

Labour Party Conference 2017

Oh, Jeremy Corbyn

This week, 11,000 people descended on Brighton for what was billed as the biggest Labour Party Conference in recent years. The mood was buoyant, boosted by the better than expected result in the polls in June. FTI Consulting were there to soak up the atmosphere.

“It is Labour that is now setting the agenda and winning the arguments for a new common sense about the direction our country should take”

Jeremy Corbyn

27 September 2017

#Corbynmania

Didn't you hear, Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour party won the election in June? At least, that's how it felt in an upbeat Brighton this week. The conference closed with the Labour leader addressing a hall filled with a party that has changed beyond recognition in the last few years. Greeted as a hero, the chants of “Oh, Jeremy Corbyn” that had followed him around all week – in the hall, at fringe events and at late night parties – once again rang around as he addressed delegates kitted out in scarves and T-shirts bearing his name and image. Cultish? Some might say.

It was Corbyn's conference. In contrast to the past two years, gone were the frequent sightings of a Labour leader walking around unaccompanied seemingly without direction. Off the cuff remarks at fringe events were replaced with repeated key

messages. With his power consolidated and no sign of any challenge, for the first time his conference presence resembled, well, a leader.

This confidence was carried through to his 75 minute address to conference which was delivered with competence and clarity and complete control of his audience. Flanked by some of those MPs most recently elected, the speech covered a whole myriad of topics and announcements from housing and rent control to moving the centre-ground of politics. The overall message was clear: Jeremy Corbyn is here to stay and in his opinion, Labour is a government in waiting.

A conference divided

Away from the conference hall, not everyone was in camp Corbyn. With the new focus of the conference being on delegates and members, the Parliamentary Labour Party was noticeably absent, not just in the hall where their speaking slots had been cut and their reserved seating removed (so that some MPs were turned away at the door once the hall had reached capacity), but also at fringe meetings and events. Many of Labour's moderate MPs were in Brighton for just one day if at all, their absence an indication that they have accepted the status quo and are no longer hopeful of a successful plot to undo the Left's takeover, at least for the time being. A further indication of this acceptance was the number of party and parliamentary staff actively looking for jobs, worried that if Corbyn's team succeed in taking out General Secretary Ian MacNicol, their jobs will become even more difficult than at present.

For their part, the increased discipline seen in Corbyn's conference activity could also be seen in the Shadow Cabinet who were more controlled in their messaging, adapting to different audiences, depending on who was in the room.

Of course the most significant division was evident in the second year of an entirely separate conference. Momentum's "The World Transformed" featured politics, art, music and culture across nine different venues. Events such as "Acid Corbynism" received disdain from those at the real conference, but the huge numbers who flocked to the rival event should be taken seriously by politicians on all sides. If Corbyn is going to have an actual victory in the polls, it is these people attracted to the "new politics" who could be behind it.

The return of business?

A big deal had been made about the bigger presence of corporates at this year's conference, a sign that the business community were starting to take the party seriously. There was a keenness to ensure that even their less friendly business policies were messaged to the business community appropriately, sometimes to the extent that they weren't even mentioned.

Despite this, the main conference hotel bars were quieter at night than in the Blair/Brown/Miliband years, in part because the lefty delegates prefer to congregate

elsewhere but also because corporate numbers are still down.

The business community may be right to be cautious of the Labour leadership: while Shadow Cabinet members claimed to be open to business community engagement at the Labour Business Day and reception, those same individuals were quick to contradict themselves as soon as they were in front of a wider membership audience. Corbyn's comments regarding a run on the pound will also cause alarm.

Such is the skepticism that the party is open to constructive business engagement there was even a rumour that the number of commercial passes will be restricted next year.

Brexit, what Brexit?

One of the biggest controversies to take place over the week – apart from the appalling spate of anti-Semitic rhetoric on the fringes together with the hounding of BBC presenter Laura Kuenssberg – was the decision to not hold a vote on Brexit on the conference floor. Despite this, the topic was omnipresent, raising its head in most debates and fringe events.

For his part, Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer did make a speech on the topic but it contained little to no substance and certainly won't have satisfied the man who spent each day stood outside the conference centre draped in European flags. There are whispers that behind the stage Starmer is waiting for the right time to maneuver the party into a softer position but for now Labour are presenting themselves as having a more flexible and realistic approach to transitional arrangements whilst not minded to support calls for a further referendum.

There may be trouble ahead

Corbyn and his team exhibited a newfound discipline in Brighton this year and they will be pleased with how this week has gone, particularly with regard to the mainstream media cut through they have achieved. Indeed, the avoidance of a Brexit vote saved them from a bun-fight on the floor of conference hall.

For his part, the Labour leader was spotted at breakfast reading both the Guardian and The Daily Mail, so he at least can't be accused of residing in a bubble.

However, there may be signs of trouble ahead. Rumblings of a split in his core team over whether power in the party or the country should be the chief aim smell faintly of the Leader/Treasury divide of the Blair/Brown years. The “newer, kinder” politics will struggle to survive if it can’t even thrive in the leader’s office. For now the serious amity that will plague Theresa May and her Cabinet at next week’s Conservative Party Conference has abated in Labour, but it would be prudent to remember that nothing is ever permanent in politics.

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FTI Consulting will also be at Conservative Party Conference in Manchester. Please get in touch if you would like to meet.



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