

National Women's Conference Report 2017

Annual Conference 2017 Brighton
24 - 27 September



Gwen accompanied me to Conference on Saturday 23rd September. Annoyingly I had not received my credentials from the party in time for Conference and was instructed to attend the Conference Arrangements Office to sort it out. We found the office behind the Conference Centre and I joined the queue, I was not alone, however, they were efficient in processing us and I emerged with my photo ID.

The conference was held in the Oxford room of the Hilton Hotel, We found good seats, I in the delegates section and Gwen in the visitors. Conference was opened by Dawn Butler MP for Brent Central, Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities. Our old friend Anne Black was in the chair. The atmosphere in the hall was very upbeat full to the brim with 1,500 Labour Women. Dawn gave a very inspiring address, rally style. She quoted Maya Angelou's poem 'Phenomenal Women'. (Read it if you get the chance) and as she told us her journey through to becoming an MP she asked us every time she raised her hand to say 'we are phenomenal women' all 1,500 of us repeated it with gusto many times throughout her speech. She announced that she was campaigning to put an end to 'period poverty', many women and young girls suffer because they have not the funds to buy the necessary protection. She will make products free to Secondary Schools and Food Banks. Dawn Butler was an impressive speaker and performer.

Next the hall erupted as Jeremy came in from the back, shaking many people's hands on the way, including Gwen's. He told us that this was the largest ever Women's Conference, he wanted to attract more women members and that 61% of shortlists will be all women. We must get through the 50% barrier of MP's and members. He spoke movingly on the memory and contribution that Jo Cox had made in her all too short life. Also thanked Kezia Dugdale for all she had achieved in Scotland. He spoke of the abuse that many women MP's suffer especially on social media, it is not acceptable and must end. He also spoke of the WASPI Women and said he would support a vote in the house for them to get justice. He praised Stella Creasy for her work in getting free abortions for N Irish women. Jeremy thanked the women in the hall for all their work and support, now and in the future. He received a long standing ovation.

Jeremy was followed by Emily Thornberry, shadow home secretary. I felt she was a big presence in the hall, she spoke with great authority and with humour on issues such as Modern Slavery, a genuine living wage, integration of health and social care, and the debt we owe those women who have gone before us.

After Emily came the newly elected MP for Canterbury. She told us of her total shock of finding herself elected and gave much credit to the Jo Cox Labour Women's Network Training Scheme. She encouraged others to apply and they would be able to achieve anything.

A video was played showing the timeline of women's contribution to Labour over the last 100 years. Then came the scrum for lunch, which Gwen and I had anticipated, we had purchased ours in M & S at the station on the way.

We reassembled at 2.15 for Policy Debates.

1 NHS and Social Care. Issues debated were Integrated Health and Social Care, privatisation and the selling off of what we have paid for, emergency bailout for this winter and the Nurses Bursary scheme cancelled also Mental health.

2 Housing. Homelessness, Grenville Tower, Effects of Universal Credit, Council Housing not 'affordable housing'! Suspend right to buy, and the sale of council housing for redevelopment of luxury housing. Only Labour values can make a difference.

3 Economic and Business policy. Public Sector pay cap is an attack directly on Women who make up the vast majority of Public Sector workers. The plight of the WASPI women (women against state pension inequality). Insecure jobs, rural poverty lack of services, women disproportionately affected by the pay cap.

4 Foreign Policy and Brexit. Protect equal rights, ethical foreign policy, Labour Party must make a plan to pick up the pieces of the Tory Brexit when we are in power.

I felt extremely heartened to hear so many passionate young Labour women with the confidence to speak to such a large audience and felt that the party is in safe hands in the years to come. After a short break when we took the opportunity to get 10 minutes fresh Brighton air, we then chose to attend a breakout session entitled 'Women in Leadership' run by the Labour Women's Network. There was a fantastic panel of high achieving women from the Labour Party including MPs Cat Smith, Jess Phillips and Dawn Butler joined by Ayesha Hazarika the comedian and previous advisor and script writer for Harriet Harman and Ed Miliband. Ayesha had some very funny tales from the 'Pink Bus'. This was an amusing and inspiring hour.

The Women's Conference closed with a reception as the main conference was opening with all the regional receptions taking place in different rooms. Gwen and I managed to get to the South East Reception in time to hear just one or two speakers. I managed to get a word with the new Labour and Co-operative MP for Brighton Kemptown Lloyd Russell-Moyle, who I had previously heard speak at the Sussex Co-op Party AGM in Lewes. I invited him to come to Chichester, to which he agreed, we just need to send him an invite.

Gwen and I both felt we had had a fantastic day and that the feel of the conference was very positive and upbeat. Thank you so much for sending me as your delegate and I would encourage any women members to attend in coming years as a delegate or visitor.

Kate Beach & Gwen Miles

28th September 2017