

LABOUR CONFERENCE: STARMER'S ON THE MARCH

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LABOUR CONFERENCE: WHAT'S THE STATE OF PLAY?

Labour conferences have their own inevitable rhythm: a pre-conference interview with Andy Burnham as the King Over The Water; a controversial policy fight on the conference floor; shadow cabinet members launching initiatives under their own brand everywhere you turn; posturing from the left in the conference hall and outside; and mutterings off to journalists that give the vibe of a party more interested in itself than the public. All the while the business community in attendance looks on in bewildered fascination that this party still thinks it could form a government.

Labour in Liverpool in 2022 will be remembered as the time when that all changed.

Professional. Disciplined. Focused. Patriotic. This conference had a completely different feel to it.

Kwasi Kwarteng's tax-cutting budget vacated the centre ground of British politics. But Keir Starmer, Rachel Reeves and the Labour Party still had to have the political creativity to march in and occupy that ground. This was not a given. And yet they did it with skill and guile.

Rachel Reeves set out a programme for a fiscally responsible economic policy that would invest in a green future. Jonathan Reynolds, the Shadow Business Secretary, offered business a seat at the table and serious engagement. And rising stars, Bridget Phillipson and Wes Streeting, offered a way forward for education and health built on investment and reform with better public services for everyone.

The message was clear: A Starmer-led Government will end the 'endless cycle of crises', defeat the cost of living crisis, tackling climate change, repairing public services, 'redesigning' them for the future, and restore trust in politics.

For the first time in many years, there weren't noises off, senior frontbenchers briefing against the leader, or divisive, public fights on conference floor. The party showed a determination to focus on what matters to the whole of the country, not just its comfort zone.

A YouGov poll putting Labour 17 points ahead of the Conservatives gave delegates a spring in their step. But the electoral challenge is still enormous. Winning an election after the party's worst defeat in more than 80 years – while Scotland remains politically challenging for all the UK parties – requires a Herculean effort. Keir Starmer has achieved the first part of that by reversing the damage of the Corbyn and Miliband years so that the party once again turns to face the electorate. But, to mix the Greek myths, he will hope that winning in two years doesn't remain a Sisyphean task.

SIR KEIR STARMER'S SPEECH

In a reflection of the mood in Liverpool this week, Sir Keir Starmer appeared confident and in control as he delivered his keynote address to Conference on Tuesday afternoon. For the first time we came away with a real sense of what a Labour government under his leadership could look like.

Labour this week appeared united and determined, a far cry from the Party's last visit to Liverpool in 2018. Starmer's speech was clear in its recognition of how much the Party has changed in the short time he has been Leader. 'Country first, party second' he proclaimed, as he outlined the changes he has pushed forward: tackling antisemitism; showing support for NATO is non-negotiable; demonstrating that Labour wants business to prosper; and dropping what he referred to as 'unworkable policies'. Starmer even went so far as to quote Tony Blair, describing Labour as 'the political wing of the British people'. There was no heckling this year, instead Starmer was received by an audience united behind the growing belief that Labour could be on its way back to power.

Attacking the Tories for their record on the economy, cost of living and the NHS, Starmer sought to set out the dividing lines between Labour and the Truss Government. He accused the Conservative Party of having 'lost control of the British economy' with higher interest rates, inflation and borrowing all for 'tax cuts for the richest 1% in our society'. In contrast, he claimed, a Labour Government would 'get us out of this endless cycle of crisis...with a fresh start, a new set of priorities and a new way of governing'.

Starmer struck a personal note in his speech as he talked about his family and his background, referring to what it felt like to be working class in the 1970s and reflecting on what it had felt like to face rising prices and to have their phone cut off because they couldn't pay the bill. He argued that 'if you're born without privilege, you don't have time for messing around' and that this 'working class impatience' drives him.

There was significant policy content in Tuesday's speech too. Of particular note was his announcement that the next Labour Government would create a publicly owned renewable energy company, Great British Energy. Starmer has notably moved away from the Corbyn-era policies of nationalising utilities but demonstrated his own form of radical policy direction with this announcement. The pledge to create Great British Energy was the pinnacle of a week where green policy announcements took centre stage.

On housing, he announced a new target of 70% home ownership, alongside help for first-time buyers with a new mortgage guarantee scheme and reform to planning. He argued that 'Labour is the party of home ownership in Britain today'.

He didn't shy away from the tricky issues facing his leadership. Tackling Brexit head on, he pledged that Labour would make it work and promised to 'control immigration using a points-based system'. And there was a direct challenge to the SNP as he ruled out working with them, saying there would be no deal 'under any circumstances'.

Starmer was clear too that responsibility with the public finances will be key for a Labour Government led by him, with Rachel Reeves as Shadow Chancellor, reiterating that every policy will be fully costed. Giving out a dose of reality, he stressed that this would potentially mean 'not being able to do things – good Labour things – as quickly as we might like'.

There has been a sense this week that it could just be Labour's time after so many years of opposition. Listening to Starmer on Tuesday, it felt like he too is beginning to believe that he could become Prime Minister. 'This is a Labour moment' Starmer concluded, and it certainly felt like it could be in the Conference hall on Tuesday afternoon. Whether or not it is will be for the public to decide when the next election comes.

WHAT DOES LABOUR MEAN FOR BUSINESS?

Business turned out in force for this year's conference. Business Day was a sell out. The Business Reception was bigger than ever. The discussion was serious and positive. Reeves, Starmer and Reynolds told the audience of CEOs and senior executives that Labour is a pro-business party who wants to get Britain's economy moving again. They offered business a seat at the table and they meant it. Centrally, for business, Jonathan Reynolds launched a new industrial strategy for the party – '[Prosperity through Partnership](#)' – that put engagement at its heart.

They set out four 'missions':

1. Delivering clean power by 2030
2. Harnessing data for the public good
3. Caring for the future
4. Building a more resilient economy

Labour's plan includes a focus on reducing barriers to trade and building up resilience in supply chains to protect against external shocks. There will be a focus on science, innovation and skills.

The standout announcements launched from the conference floor include:

- Plans to create a publicly-owned renewable energy giant - Great British Energy
- A green prosperity plan that would: double Britain's onshore wind capacity, treble solar power, quadruple offshore wind, invest in tidal, hydrogen and nuclear, and will make Britain's energy generation zero carbon by 2030.
- 70% of the population to be homeowners - offering new mortgage guarantees and a clampdown on buy-to-let landlords.
- A pledge to 'make Brexit work', with reform of the Northern Ireland protocol

and acting as a global champion by reducing barriers to trade, whilst not embarking on the deregulation drive of the current Government.

- A crackdown on corporate fraud with new responsibilities for senior managers.

Labour's focus on public services will also be a big area of work for an incoming Labour government. This will include:

- An increase the NHS workforce; taking on an extra 7,500 medical students every year, doubling the number of district nurses, and offering 10,000 extra nursing placements;
- 13,000 extra police officers and PCSOs to rebuild neighbourhood policing;
- And a long-term commitment to invest in childcare including, providing breakfast clubs for all primary school children

Labour has two years to turn these aspirations into a plan for government. Reeves and Reynolds have set out an open offer to business to help develop their ideas. From the mood at the conference, business will take this offer seriously.

THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

Between Friday's fiscal event and this week's Labour Conference the battle lines for the next General Election have been well and truly drawn. It was to be expected that Labour would rely on the traditional dividing lines between themselves and the Conservative Party of the NHS and support for working people versus prioritising the wealthy. Friday's efforts by Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng added fuel to this fire, providing Labour with evidence for the arguments already being made.

In an indication of the messages we will hear more and more of in the months to come, Labour's Shadow Cabinet repeatedly drew comparisons between the actions of the Government last week – on bankers' bonuses and tax cuts for the wealthy – with the priorities they set out in Liverpool.

Rachel Reeves gave a clear indication of where Labour would make different choices, setting out that the Party would reintroduce the 45p top rate of income tax and spend the money on more district nurses and health visitors, as well as expanding nursing and midwife placements, and doubling the number of medical students. Starmer reiterated these core arguments and in a clear sign of Labour's key messages to come, argued that in a choice between tax cuts for the richest and supporting the NHS, Labour will always deliver for the NHS. Arguments over funding the NHS are Labour's bread and butter, but this week we saw the beginning of what that means in concrete policy terms in their next manifesto.

Starmer argued that 'a cloud of anxiety hangs over working people', with a government that has lost control of the economy in the name of tax cuts for the wealthy. 'Don't forget. Don't forgive.' he argued as he sought to contrast the record of the Conservative Government

on the economy, crime, NHS and energy bills with what he argued would be 'a fresh start' with Labour.

'A fairer, greener future' was Labour's strapline in Liverpool this week, which manifested itself in a range of announcements from the economy, energy, the NHS, breakfast clubs and more. This argument, along with calls for a fresh start with a Labour Government, will form a central part of Labour's efforts as they seek to turn this week's momentum into gains at the ballot box.

OVERHEARD AT THE CONFERENCE

"I thought the Tories were going to call an election in November, but they can't go to the electorate with a record of crashing the economy in their first fortnight in power"

-Shadow cabinet member.

"Rachel Reeves has the toughest job in politics. Liz Truss will give us the worst public finances since the war."

- Senior backbench MP

"This is worse than Black Wednesday for the Tories. The door is open wide for Labour"

-Well-respected pollster

HOW ARE PEOPLE REACTING?



Paul Johnson @PJTheEconomist · 10h

Important for Labour to recognise that, if they win the next election, they will not be bequeathed an easy situation. In 1997 the economy and public finances were strong. That will not be the case in 2024



Ayesha Hazarika @ayeshahazarika · 6h

This speech is a big moment. Better than last year. More punchy. Starmer is so much more comfortable & confident in his political skin. Delivery much better. Also doesn't need a heckle to have a big moment.



Paul Waugh @paulwaugh · 1h

A bit of Blair, a lot of Brown, a dollop of Miliband and a nod to Corbyn. But no-drama Starmer has parked Labour firmly on the centre-ground vacated by Truss's Tories.



Sebastian Payne @SebastianEPayne · 22h

Keir Starmer's #lab22 conference speech was solid, but crucially it was plausible. For the first time in a decade, it's easy to see both the Labour party and its leader in power. There's a palpable sense Starmer now believes (for the first time) he can and will be prime minister.



Will Tanner @Will_Tanner · 20h

Today Keir Starmer announced:

1. Commitment to sound money, with falling debt/GDP
2. A points based immigration system
3. A 70% home ownership target

It's an explicit attempt to neutralise the Conservatives' biggest brand strengths, while creating dividing lines on NHS and tax



Beth Rigby @BethRigby · Sep 27

Lab & its' leader have changed a lot in a yr. KS, heckled by the left in '21 speech cheered to rafters even as he positions himself heir to Blair. KS's Lab the party of biz, of aspiration, of the centre ground. Starmer more confident than I've ever seen him. Hope turns to belief