

Report Labour Party Conference 2009

The atmosphere at the conference on the Sunday was very tense, no one was sure what to expect.

The talk was all about Gordon Browns leadership, many delegates were worried that whatever happened, Labour was on course for defeat at next year's election. The majority feeling was that Labour had no choice but to stick with Gordon.

Right from the start, speaker after speaker especially Government Ministers attacked the Tories and their leader, David Cameron. They mocked his failure to group issues around the credit crunch and last years global banking collapse.

Many, including Harriet Harman, Alistair Darling and Ed Balls cited many world and financial leaders who had heaped praise on Gordon Brown and his handling of the economy.

Peter Mandleson who (like him or loathe him) gave the best speech to Conference. His attack on David Cameron flawed decision to state that the recession should run its course and that Cameron would have done nothing was particularly derided Mandleson twisted the knife stating that all the G20 leaders had backed Browns Fiscal Stimulus Policy to help small businesses to borrow money and stay trading. Again and again stating that this was the financial decision of the century and that Cameron had made the wrong call. The performance was theatrical in its delivery managing to heap praise on Gordon Brown as a world statesman and deriding Cameron at a disaster waiting to happen.

The Leaders Speech

To put this speech into context, it is definitely the last speech before the next election. It is also possibly the last speech from a Labour Prime Minister for a considerable time should Labour loose the next election. The opinion polls are rather volatile at the moment but one this is clear, the volatility revolves around the size of the Tory lead, so the pressure on the Prime Minister was enormous.

The leaders speech over the last several conferences has become hyped up to fever pitch, the atmosphere is always electric with the enforced queues for security everybody waiting in line, the time then comes for the doors to open, everyone rushes in to their seats. A video then starts with the theme being labour leaders and their achievements in the past to the present leader all adding to the emotion of the occasion. This is followed by a repeating montage of Labours achievements since 1997 accompanied by loud music.

Eventually the moment arrives as the great leader and his wife are paraded into the conference chamber. We all stand and cheer as the entourage rises to the platform.

The event is now up and running, the leaders' wife takes to the stage with further cheers and ovations.

She will support her man, he loves this country and she loves him. (All too much like an American convention style for me.)

Then he begins the speech which is good, well crafted and excellently delivered and contains some new policies, help for teenage single mothers, help for the elderly to stay in their own homes when they have deteriorating conditions, referendum on a new voting system (single transferable vote) in the next Parliament and more financial help in the recession. With the virtues of the Health Service followed by a constant attack on the Tories.

A good speech not a great speech probably enough to keep him in place until the election. The standing ovation lasted 10 minutes then we all filed out to discuss it.

Most opinions were similar to my own but many loved it but a significant amount still remained unconvinced..... Only time will tell.

James Stribley gave a fantastic speech on the lack of progress made with the Remploy situation. He stated the Remploy members were ready and willing to work and the Government must procure more contracts for its factories. He delivered the speech from the heart and received the only real spontaneous standing ovation at the conference.

Paul Kenny spoke excellently in an emergency resolution on the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Following the defeat of the Tamil Tigers thousands of civilians had been herded like animals into concentration camps where many had allegedly been slaughtered. Both James and Paul's resolutions were passed by conference.

Without going on too long, Ed Balls spoke well and so did Alan Johnson in fact most ministers gave a good account of themselves. The conference closed with Defence and Foreign Affairs on the agenda - nothing much new in these areas. Harriet Harmon closed proceedings with a good speech hammering away at many of the same points made all week.

Summing up, the Conference was reasonable; to say it was successful would go too far. There are too many dark clouds on the horizon to worry about but the leadership will be happy and there were no surprises and the media were not too hostile with one exception. The Sun newspaper came up and declared its support for the Tories, this upset many of the Labour hierarchy including Paul Mandleson who was supposed to have had an almighty row

with the Sun's Political Editor (a storm in a tea cup). Tony Woodley, the leader of Unite ripped The Sun up on stage. This was great theatre and I must admit I gave a cheer and waved my fist.... all good fun. The truth is that Murdoch the Sun's Proprietor has always been right wing and there's an old saying "that if you lay down with dogs you will get fleas". Unfortunately in Labour's case with the Murdoch press this is true with too many compromises to the neo liberal right.

The Conference Fringe

There were many fringe meetings at Brighton this year, my highlights were all South American causes. Firstly, I attended a meeting of the Justice for Columbia campaign which was very enlightening. Columbia is one of the most dangerous places for Trade Unionists in the world. A moving speech in Spanish was given by a women trade union official from Columbia whose father, brother and two cousins had been murdered by anti trade union forces working within the Columbian Government. Their crime, trying to organise working people to fight the disgraceful terms and conditions they are forced to work for the US backed rich land owners.

On a similar theme the CUBA Solidarity Campaign held a fringe meeting to publicise the Miami Five, Cubans held in prison by the Americans on trumped up charges of anti American activities. This meeting was absolutely packed to the rafters. They have been in jail for over 10 years and their plight is made worse by a conspiracy from the US and UK media not to report their incarceration in Florida jails. The attendance proves their plight is not forgotten. There were two wives and a daughter of the Miami Five. The daughter spoke passionately and of the pain of not being able to see her father. I honestly don't see why the most powerful country in the world has such a hang up about CUBA.

Finally, the third South American fringe I attended was the Venezuela Support Group. This is another South American country sick of the US interference and its neo liberal policies.

Colin Burgon, MP and GMB ultra loyalist gave a brilliant speech with the main points being that the South American countries had been for several decades controlled by rightist governments with virtually no regulation of the market place this had led to massive inequality and exploitation of the working classes. This Neo Liberal policy had been adopted in Europe after the fall of Communism. So far in Europe many regard this policy as an advantage especially in Eastern Europe however, there is massive evidence that inequality and exploitation are taking route in many of these former Communist countries. This model in Eastern Europe as been tested by the banking crisis with many working people either losing their jobs or having their pay slashed to maintain the profits of their new capitalist controllers. The UK has not been immune from the phenomenon with an increase in unemployment and pay cuts in the Private Sector.

The lessons learned through Venezuela are clear, this neo liberal model is fundamentally flawed as it is based on exploitation and greed of the unregulated capitalist market place. That is why leaders like Hugo Chavez were elected. The people had had enough of this economic system; Chavez believes that a countries resources should be used for the good of the many and not the few..... Thanks for a very informative speech Colin!

The South American fringe meetings really made me think, isn't this why we became involved with the trade union movement to fight in equality, exploitation and the greed of an unregulated capitalist system.

Conclusions and Comments

I think the conference was reasonably successful, whether it is enough to help Labour rise in the opinion polls is another question entirely. Policies adopted by Labour in the next six months will be crucial to the outcome of the election. We must concentrate on our key areas of popular support. We must hammer at the consequences for the Health Service if the Tories were elected. We must never forget the state of the Public Services under the last Tory Government. Remember in what state our schools were when Thatcher and her henchmen were in power.

Brown must return to the core socialist values of the Labour movement. This Governments flirtation with big business, deregulation of the banks and neo liberalist policies have lead us up a dead end. We can no longer tolerate a society where social mobility has become stagnant when we claim to have a policy of opportunities for all, we must really mean this. We are the party of opportunity and a person's postcode must not dictate their future.

We as trade unionists cannot walk blindly through the Tory veil of death. The poor and working class of Britain would never forgive us. We must fight to ensure David Cameron and his gang do not destroy all that has been built. This is a battle for the heart and soul of the working people of this country, defeat is not an option. The alternative, as in the TV drama Life on Mars, would return us all to the 1980's and the Thatcher era only this time there would be no chance to return to the present, this is the stuff of nightmares. We must get behind the Labour leadership and fight the Tories to the bitter end.

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