

Labour Party Conference 2017 – Delegate’s Report

Anshu Srivastava 12.10.17

Firstly, I would like to thank the CLP for giving me the opportunity to represent them at this year’s Labour Party Conference. I learnt a lot, met some fascinating people and thoroughly enjoyed myself. I’d also like to thank my fellow Lewisham Deptford Delegates for their good sense, hard work and great company.

Saturday

I arrived to a very buzzy Brighton on Saturday evening to hear that the Women’s Conference had gone really well, with Centre Left Grassroots Alliance candidates Teresa Clark and Jean Crocker being elected to the Women’s Conference Arrangements Committee.

My friend Sachin, who is from Loughborough CLP, had been in touch to say that he was one of the 70 delegates who were reinstated following the welcome decision by the NEC to extend the freeze date for delegates.

Sunday

Our first task on Sunday morning was to consider the Contemporary Motions in the 1st Conference Arrangements Committee Report and place a single vote in the Priorities Ballot for four subjects to be debated and voted on as Compositated Motions over the coming days. The top four CLP subjects would join the four subjects already selected by the affiliated organisations (trade unions and socialist societies). Rebecca, Masie and I discussed this at length (sadly despite our best efforts to connect with Barney he wasn’t available to join us) and chose the following subjects... Social Care, Housing, Brexit and the NHS.

The question of putting Brexit on the ballot was contentious with various groups such as Momentum and Labour First lobbying for this subject to be on or off the ballot. Irrespective of these arguments or our own inclinations (which were varied), Rebecca, Masie and I had no hesitation to vote for Brexit to be on the ballot, as we recognised our moral obligation to do so given that our CLP’s motion to Conference had been Brexit related. As it was, the final eight subjects that were chosen were Grenfell Tower, Growth & Investment, Housing, NHS, Public Sector Pay, Rail, Social Care & Worker’s Rights.

I don’t wish to make this report too long, so if anyone is interested to learn more about the emergency motions, rule changes or the new Referencing Back procedure, which came up at Conference, please come and speak with me or one of my colleagues.

The rest of Sunday was spent listening to speeches and voting on sections from the Labour Policy Forum report. The highlight was without doubt Diane Abbott’s speech as Shadow Home Secretary. I have long been inspired by Diane’s commitment to social justice and tenacity in the face of years of racist and misogynistic attitudes, so it was especially heartening to see her in such fine fettle and setting out such a serious and compassionate programme. Some of you might have also seen the selfie that Shereen and I got with Diane as she left the hall!

Sunday evening I went to a number of fringe events, the most illuminating was held by CND where one of the speakers was Fabian Hamilton, Shadow Minister for Peace and Disarmament... I confess I didn’t know that we had such a portfolio in the Shadow Cabinet, but I can be sure that there isn’t a mirror post in Theresa May’s team.

I was frustrated to learn that Contemporary Motions that several CLP's had put forward on Nuclear Weapons and Korea were not considered contemporary enough by the CAC and thus didn't make the cut. Given that tensions in the Korean Peninsula have been escalating since Trump's election last year clearly this was nonsense, and the only rational conclusion is that the CAC didn't want any debates related to Nuclear Weapons or Disarmament to reach the conference floor. I would like to suggest that this CLP writes to the NEC to express our dismay at this situation.

Monday

The issue of defence and foreign affairs also brings us to the main speech on Monday morning by Emily Thornbury. I have to say I was quite moved, as this is the first time in many years, in fact since Robin Cook, that I heard a major British politician give a speech on our role in the world and felt that it represented my politics and values without reservation. It was a brave speech, especially in her criticism of Saudi Arabia, free of triangulation, full of conviction but far from dogmatic.

Keir Starmer, Sadiq Khan and John McDonnell also spoke on Monday and each, in their different ways, showed the quality, breadth and foresight that Labour can be grateful for in its leading figures.

My fringe highlight on Monday was David Lammy speaking at the event held by Stand up to Racism. After the publication of his excellent report on Race in the Criminal Justice System and in light of the Grenfell Tower catastrophe I was keen to hear him in person, but I was not prepared for the depth and power of his righteous anger. This, I felt, is a politician whose time has come, and frankly I was impressed. I hope that he will soon be back in the Shadow Cabinet.

Tuesday

Rebecca, Masie and I used our CLP vote to support Anna Dyer and Emina Ibrahim in the NCC Ballot.

I was sad that due to the commitments of being in the Hall, I didn't manage to make it to the launch of the new Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL) group on Monday night, as I welcome the broadening out of debate on issues which are important to our Jewish comrades in the Party. However, on Tuesday an event occurred in the Hall which I found to be quite disturbing. The Vice Chair of JVL spoke from the stage, and ended her speech by proclaiming that 'there is no Anti-Semitism in the Labour Party' which was greeted by a standing ovation and cheering. Of course, I fully respect that this is the experience of this comrade, but I feel such testimony should be received with more humility. I think that a similar reaction of 'whoopin and hollerin' to someone of colour proclaiming that 'there is no racism in the Labour Party' would be a very strange and alienating experience... this was after all not a Trump rally. I hope this reflection gives all of us some pause for thought.

Tuesday also saw votes on important rule changes on Party Democracy and the new review to be led by Katy Clarke. In light of my previous point I was pleased by the position of the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) and the withdrawal of their amendment, as this is a group that I have not always agreed with in the past. I went over after his speech to personally thank the vice chair of JLM for his contribution.

I was impressed and educated throughout the conference by a huge variety of speeches from CLP delegates. I heard from people who have attended previous conferences that this spirit of participation of ordinary members was a refreshing change. Although, it meant that the day's proceedings overran the timetable, I felt that the chairing of the morning session by Claudia Webb MP was hugely important in delivering this democratic upturn.

The other surplus we learnt about on Tuesday is the rude health of Labour's finances. The National Treasurer Diana Holland told us that the party is debt free for the first time since the 1960s... it had £25m of debt only 12 years ago. This situation is all the more impressive as it has not relied at all on membership or donations but careful financial management. This report did lead to several CLPs asking that more funds are thus made available to them, especially marginal seats who now feel that they have a great chance at the next election.

The main shadow minister speeches were delivered by the excellent Rebecca Long-Bailey, Angela Rayner and John Ashworth setting out a progressive anti-austerity agenda for business, education and the NHS. My fringe meetings on Tuesday were on White Working Class Inclusion with Rusharna Ali MP and Community Organising with Ed Milliband (!), but I must also reserve a mention for the inspirational guest speaker Naomi Klein who reminded us all that without tackling climate change all our other ambitions are terribly short sighted.

Wednesday

I attended two Policy Forums on Wednesday, the first on Brexit where I was able to deliver a point to the Shadow Brexit team, and then the Environment, Energy & Culture meeting.

The final event was Jeremy Corbyn's main conference speech and after the result of the June 2017 election and what had been such an energised and united conference, it was a sheer pleasure to be in the hall to hear the leader of our party make such a confident and thoughtful address to the nation. I'm looking forward to him becoming our next Prime Minister.

A final cup of coffee with comrades from Lewisham who had been such great company throughout and it was time to head back to New Cross Gate.