Introduction

Although there is a common cliché that every conference season was “the most important in generations”, this past one was truly momentous. Usually the conference after a general election leads to the beaten party looking deeply into themselves, choosing a new leader or a new policy direction, whilst the winner pats themselves on the back – and gets down to the business of governing. This time it was the opposite. Back in Whitehall and Brussels, the Brexit negotiations rumble on—the biggest challenge any government has faced for 40 years.

In Brighton, we saw a party that felt it was on the up. Those against Jeremy Corbyn, remained subdued. There was no plotting at the fringe or barnstorming centrist speeches in the main hall. Corbyn supporters painted a picture of themselves on the brink of government—never mind that there may not be a general election for another five years.

Up in Manchester, the party that actually won the election was in a very different mood. The Conservatives gathered a little bruised – some believing the hype from Brighton that Corbyn is indeed on the brink of power. For several years, the Conservatives have been concerned that they do not attract enough out of the young vote. That used to mean anyone under 30; now under 45. Therefore “getting the young vote” has gone from being a flashing light on the dashboard to a reason to take the car into the shop. Although it was discussed throughout the conference, little in the way of a solution was found.

In fact, apart from falling letters, a coughing fit, and a rogue comedian, the Conservative party conference will be best remembered for what was not said. There was little in the way of juicy policy announcements; more funding to “help to buy” and a freeze on tuition hikes, a couple of billion on social housing.

Theresa May started her speech by telling the Conservative faithful that during the “too presidential” general election campaign people saw the governing party as the “continuity” offering – rather than the a chance for radical change. If this was the diagnosis for the poor performance last June a cure remains unstated by the PM.

We have brought together the key announcements from both of the main parties to give a picture of what happened over the past few months, and to prepare you for the next few busy months in Parliament, including the first ever Autumn Budget. If you would like more information about how Maitland Political can help you to communicate with government don’t hesitate to get in touch.

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This was a conference dominated by Theresa May's future, Brexit and the need to attract the youth vote, although none of these problems were really solved over the course of four frenetic days in Manchester.

Backbencher and unlikely leadership contender Jacob Rees-Mogg was the star of the conference, seemingly taking over Boris’s mantle as members’ favourite. The Mogg was in demand, speaking at no fewer than three packed events and putting forward a buccaneering vision of Britain's future outside of the EU that, on occasion, sat at odds with the PM's.

Not to be outdone, Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson, the most successful Conservative north of the border in a generation, could also elicit long queues and large audiences. Davidson is another who has been tipped as a potential contender for the top job, although she insists that her focus, for now, lies in Edinburgh. Davidson created one of the (few) memorable, positive lines of the conference: "The Prime Minister and I saved the union".

Far from being the ‘parade’ of potential leaders many thought it would be, the conference ended up presenting no desire to remove the Prime Minister, but little confidence that she would lead the party through the next general election. The lack of direction was evident in main speeches. It is clear that the Conservatives are struggling to set the conversation, pitching themselves as the “defenders of capitalism” but essential throwing around many of the same claims and insults at the Corbynistas that failed at the election.

When May came to give the speech that was meant to reboot the party and restore her fortunes, the policy offerings were meagre. Whilst her commitment to social justice pre-dates the momentum behind Corbyn, the policies felt reactive. Faced with the entrenched problems a whole generation is facing, her announcements did not feel nearly radical enough. Much was made of plans for housing, but they were widely condensed as lacking the dynamism needed to get Britain building.

May had started well, with a long awaited apology to Tory activists about the election result. However, she soon ended in another sorry state - first suffering the intrusion of a comedian thrusting a P45 into her hand, and then an agonising coughing fit that, for the first time that week, had the party united behind her – in sympathy.
Theresa May

Theresa May was hoping to use her speech at conference to unite the party behind her plans for the country. It certainly did not go to plan. Though the media are likely to focus on her difficult delivery and a security breach which saw her handed a mock P45, the PM sought to use the occasion to present the Conservatives as the only party able to help people achieve the "British dream". In terms of content, the speech was quite thin, although there was a commitment to put the manifesto pledge of an energy cap into practice and a commitment to review the Mental Health Act. The speech was themed around building a better future: the central plank of this was committing to address Britain’s housing crisis. May reassured that hall that her desire to focus on social justice remained undimmed, whilst acknowledging that the Government’s most important duty was to ensure Brexit worked for everyone in the UK.

The key announcements included:

• Measures to address the housing crisis, including £9bn for affordable housing
• Legislating to introduce an energy price cap
• Pressing on with reforms to education and skills training
• A review of university funding and student financing along with a freeze on tuition fee increases and setting a higher bar at which students have to start repaying
• An opt-out organ donation system and review of the Mental Health Act

“Whenever we are tested as a nation, this party steps up to the plate.”

It was an eventful speech for all the wrong reasons and will have done little to blow clouds that circle the conference away. Still, the threat from Boris appears to have diminished, at least for now, while the Government’s plan for Brexit, as outlined by May last week, remains intact.

The Institute of Directors was one of many who condemned the speech and wider conference season. Stephen Martin, the IoD’s director general commented: “I think it’s fair to say that this year’s party conference season has been one big let-down for businesses across the UK. On the one hand you have a Labour party which has decided that business is the bad guy, on the other you have a Conservative party which talks about the importance of markets, but then tinkers around with help to buy and energy price caps. What are business leaders meant to make of it all?”

Philip Hammond

In his keynote, likened at times to a history lecture, Hammond defended the free market and threw his support behind the Prime Minister's Brexit vision, calling for an acceleration of the negotiations. The speech was fairly light on policy, with many pointing to his failure to address the reasons for Jeremy Corbyn’s popularity.

The key announcements include:

• A Brexit transition period of at least two years to help business adjust
• £300m to be invested in rail infrastructure in the North, helping to link existing infrastructure with projects such as HS2
• £10bn in funding would be made available to extend the Help to Buy scheme to help homebuyers

“I think we owe it to the next generation to show how Corbyn’s Marxist policies will inevitably lead us back to where Britain was in the late 1970’s.”
David Davis and Liam Fox

The government’s two newest departments gave their second ever conference speeches this year. David Davis, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and Liam Fox, Secretary of State for International Trade, both gave addresses filled with robust optimism. Liam Fox argued that the “fundamentals” of the UK economy were strong; adding that, should Labour take power, it would result in “economic incompetence, financial incontinence and self-congratulatory nonsense.” David Davis emphasised the value of free trade, arguing Brexit allowed the UK to be more international, not less. Whilst promising to honour the UK’s commitments, Davis insisted Britain would challenge the EU’s claims for exit payments “line by line”.

Liam Fox: “Our vision is of a UK that trades its way to prosperity, stability and security.”

David Davis: “Just last week I heard Keir Starmer say, ‘We mustn’t get bogged down in discussions about technicalities’. Well I’m afraid ignoring the details of Brexit just won’t cut it. It’s like they’ve got a new slogan: ‘Labour…government without the hard bits”.

Boris Johnson

Johnson was on manoeuvres in the weeks leading up to conference, to ensure that he was still the centre of attention. The membership had clearly been hoping for a performance to alleviate a conference that had, up until that point, been described as sluggish. The speech, wide ranging in themes, raised some laughs but it was not what most had been hoping for.

Johnson criticised Labour’s Brexit policies saying it would inflict a “national humiliation”. Echoing Philip Hammond, he referenced Labour’s effect on British politics in the 1970s, arguing Labour’s disastrous management of the economy had been forgotten. He defended free markets and deregulation for their poverty alleviation, referring to the “shackles of socialism”. He also took aim at the “gloominess” of political commentators, urging the country to be more optimistic about its status.

“We are one of the great quintessential European nations. In many ways the most influential European nation of all.”

Five things we learnt at the Fringe

• The conference hall is out of fashion and looking at the audience, you’d think nobody turned up. However, the fringes were full to burst, focusing on the youth vote and Brexit.
• Ruth Davidson has made herself an extremely popular figure, creating one of the only memorable positive lines of the conference: “The Prime Minister and I saved the union”. Meanwhile, the other popular face in the fringe is Jacob Rees Mogg - whose events led to long queues and shareable social media content.
• While there’s no desire to remove the Prime Minister, there’s little confidence that she will lead the party through the next general election.
• The Conservatives are struggling to combat Labour in terms of the broader debate, desperately trying to pitch themselves as the “defenders of capitalism”.
• Boris is not as popular as he used to be on backbenches (but members still love him).
Labour Party Conference

While Jeremy Corbyn’s claims to be “one-more-heave” from power might seem at times far-fetched, the strength of his grip on Labour cannot be understated. At last year’s conference, the Labour leader skulked around. This year, he toured the conference areas with confidence and was clapped and cheered by rows of his supporters as he walked into the Brighton centre for his keynote speech.

This new found confidence was amplified by the lack of vigour from moderates in the party. Walking around the exhibition stands, attending the fringe events and panel discussions, it was clear that the likes of Hilary Benn, Chuka Umunna and Heidi Alexander were not involved in the policy discussions despite being in attendance.

It is hard to see where moderates could launch such assaults right now. Standing on the outside of the conference hall during John McDonnell’s keynote speech, it was striking to experience the cheering as the Shadow Chancellor announced plans for intervention after intervention in the UK economy. Wind the clock back just a few years and the very floating of such policies would have given the lobby enough to write about for the duration of the conference. But this, for now at least, is the Labour norm.

Conference did feature the customary events from the Labour moderate group Progress. At one rally they held in Brighton’s Odeon cinema, Sadiq Khan and Tom Watson gave impassioned speeches where they reversed their previously “principled” objections to Jeremy Corbyn. On the other side of the spectrum, Momentum is no doubt enjoying it. One activist branded the moderate sect an "endangered species" and a journalist said the attitude of Momentum towards the Labour old-guard is akin to an irreverent youth rising up against their better-established elders.

After three long days of this, Jeremy Corbyn took to the stage for the final day at conference. He praised Labour’s unity and claimed the political centre ground had shifted in his favour as he unfurled a vision of a “socialist” Britain. As well as nationalising utilities and railways, he pledged Labour would seek to better hold companies to account for their actions and fund the delivery of a National Education Service through higher taxes on large corporations. Other pledges included giving workers in private companies more control: “Democratisation. It means employees given their voice at work, with unions able to represent them properly, freed of undemocratic fetters on their right to organise.” He also promised Labour would take action to stop employers driving down pay and conditions whilst holding large companies accountable for their social impact.

Jeremy Corbyn was buoyed at last year’s conference by his second victory for the Labour party leadership, but nonetheless still flattened by his own party and dire opinion poll ratings. This year, he and his fan-base had confidence granted from the British electorate at the 2017 election. Previously, it was the Labour moderates who had a monopoly on winning the trust of the British people, but even the most respected political commentators are now confident of Jeremy Corbyn’s potential to succeed at the ballot box. As for “one-more heave”, this does however fail to account for the rapidly changing political context. Blairites tell us that the only thing that is constant is change, and the Brexit drama and others could quash Labour’s electoral chances as much as it seems to be quashing the Tories.
Jeremy Corbyn

Corbyn hailed Labour’s performance in the 2017 General Election, declaring that the party had become “a government in waiting”. Amid repeated attacks on the Government, he challenged them to “pull yourself together or make way”. Corbyn unfurled a vision of a much more interventionist state. As well as nationalising utilities and railways, he pledged Labour would seek to better hold companies to account for their actions and fund the delivery of a National Education Service through higher taxes on large corporations. Corbyn declared his party was the only party that could unite Leave and Remain voters. He characterised the Government’s approach to Brexit as ineffective, saying Labour would reject a “Trump-style race to the bottom in rights and corporate taxes”. Characterising regeneration schemes as too often involving “forced gentrification”, Corbyn promised to implement measures such as rent control, new requirements for regeneration projects to test their benefits and powers to tax and/or compulsorily purchase undeveloped land on a “use it or lose it” basis. Many commentators have noted that it was a speech which did nothing to address difficult questions such as Brexit.

The key announcements included:

- Labour’s plans for a “publicly-owned engine of sustainable growth”
- A portfolio of pledges on housing including two new requirements for regeneration projects
- A National Education Service including free tuition for technical and further education courses
- Calls for democratic ownership of natural monopolies in the form of the renationalisation of major utilities

“The political centre of gravity isn’t fixed or unmoveable”.

John McDonnell

John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor, opened his keynote speech by declaring “it’s always been the role of a Labour Government to lead this country into each new era”. He was very confident, tackling student debt head on – an area where Labour has been under constant pressure since the Election. He promised Labour would support “effective proposals” to reduce interest rates or raise repayment thresholds for students. He also pledged to “wind up” all PFI contracts, bringing it all back “in-house”. McDonnell also pledged to radically expand worker control and bring back into public ownership utilities and key services like rail, water, energy and the Royal Mail. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) responded by calling McDonnell’s plans for economic policy “the wrong plan at the wrong time”.

“Rail, water, energy, Royal Mail: we’re taking them back.”
Labour Party Conference

Keir Starmer

In his speech, Starmer argued for a transitional arrangement which put jobs and the economy “first”. He suggested a Labour government would reach an agreement that allowed the UK to remain in the Customs Union and Single Market during a transition period. Starmer criticised May’s speech in Florence before arguing that Labour would build a new and progressive partnership with the EU.

“All she has done is to delay the cliff edge. All her ideological red-lines remain. She still prioritises arbitrary immigration targets over jobs and the economy.”

Five things we learnt at the Fringe

• Tom Watson and Sadiq Khan reneged on their previously principled objections to Jeremy Corbyn.
• Labour party moderates have decided that resistance to Corbyn is futile (for now).
• Labour is now confident being ‘the’ party of public ownership.
• Under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, there will be no strongly pro-Remain position on Brexit.
• Labour seem to have a confused position on whether they won or lost the 2017 General Election.
Brexit negotiations

The European Parliament’s decision to vote against moving on to trade discussions with the UK in October is a further setback for the UK government as the March 2019 departure date looms. Theresa May’s Florence speech has gone some way to address the EU’s concerns, notably those on budget contributions, but Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier remains cautious about progress across numerous areas key to the “divorce”.

Negotiations are expected to take on a new impetus as the UK’s team seeks to strike a deal over EU citizen’s rights, Britain’s financial settlement, and the biggest stumbling block – the status of Northern Ireland – all in time to move on to talks about the future relationship. Despite the increasingly difficulties, and growing business concern, the Government has stuck to its plan to exit the Single Market and Customs Union and aim for a (as yet unclear) bespoke deal. The fifth round of negotiations began today.

EU (Withdrawal) Bill

Back in Westminster, the Brexit battle will be fought over the EU withdrawal bill. The bill passed its first major hurdle in the Commons despite Labour opposition, but will now face much closer scrutiny as MPs debate it line by line. The main concerns about the bill remain; it will transfer considerable power to amend existing legislation to ministers as they transcribe EU regulations into the UK’s law book.

The Scottish and Welsh government have already put on record their opposition to the bill, which they deem a power grab, while former Remainers on the Labour and Lib Dem benches plan to table significant amendments in a bid to soften the impact of Brexit.
**Autumn Budget**

The Chancellor will deliver his autumn budget statement on 22nd November. Philip Hammond will once again attempt to boost businesses confidence and reassure families that the economy continues to be resilient as Britain strikes out on its own as an independent trading nation. However, he will also want to move attention away from Brexit and on to the problems that continue to keep Treasury officials awake at night: productivity, pay, re-balancing the economy, and – above all – housing.

Hammond will want to show real progress with the budding industrial strategy and is likely to herald further investment in infrastructure projects across the country. We could see new announcements on skills and training, in addition to measures to ease the cost of energy bills on consumers.

**Gig economy**

The gig economy returns to the fore as Parliament resumes today. Frank Field’s Work and Pensions Committee and Rachel Reeve’s Business Committee have joined forces to launch an inquiry into the issue following the publication of Matthew Taylor’s review of modern employment. Taylor himself will give evidence to both committees on Wednesday, while delivery firms Hermes and Deliveroo have been hauled before Reeve’s Committee to account for their employment practices.

This issue goes wider than the Taylor review however; John McDonnell claimed in his conference speech that technological change, a vital enable of the gig economy, had enriched “a tiny elite” who he condemned for “creating a life for many workers of long hours, low pay, and insecure employment.” Jeremy Corbyn also hit out at the growing trend towards automation and the changing nature of employment. This will be a focal point for Labour and trade union campaigning in 2018, and the Conservative government will be anxious to be seen to act in support of workers, particularly the young.
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