Government in the fight against ISIS, but oppose British boots on the ground in either Iraq or Syria. Jeremy Corbyn said called for a new UN Security Council resolution to find a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

Will campaign to keep Britain in EU and advocate giving 16 year olds a vote in the referendum. Defended the transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP) with the US. Will vote against renewing Trident and establish a policy committee to debate further disarmament

HOME AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

Home Secretary, Theresa May said high migration made a “cohesive society” impossible and the economic benefit of high immigration “is close to zero”. David Cameron announced that the Government will maintain its 2% commitment to defence spending.

Jeremy Corbyn is against renewal of Trident, but Shadow Defence Secretary, Maria Eagle and Shadow Foreign Secretary, Hilary Benn are in favour. Shadow Home Secretary, Andy Burnham said Labour would oppose cuts of more than 10% to the Police.

The UK should opt into the EU-wide quota system and take 17,000 refugees. Oppose the replacement of the Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights.

INFRASTRUCTURE

George Osborne said that the Conservative Party are “the builders” and will “shake Britain out of its inertia” with the creation of a new independent National Infrastructure Commission, chaired by former Labour Minister, Lord Adonis.

Labour would turn the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills into a “powerful economic development department”, which would be in charge of public investment and infrastructure planning. The railways should be returned to public ownership.

Britain should invest in “the best rail links in Europe” and make long term capital investments in infrastructure to help businesses and grow the economy.

TECHNOLOGY

Every household will be guaranteed access to basic broadband, and 95% of the UK will have access to high speed broadband by 2017.

Money currently spent on maintaining Trident should be invested in “in high technology engineering”.

Will invest in UK-wide superfast broadband.



conference whispers

Since David Cameron let it slip that the 2015 election would be his last as leader, talk of his successor has rumbled below the surface. It stayed below ground for the most part in Manchester – though there were occasional huddles of lobbyists and activists plotting how to get on board with Team Osborne. Nicky Morgan's assertion that there should be a female candidate set tongues wagging, but it seems clear she was not referring to Theresa May, who did not have as good a week as she had back in 2014.

Tony Gallagher, the new editor of The Sun, worked the new crop of MPs at News UK's party – a far lower key event than in the pre-Leveson era, and both The Telegraph and The Spectator secured attendance of Cabinet Ministers and celebrities; a quietly smug Lynton Crosby could also be seen enjoying the praise of

delegates for his focused and effective election campaign.

The attacks on party members outside the conference unnerved attendees, but the egg-throwing and untargeted torrents of abuse were little more than a distraction by Monday morning. And the party-goers seemed better behaved than in years gone by – an older, more considered crowd. One delegate, however, lived up to expectations of folly when inadvertently taking an Uber all the way back to London and running up a £311 fare in the process. This being Tory Conference, the bar chat consensus was that this was a fair price for a private car at only £1.40 a mile.

As Jeremy Corbyn toured 36 conference receptions, including Labour Friends of Israel where he failed to utter the word "Israel", he usually got a much colder welcome than Tom Watson did – even though Watson rarely spoke. At the reception hosted by trade union Community, the biggest cheer of the night was for Kezia Dugdale, the youthful and dynamic leader of Scottish Labour.

It is quite normal at Labour conference to find left-wingers outside the conference site handing out political briefings telling delegates which way to vote on key issues being decided at conference. This year, Labour First were handing out flyers asking delegates to back moderate policy positions – handing out over 2,000 on the Sunday alone. The Labour First fringe event was so well attended, it spilled out onto the sunny street of Brighton in scenes reminiscent of the Corbyn's leadership rallies.

After a discussion about Trident, one young Labour activist was surprised that Jeremy Corbyn gave them his business card, complete with direct email address and mobile phone number, and asked them to get in touch with more information. That's quite the mobile number to have in the weeks and months ahead.

And perhaps Labour will consider replacing the Red Flag, which traditionally closes conference, with Andy Burnham covering the Beatles at the now-infamous Mirror party. Or perhaps not! It was strange to see some of the high fliers of Labour's Shadow Cabinet from the last Parliament looking decidedly out of sorts. The likes of Chuka Umunna, Tristram Hunt, Emma Reynolds and Rachel Reeves now find themselves out of place in the new old Labour Party. They will probably be back one day, but for now it looks like Jeremy Corbyn isn't going anywhere.

Given that there are just 8 MPs remaining, gossip and rumour were low on the ground. For all the talk of possible defections from Labour to the Lib Dems, the only defection rumour that had any legs was Baroness Tonge, who sits as an Independent Lib Dem in the House of Lords following the removal of the party whip for her comments that Israel "would not last forever". Her announcement that she would decide by Christmas whether she would join Corbyn's Labour were reportedly met with cheering in the conference bar when it broke.

Much of the talk amongst delegates was on Trident and whether the voting membership would rebel against Tim Farron and vote in favour of scrapping Trident altogether. Farron's motion to

commit the party to voting against the like-for-like replacement and establish a policy committee to consider the party's future policy on the nuclear deterrent. It was a heated debate, with even Shirley Williams taking the stage, but in the end it was a decisive victory for the new Leader on a subject close to the party's heart.

The role of conference in policy formation was also a hot topic now that there was no Coalition or Quad to think about. Party policy was occasionally at odds with the leadership during their time in Government, including on airport expansion. How Tim Farron manages these potential differences will be key to his success, both as a leader of the Lib Dems but also as someone trying to rebuild a credible party of government.



connect at the conferences

Connect Communications had a big presence at all the main party conferences in 2015, building on our reputation as the leading communications agency working with clients on conference stands, delivering fringe meetings, dinners and contact programmes.

Our consultants were in Bournemouth for the **Liberal Democrat conference**, supporting clients in meetings with Lib Dem peers and their few remaining MPs. For many clients the Lib Dems remain a vital force in the House of Lords, capable of offering considered scrutiny to legislation and a real opportunity for policy debate. The now relatively relaxed atmosphere of conference still provides a rare chance for clients to have a candid conversation, and Lib Dems in 2015 was no exception.

Now becoming an **annual fixture in Labour conference-goers diaries**, Connect hosted a Leader's Speech watch party for 250 invited guests to watch Jeremy Corbyn's first major speech to the country. Projecting the speech onto a giant screen, our guests heard insight and analysis from Connect's leadership team Gill Morris and Andy Sawford. Attendees were asked to rate Corbyn's speech as either 'hit or miss' and the majority felt it had been a 'miss'.

The Policing Fringe organised by Connect is a popular event on the conference fringe. This year our partners were the Police Federation, Police Superintendents' Association and the National Police Chiefs' Council. The fringe meetings heard from Andy Burnham, the new Shadow Home Secretary, Jack Dromey, Shadow Policing Minister and Mike Penning, Minister for Policing at the Labour and Tory conferences. They discussed the changing nature of demand on policing, how services could be delivered differently in the future, and the relationship between the police and the public.

Connect brought together **nine housing associations to hold four events** across the party conferences, including the two packed **Housing Fringes**, to champion the role of social housing in delivering new homes and driving innovation. At the height of the National Housing Federation deal on voluntary Right to Buy with DCLG, the events heard from the entire frontbench housing team of John Healey, Roberta Blackman-Woods, Teresa Pearce and Matt Pennycook at Labour conference; and Housing Minister Brandon Lewis, Deputy Mayor of London Richard Blakeway and 10 Downing Street policy adviser Alex Morton at Conservative conference.

Connect supported Pimlico Plumbers to exhibit at Conservative Conference, as they launched a new report on apprenticeships by founder-chairman Charlie Mullins. Pimlico apprentices Ashley, Jodie and James invited MPs and delegates to take the **Pimlico Plumbing Challenge** against the clock, while teaching them how to undertake a plumbing task. Chancellor George Osborne stopped by the stand to talk to the apprentices about their work, and other visitors included Teresa May, Sajid Javid, Nick Boles and Matt Hancock.

And, when we were not organising and attending meetings, fringes or dinners, we were out and about taking in the conference atmosphere and gathering insights from our networks among Conservatives, Labour, the Lib Dems and – for the first time – at the SNP's conference in Aberdeen.

To find out more about how we can help you with your conference programme and events in 2015 and 2016 contact us on:
conferences@connectpa.co.uk



connect at the conferences



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20 October 2015 **Inside an MP's office**

Do you understand the inner workings of an MP's office? Our Chief Executive Andy Sawford, former MP for Corby, and Rob Dale – author of a new book on the life of a parliamentary researcher will give you top tips on how to build support and lobby effectively.

22 October 2015 **Working with the SNP**

What does the arrival of 56 SNP MPs in Westminster really mean for you? Using expert trainers and commentators this course will give you an overview of how to work with the SNP in Westminster and Scotland.

27 October 2015 **Introduction to public affairs**

An essential course for those new to public affairs, as well as for anyone working in policy-making or government who needs a greater understanding of how decisions are made. Our popular course provides an excellent overview of UK political decision-making and how it works.

10 November 2015 **Working with the Conservatives**

There are many challenges on the horizon for the Conservative Government. This Connect training course will give you insight and analysis on the current state of the party and how to lobby and influence the future direction of policy and legislation.

17 November 2015 **Everything you want to know about Jeremy Corbyn but were afraid to ask**

Jeremy Corbyn is a new force in British politics. Learn from our expert trainers about the man behind the movement and how you can work with the Labour parliamentary party to raise your profile and shape the debate.

Training for you

In addition to the programme of training courses hosted by Connect, we are always happy to design bespoke training sessions delivered by our public affairs specialists. If you would like to find out more about how we can help you and your team understand the political landscape in the UK and share practical advice on delivering public affairs please contact Charles Pitt at c.pitt@connectpa.co.uk