

Tory party conference 2019

The effigies hanging off the bridge were Conservatives apparently, the banner above suggesting that 130,000 Conservatives should be killed to 'level the playing field', welcome to Manchester and the 2019 Conservative party conference.

Leaving the hotel to make the short walk to the conference centre on the first day I tuck my all too obvious blue pass into my coat and pull my hat down. I don't want to be attacked, I don't want to have food flung at me, I don't want to be hanging from a bridge or anywhere else, I just want to go to my party conference to see what I can find out about those things that interest me. I have spent hours going through the conference programme marking up the talks I want to attend – here's a quick pop quiz, which of the following are actually from the Tory Party Conference and which have I taken from other party conferences (answer at the end – don't cheat).

Is Welfare Reform working? Poverty and hunger in modern Britain.

The pathway to net zero carbon emissions

Facing our future. Hearing young people's voices in the fightback against plastic pollution.

Challenging 'Islamophobia'

Can we make a just transition to a green economy?

Inclusive tourism for disabled people.

Supporting mental health in the built environment

Building a kinder generation. The impact of Social media on young people, crime and animal welfare.

British Blue Planet: protecting our marine life.

How to break the link between plastic and poverty.

Is it time for social care to be funded like the NHS?

Care in Crisis? The state of elderly social care.

Saving lives by ending rough sleeping.

Come out for LGBT: Building Britain's leadership on LGBT equality.

Annoyingly a number of the things I want to attend are on at the same time – it's frustrating and even more so when, due to the refusal of Parliament to recess, a number of changes are made last minute so I dash off to a meeting to find it has been rescheduled. The whole recess issue strikes me as being a bit petty, especially as it then became a veiled threat to go for a motion of no confidence when the Conservatives are all elsewhere – in the end no more than a threat but a mean trick to play on delegates, on the local businesses, on the exhibitors (including many charities) and on the speakers.

Although I was mentally prepared for Mancunian flan flinging it didn't materialise – first day and not an objector in sight – lots of police, lots of security (sad that it is necessary in this day and age) but no XR activists, no EU campaigners of either persuasion...maybe it was the rain. Throughout the entire conference there were very few protesters – my favourite was a Brexiteer with a message that leaving the EU was ordained by God and was in Revelations, he was dressed with a certain

eccentric style which reflected his political beliefs. On the penultimate day I encountered a small band of very polite and lovely environmentalists on the steps of the Friends meeting house – good for them – and a noisy protest that turned out to be less about the party conference and more about the 70th year of China under communist rule allied to the current unrest in Hong Kong. Just goes to show that we are not the only game in town...on the last day the protesters were WASPIs with whom I have a deal of sympathy. All in all a low turnout on the socialist worker/momentum front....I wonder if Andy Burnham had a word?

The opening of the conference was a solid enough affair in the main hall – I wasn't totally sure what to expect, who would be there – would anyone be there? Not only was it business as usual it was smooth and efficient, on time and on message. There is a kind of counterpoint to the apparent chaos of Boris, a steely intent and conviction that was not present previously – probably because Mrs May, for all her robotic repetition, never convinced – seemed to be always wavering in the middle ground, hoping that everyone would stop being so unreasonable and join her in the centre. Clearly that didn't work so instead we have gone Boris or Bust; the poker player who has bet the lot, the house, the car, the kids and his everlasting soul hasn't gone as all in as BJ. The leit motif of the conference is "Get Brexit Done" as though it were some sort of chore; a salad course that must be got through before the steak and chips, a cucumber sandwich before the chocolate cake. Not only is everyone bored to tears with the whole thing, we are becoming increasingly fed up with the paralysis of Parliament. As a councillor I want them to get on with the public spending review, the green paper on adult social care, investment in schools and hospitals ... I don't think I can cope with many more pointless debates of endlessly rehashed argument – as Boris puts it 'the supermasticated subject of Brexit', enough is enough. The 'Get Brexit Done' exhortation is indeed the caveat to a tantalising prospect of major investment in schools, the NHS and police – there are other priorities that need to get into the top billing as well – the environment, Adult Social Care funding – we will all have our favourites – but the problem is that the legislative timetable has been infected with Brexcosis. We've got to push through to push on.

There was a good speech from James Cleverly about how he sees the current state of Brexit as a challenge to democracy. I am puzzled why everyone finds this so complicated – we have a sovereign Parliament (or should have), our MPs are representatives, not delegates, and therefore the decision taking resides with them. They decided, overwhelmingly, to abdicate their responsibility to 'the people' when they voted to support a referendum on the question of Europe. They then emphasised the 'once in a lifetime' nature of the referendum and they pledged to uphold the result. The government campaigned to remain, they spent a fair amount of public money to do so and yet, despite this, they lost the vote and the rest, as they say, is history. I do not understand how we now have political parties (the Lib Dems were particularly vociferous in their support of the referendum) who now intend to set aside the result of the vote because they disagree with it and all of a sudden they want to reclaim the Parliamentary authority that they had given up. No wonder it's such a Horlicks.

I was really touched by one young man in the audience who spoke to the panel, he had been brought up in care (I had a chat with him later and found out that he had been through 120 different placements during his childhood), he is a young black man, quietly spoken, reserved and is now in legal training. Wow. There are so many amazing life stories here – he could have blamed his circumstances, he could have become a lost soul, a statistic of failure but because he totally gets the basic notion that he, and he alone, is responsible for the choices he makes here he is – addressing

the Conservative Party Conference, inspiring delegates and, as James Cleverly told him, he has a bright future.

The Conservatives don't shout about this nearly enough – our ranks are not all titled privilege but real merit - Sajid Javid, Michael Gove, Shaun Bailey, Ester McVey – Thatcher's children, the embodiment of social mobility; Sajid Javid, the son of a bus driver, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We are the masters of our fate indeed.

The Conservative Women's Organisation is celebrating a 100 yrs anniversary – it is the oldest politically affiliated women's group in the world, Mrs Pankhurst was a Conservative Parliamentary candidate, we had the first woman MP (Nancy Astor 1919) and we have had two women Prime Ministers all without any all women shortlists. We just look for talent, ability, hard work – we are not ticking boxes.

Boris Johnson addresses the hall – he is well received. He is a great self-parody – umming and then rushing headlong into a sentence structure which seems to be a cul de sac before he pulls off some semantic trick at the last moment and turns it to advantage. He is the Tommy Cooper of oration, the deliberate fumbler who nevertheless pulls off the trick after a bit of redirection and distraction. I wonder if that isn't what the whole plan is – Boris on stage, nothing up this sleeve, nothing up this sleeve, and from this hat (there is no hat), from this invisible hat I will produce (drum roll), not a rabbit (drum roll), not a dove (drum roll) but a Brontosaurus, yes! An extinct and large beast of the Jurassic era will appear – what's that you say? How? Aha, well, ooh what's that up there? Is it a dragon? Look!

Having said that, I think he is entertaining, certainly better than Mrs May, his insouciance is attractive, he enthuses about Gigabit broadband but clearly has as much understanding as I do of the technology that he finally describes as 'superinformative vermicelli', he makes a joke about launching Corbyn into space as the Communist Cosmonaut and tells us of the potential for clean and limitless energy from a company in Oxfordshire that is on the verge of producing scalable fusion (he later qualifies this by saying it is a wide verge but that they are on the verge of the verge). Actually it is quite amazing what is going on in Oxfordshire at Tokamak Energy and typical of both Boris and of Conservatives that we move swiftly from the problem to what might be part of a solution. I am not saying that we shouldn't cycle more, eat less meat, use less plastic and so forth but the real solution to the climate change crisis is more likely to be in the form of technology in partnership with business and industry bringing a new age into being.

A brief peroration if I may – it is of little or no use to 'admire the problem' we have got to move on from endlessly restating that the end of the world is nigh, that the sky is falling on our heads, that Brexit will lead us to catastrophe, that it's all going horribly wrong and start to come up with SMART solutions; my new acronym de jour SMART – Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound. So. Why not look at some of the amazing technological solutions that are on the verge of the verge – Tokamak is anticipating adding clean, abundant and cheap energy into the grid by 2030.

Did you know....

That the first world leader to recognise the dangers of climate change was Margaret Thatcher? In her 1989 address to the UN (6 years before the first report of the IPCC) she said

What we are now doing to the world, by degrading the land surfaces, by polluting the waters and by adding greenhouse gases to the air at an unprecedented rate—all this is new in the experience of the

earth. It is mankind and his activities which are changing the environment of our planet in damaging and dangerous ways.

There is a strong focus on the environment and on developing countries, the work being done to educate girls and prevent Ebola but, of course, Brexit is never far away. I am always happy to be surprised and I must admit that Steven Barclay's speech contained some unexpected things in his list of 'despite Brexit' things....so, 'despite Brexit'..

We have 700 more EU doctors working in the NHS than we did before the referendum, we have the highest levels of inward investment in Europe, London has overtaken NY as the global leader in FinTec.

Another thing that Boris mentioned, more than once in fact, is that membership of the EU has prevented the British government from banning live export (export of live farm animals, often over long distances to slaughter on the continent – they arrive traumatized, often with injury) in his speech at the end of conference he said (if we leave) 'we can ban the cruel shipment of live animals that has offended the British people for so long' – it has certainly offended me and I would love to see it brought to an end.

Another effect of EU membership is that we can't remove VAT on solar panels and – of course – our ability to restructure the CAP (common agricultural policy) is limited. If we can't change the CAP how do we bring about the radical changes to agriculture needed to get to net zero by 2050? If we do not get back our territorial fishing waters how do we start to fish sustainably?

I attended a talk at Conservative Environmental Network on reducing waste (food waste in particular) – there is some very good work here, take a look at company shop

<https://www.companysshopgroup.co.uk/>

which diverts surplus goods from waste to use. The NFU were represented as were Nestle, and SUSTAIN charities. There was general agreement that there needs to be a whole chain solution, more collaboration, better labelling.

Did you know.....

The largest ever urban growing (greening) project was in London – guess who the mayor was....Boris. Perhaps that is why he wanted the garden bridge – grow more stuff! He is also bus mad so, if he can stay at number 10 for more than a few months, I anticipate some strong measures to support bus travel. His father is not the only environmentalist in the Johnson household I suspect.

I also attended a talk on the funding for adult social care – Jacob Rees Mogg was supposed to be there but I assume he had to be in London due to the refusal to recess, he is a great champion of the rights of those with adult social care needs. Anyway – the overall feeling was that there is a fundamental misalignment between health and social care (I have some sympathy for this view, we are working on it), it was suggested that the cost to the state of bringing parity between health and social care is 11bn – social care is not just about the elderly, we have increasing numbers of adults with learning disability due to great advances in medical care. Camilla Cavendish took the line that it wasn't just about money but about managing demand, living healthier, prevention, holistic care – I don't see it as an either...or. There did seem to be a consensus developing that a state backed solution will have to be found and it is important to depoliticize the issue to make any progress. Sadly, due to the Parliamentary time being taken up with the Groundhog Day debate on Brexit, the Green paper hasn't appeared yet. There was praise from Age UK for the energetic way Jacob Rees Mogg has taken this issue on and Boris has taken it up. It really needs to be sorted. The stress on local authorities was acknowledged and the principle that social care should be free at the point of use to remove the burden on the individual and share it with society.

Here's another pop quiz to end this report –

Before he led the British Union of Fascists Oswald Mosley was a leading figure in which political party?

So, the conference passed off without major incident, the atmosphere was upbeat, there were more young delegates than ever before and they brought an energy and enthusiasm that was brilliant. As the Prime Minister made his way from reception to reception the chant of 'Boris, Boris' shook the ceiling lights. The West Midlands reception was bursting with this vitality, Andy Street, Sajid Javid all greeted with rowdy cheers.

There is a renewal, something bold and brave. As the young man I met who had been in care told me 'I am responsible for what I do. It's up to me' – he is indeed the master of his fate, the captain of his soul and we can all learn from him.

Hope you liked this account – it's just my personal thoughts and observations, if you take issue with it, that's fine, stick it in the bin. I am not going to enter into online banter with anyone who wants to say rude things.

Elissa

Pop quiz answers:

All the talk titles are from the 2019 Conservative Party Conference

Oswald Moseley was the Chancellor for the Duchy of Lancaster in the Labour government 1929 – 1931. His ideas for nationalisation of major industry, rebuilding the economy by public spending and protectionist tariffs were blocked by the cabinet. After the war he founded the Union Party and called for a single nation state across the continent of Europe.