

Impressions of Labour Party Conference 2017

By Brian Ingham

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The Best for Decades!

After an absence of many years, I re-joined the Labour Party to help get Jeremy Corbyn elected as leader. Two years later I was the delegate for the Beckenham Constituency Labour Party at the Labour Party Conference. Jeremy Corbyn had emerged from two years of turbulence. Most Labour MPs tried to stampede him out of office. After they failed he then led them into the 2017 election and all those MPs expected it to be a disaster. Political pundits predicted a crushing Tories majority. They were all wrong: the Tories lost their majority, Labour gained 32 seats in the biggest swing to Labour since 1945 and Corbyn's right-wing critics within the Party were silenced.

And then we had this historic conference. For anyone who has been waiting for a Labour party that genuinely seeks to place itself alongside ordinary working people, articulating their hopes and fears and putting forward a programme that strives to really meet their interests, I believe that this was the best conference by far for years. Decades even!

There were more delegates than for a long time. In his 2001-2007 Diaries, Tony Benn spoke of the Labour party being more like a trade fair. There was still a lot of that, but this party was far more characterised by the ferment of discussion and debate taking place. Inside the conference hall, largely there was unity around a shared understanding the class nature of society and of the unharnesses and horrors that this society has inflicted upon the majority of the people.

The slogan "For the Many, not the few." was reiterated by many both ordinary delegates and Shadow Cabinet members. Sometimes repeated conference slogans can begin to sound like clichés. This was not the case in Brighton because of the facts and figures and the analysis to which the slogans were attached. Outside the conference hall there were a staggering array of discussions and debates under way, much of it under the umbrella of "The World Transformed", which grew out of Momentum. It's not an exaggeration to say that both inside and outside there was a vibrant energetic mood.

John McDonnell spoke from the rostrum in defence of striking workers. Who can remember a Labour Shadow Chancellor doing that! You'd have to be quite old. There was also massive support for Dave Ward, CWU General Secretary, who asked for support for postal workers should they vote for strike action (and they have!), and for Dave Prentis, Unison General Secretary who asked for support "if the time comes for strike action."

There has not been a conference in decades when Shadow Cabinet members and the leader of the Labour Party put forward such a string of promises of reforms. And to such popular acclaim! The conference built upon and went further than the election manifesto.

Here are just some of the pledges:

- An end to the public sector pay cap
- No more PFI contracts
- Existing PFI contracts will be brought in-house
- 3,000 more fire-fighters to be hired
- No more outsourcing to the private sector
- Enquiries to be set up into Orgreave and Shrewsbury Building workers injustices
- No tuition fees for college courses
- Rent controls to stop exorbitant rents
- Undeveloped land held by private developers to be taxed
- Councils to have to win ballots of tenants and leaseholders before any redevelopment
- People on redeveloped land will get new homes in the same area & on no worse terms
- Tory anti-trade union laws to be reversed
- Utilities to be renationalised
- Royal Mail to be renationalised
- British Rail to be renationalised

Those leaders, like Tom Watson, who had been associated with the attempt to drive Corbyn from office, liberally littered their speeches with his name to show that they were now “on message”.

The issue of anti-Semitism has been used to whip up discontent against the Labour leadership. I think this issue may now recede significantly. A new all-embracing rule was adopted to make absolutely clear Labour’s opposition to all forms of discrimination. Also from the floor of the conference there were passionate speeches making it clear that opposition to the policies of the Israeli state does not amount to anti-Semitism. A new organisation was set up at the conference at a huge meeting, to give an authoritative alternative to the voices that have been making the running on this issue. When he spoke, Jeremy Corbyn was adamant in his opposition to anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination. He was also clear about Palestine: “Let’s give real support to end the oppression of the Palestinian people....”

The conference was actually more radical than the NEC. There were two successful reference back motions on sections of the National Policy Forum Report. One told the NEC to think again over schools: there was no mention in the report as to how schools would be brought back under local authority control. The other told the NEC to think again over the NHS. The Report had said, “... we would repeal the Health and Social Care Act, making the NHS *the preferred provider*....” The delegate moving the reference back, quite correctly, wanted the NHS to be the *only* provider! The delegate also said, *No profit* should be made out of the NHS, when speaking against the clause, “We will introduce a new legal duty to make sure that *excessive private profits* are not made out of the NHS at the expense of patient care.”

The National Policy Forum Report is a legacy of the Blair/Brown years when discussion and debate around resolutions was curtailed in favour of a more stage-managed conference.

Lots of debating time is also now given to seminar sessions where delegates can go along and listen to ministers and perhaps put a question. This gives a veneer of democratic listening, while actually taking away time for genuine debate and decision-making by delegates. Resolutions have to be “contemporary”. This word is then interpreted by the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC). 120 succeeded this year but 65 failed! This filtering process then goes further with delegates voting for only *eight subjects* they want to prioritise for debate. Resolutions in those subject areas are then composited. Most emergency resolutions were also ruled out by the CAC. This body may prove more sympathetic to motions from affiliated organisations next year as the left’s slate was successful in the elections for the CAC 2018.

One feature that was very clear this year was that there were two clear slates and very few votes were cast for candidates outside of these slates. The left, organised through Momentum, was massively successful. This shows what can happen when the left is united. Momentum may not be the forum for political discussion and debate that many on the left would like but it has risen to meet the challenge of internal Party elections and elections. Momentum has significant weaknesses, but in conference it was effective for this narrow but key purpose.

Many in the party wanted the conference to take action to stop the Party’s full-time officials suspending and investigating members. Conference didn’t move in this direction and if any delegate had tried to move action against the General Secretary, Iain McNicol, the move would probably have back-fired, given the sentiment for unity. However, one delegate did manage to raise a question in the final statement, asking how much was spent on the Compliance Unit. We were told that the figures were hidden in other figures. This is certainly a question that individual CLPs should pursue with the new NEC. It shows that the right-wing officials are still there and pose a potential problem, though they may well now show far more loyalty to Corbyn, now that his leadership is beyond dispute.

Rules change was another area where the old regime introduced an anti-democratic filter. Any rules amendment proposed by an affiliated organisation or CLP must wait one year before appearing before the conference. This is supposedly to give to leadership time to see if the amendment poses any legal problems, as if a lawyer couldn’t check this out in the period between the amendment arriving and the conference taking place.

The NEC can put amendments forward, and this year some important rule amendments from the NEC were implemented. There will be *three more constituency representatives* on the NEC and *one more from affiliated organisations*. This will undoubtedly weaken the hand of those opposed to the leadership. When the next leadership contest takes place only 10 per cent support from MPs and Euro MPs is now needed for candidates to appear on the ballot paper. This was an NEC compromise because the original ‘McDonnell amendment’ had called for only 5 per cent, but amendments along these lines were dropped.

There is to be a review into the rules and structures of the party and it is possible that the rule may be strengthened in this process. We will see. The leadership is clearly still making some concessions to the Parliamentary Labour Party to try to have unity. Nevertheless, the

changes that were introduced do mark a weakening of the hold of the right within the party.

The overall mood of the conference was as if Labour had actually won the election. There was certainly an expectation, that should an election take place any time soon, Labour would win and win well.

The Tories are undoubtedly in crisis at present. Their neo-liberal agenda has been pursued with arrogant certainty by the Tories and New Labour since the Thatcher years. It is now discredited, especially among younger voters. This conference offered a decisive turn to a Keynesian alternative. John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn spoke of establishing Regional Development Banks as part of a National Industrial Strategy and a National Transformation Fund of £250bn to build homes, transport, and energy and digital infrastructure.

When Harold Wilson came into power in the 1960s after 13 years of Tory rule, promising to transform Britain in the “White heat of a technological revolution”. He set up an Economic Ministry to develop a national plan of production. Under world-wide economic pressures, those high hopes were dashed and the ministry was wound up. Reforms were turned into counter-reforms, with controls on wage increases and an attempt to introduce controls on trade unions.

A Corbyn Labour government, attempting to implement its programme of reforms, with a national plan to drive forward its industrial strategy, will inevitably face similar economic storms. At the conference the Shadow Minister for rail spoke of the industry today being “corporate welfare on an industrial scale”. He also said that re-nationalisation was required because, “You cannot control what you do not own.” That is certainly true of the railways, but it is also true for the economy as a whole. If the major monopolies that govern our lives remain in private hands then at key moments they will put enormous pressure on even the most left Labour government to abandon its programme. This is what Syriza found out in Greece.

This conference, therefore, marked a turning point. Labour is now united behind a radical programme of action. Those who would have wanted to sabotage the leadership have largely retreated into silence, at least for now. It was a buoyant conference, full of hope. I felt privileged to be a delegate and proud of the commitments that were agreed. This programme will inspire millions of people: it can take labour to a decisive electoral victory. But, should big business try to sabotage the programme in any way, the leadership and the mass of members should be ready for that Labour government to take the next necessary steps, to take real control of the decisive levers of the whole economy.