Party Conferences Briefing

by Policy and Public Affairs Team

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Overview

Members of the IFoA's Policy and Public Affairs team attended or monitored this year's party conferences, where we saw a marked move by some party leaders to lay out their personal visions for the future of the country, whilst others struggled to move past ongoing political scrutiny. Andy Burnham's first speech as Prime Minister announced a sweep of bold policies to undo what he sees as an economic and political model which has failed people and communities. Measures included reform of the pension triple lock, plans for a National Care Service, greater powers for public control of utilities and housing reform. However, with some of the announcements pushed until after the next general election and a failure to demonstrate how he will reduce – rather than reallocate – government spending, there remain unanswered questions.

In Birmingham, Kemi Badenoch put the economic agenda at the heart of her speech, as well as a party-pleasing pledge to remove inheritance tax on family homes. She also provided a clear rebuttal to Reform, saying "we are not like them… We are not uniting with *that*." However, Badenoch's personal poll ratings outstrip those of her party, and she is yet to articulate what exactly the Conservatives path back to power is.

The Liberal Democrats continue a period of self-reflection, as despite their record number of MPs their polling still sits at 10%, behind the Greens, in fifth place. Whilst leader Ed Davey said the party is in "the fight of our lives" against Reform and right-wing politics, others in the party questioned whether they should reposition to target "Blue Wall" Conservative voters or urban liberals.

For the populist parties of the right and left, their conferences were overshadowed by controversy and a sense of stalling momentum. Whilst Reform were able to set the narrative for the other parties last year, this year saw their efforts to position themselves as a party ready for government undermined by ongoing scandals. Meanwhile, the Greens saw record number of attendees but a "Zionism is Racism" motion dominated coverage and Labour's move to the left may see their appeal dwindle.

As ever, the party conference season was a useful touchpoint for attendees from the IFoA Policy and Public Affairs team to engage with the policy-making agenda, help raise the profile of the profession and to meet key decision-makers and political insiders, as part of our work to amplify the actuarial voice and impact policy for the public good.

Reform, Birmingham, 3-5 September

In his speech, Nigel Farage called for fundamental reform, saying he would declare a national emergency upon taking office, with a sweep of interventionist policies to fix a "broken" Britain. Measures included stopping small-boat Channel crossings as an immediate priority, cutting energy bills with a rolling-back of net-zero policies, and a reduction in welfare spending. Elsewhere, he suggested potentially abolishing the House of Lords and said he would cancel Parliamentary recesses, with Parliament set to sit 24 hours a day, six days a week. The Conference aimed to position Reform as a government in waiting with its theme of 'The First 100 Days' and Farage pledging to replace any of his ministers who failed to deliver change at pace.

Other key announcements and events:

- Reform's Conference was overshadowed by an investigation from Channel 4 News and Verbatim, which included undercover footage of two of Farage's advisers appearing to discuss how to get around electoral law in order to receive donations from a fake foreign donor.

- Treasury Spokesperson Robert Jenrick announced Reform's plans to increase the income personal allowance from £12,500 to £15,000, describing Reform as "the party of fiscal responsibility."

Liberal Democrat, Brighton, 19-22 September

Ed Davey called on his party to "fight", arguing the Liberal Democrats are the strongest democratic counterweight to Nigel Farage's movement, describing the party as a "firewall" against the populist right. His offer to voters focused on the cost-of-living agenda, with commitments to cut fuel duty by 10p per litre, rail fares by 10% and to reduce the bus fare cap to £1. Other proposals included raising the personal income tax allowance to £15,000 and Davey also reinforced his party's commitment to closer UK-EU trade arrangements through rejoining the single market as a route to greater growth.

Other key announcements and events:

- One of the most prominent policy pushes was around the maternity care crisis, with Davey framing the issue as a national patient-safety scandal, with additional motions on tackling the maternity crisis, rebuilding health visits and improving support for children and families.

- AI was another key theme in Brighton, where the party unveiled proposals for a £250m Online Crime Agency, funded through levies on major technology and AI firms, to tackle online child abuse and other crime. Elsewhere senior figures signaled a more interventionist approach with potential AI regulation.

Labour, Liverpool, 27-30 September

At the outset of his address to conference, Andy Burnham said he was going to give a "real speech" rather than politics-as-usual and he addressed a bold spread of policy issues, articulating a clear political vision. Headline announcements included plans to fund a National Care Service, partly through changes to the state pension triple lock from 2030, plans for greater public control over housing, water and energy, and plans to give voters a say on the future of our relationship with Europe and over electoral reform. He acknowledged that he may pay a political price for his policies, with questions remaining on the detail and funding of his announcements, especially in the context of increasing public spending and government debt.

Other key announcements and events:

- Chancellor John Healey used his conference speech to set the scene ahead of this month's Budget, where he outlined the difficult economic environment and said his "first duty is fiscal discipline." However, Healey called for a "new confidence in Britain" and promised "a new age of industrialisation" although no hints were given as to what would be in the Budget.

- AI Minister Kanishka Narayan was in high demand, appearing at a series of fringe events, where he outlined his vision for positioning the UK as an "honest broker" for AI on the international stage, and his strategy to make AI public policy tangible for individuals and businesses.

Green, Brighton, 2-4 October

In the lead-up to his (failed) run for the Holborn and St Pancras seat, Zack Polanski claimed a Green victory in having helped push Andy Burnham's policies to the left, calling on supporters to "vote Green and watch Labour move." Elsewhere his speech focused on cost-of-living challenges, with Polanski labelling the country "Rip Off Britain" and announcing plans to implement emergency rent controls, with increases to be capped at the lowest of CPI inflation, wage growth or 2%. He also called on the Government to reverse the proscription of Palestine Action.

Other key announcements and events:

- One of the most controversial debates in Brighton was around a "Zionism is Racism" motion, which passed by 1,022 votes to 813, cementing the party as explicitly anti-Zionist. The

decision led to criticism from senior Green figures, including former leader Caroline Lucas, and towards Polanski's decision not to vote on the motion.

- Elsewhere Polanski continued to argue for wealth taxes and increased public ownership of key utilities to help address inequalities.

Conservative, Birmingham, 4-7 October

Kemi Badenoch's speech set out to appease the party faithful and aspirational voters with a headline announcement to exempt main homes from inheritance tax, an additional £500,000 tax-free per person and extending free childcare to those earning more than £100,000 to help ensure "what people earn belongs to them." Labelling Andy Burnham "reckless" with public spending, she leaned into a focus on economic competence, saying growth would be her party's central organising principle. Her approach to tackling Reform has also evolved, with Badenoch drawing a distinction from Farage and her former-Conservative defectors, calling out their "character, conduct and standards."

Other key announcements and events:

- Shadow Chancellor Andrew Griffith's speech drew a distinction between the Conservatives' belief in enterprise, wealth creation and private investment versus Labour's state interventionism and regulatory approach. Elsewhere he committed to repealing every job destroying measure in the Employment Bill.

- Shadow Defence Secretary James Cartlidge set out the party's plans for the "Britannia Shield", a new national missile and drone defence system.

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