Party conferences: anarchy in the UK?

General Features

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This autumn’s party conferences highlighted that politics in Britain is now a five party affair (six in Scotland and Wales). Labour and the Conservatives would both prefer to put a simpler choice before the electorate.

The late 1970s. A time of punk rockers and disco divas, shag-pile carpets and avocado bathrooms. A simpler time when telephones had rotary dials, televisions had just three channels and politics, for most people, was a choice between just two parties – an interventionist Labour government that argued for collective provision and a strong state, and a Conservative opposition intent on shrinking that state, with only a small minority of voters looking beyond this duopoly.

For different reasons, it suited both of Britain’s traditionally dominant parties to hark back to this time half a century ago during their conferences this autumn.

For Labour’s new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, 1979 was the year the country took the wrong path, electing a Conservative government which spent the following decade centralising political power, privatising economic power and presiding over the de-industrialisation of much of the country. He wanted to ‘make a break with the direction of the past 40 years and put Britain on a new path’: national renewal, public service expansion, an activist state.

The Conservatives looked instead to the political and intellectual reaction against the 1970s. Kemi Badenoch’s ‘The Right Way’ deliberately echoed Margaret Thatcher’s 1976 pamphlet ‘The Right Approach’, presenting lower taxes, deregulation, spending restraint and a smaller state – as well as, hint hint, a strong female leader – as the route out of national decline. And, of course, it suited both parties to frame the choice as a binary one: Labour on the left versus the Conservatives on the right.

But, as we know, that is not how politics stands today. Opinion polls in the late 70s typically gave Labour and the Conservatives 90% support between them. These days most surveys show that figure down below 50%. The battle they want to fight is with each other but to do that effectively they first need to dominate their own political flanks, seeing off insurgents who would cast them as relics of the past. That was the imperative going into this autumn’s round of party conferences.

Reform UK in Birmingham: Take a chance on me

One of those insurgents, Reform UK, has been ahead in most polls over the last year and used its conference to project the image of a government in waiting. Its ‘First 100 Days’ theme promised rapid action on migration, energy and tax, with prospective ministers expected to resign if they failed to deliver. The conference was the party’s largest yet, and its packed speeches demonstrated momentum, but organisational problems and the resignation of senior officials amid a donations controversy raised questions about maturity and readiness for office.

The principal tax pledge at the conference was to raise the personal allowance to £15,000, with £20,000 retained as a longer-term goal. Reform also maintained its proposal that employees earning below £75,000 should pay no income tax on overtime above 40 hours. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these offers, the conference represented a continuation of the party’s efforts to move away from

promises of large unfunded tax cuts towards a message of fiscal responsibility. Reform is trying to manage a tension between its belief that tax cuts are central to achieving growth and the recognition that promising too much risks making the party look reckless and unserious. Much will hinge on whether the projected spending cuts to pay for the tax cuts are deemed credible.

Reform seeks to prioritise workers and small firms over wealthy asset-holders. It would reverse restrictions on agricultural and business property reliefs but has dropped plans for broader inheritance tax cuts, contrasting 40 million people paying income tax with the relatively small number of estates paying inheritance tax. It proposes cutting employer National Insurance back to 13.8% for British workers, financed by a levy on employers of foreign workers, and giving taxpayers a £30 tax credit when HMRC keeps them waiting on the telephone for more than 30 minutes. The party has launched a consultation on using the tax system to encourage housebuilding and town centre regeneration.

Liberal Democrats in Brighton: Davey’s on the road again

The Liberal Democrats met in Brighton unsure whether the party’s glass was half full or half empty. 72 MPs and local election successes provided grounds for optimism, but these were tempered by weak polling and concern that rival parties are communicating more effectively with voters.

Leader Ed Davey’s closing speech combined a fierce attack on the forces of the far right with a cost-of-living offer. The headline policy announcement was to raise the personal allowance to £15,000 (an unexpected piece of agreement with Reform!) and the higher-rate threshold to £56,000. The party said the cuts would be funded by growth from closer European integration. Because an agreement would take years, the tax reductions might not arrive until the final year of the next Parliament. Notwithstanding this, some activists worried that foregrounding tax cuts sat awkwardly beside warnings about underfunded services.

Treasury spokesperson Daisy Cooper’s 30-page ‘plan for growth’ sought to establish the Lib Dems as pro-enterprise and fiscally responsible. The party proposes breaking up the ‘anti-growth’ Treasury, creating a Department for Growth as a one-stop shop for firms and investors, and a smaller Department for Public Expenditure to control budgets. Business costs would be reduced through lower employer National

Insurance for part-time and younger workers, cheaper energy and an anti-bureaucracy drive.

To make the UK ‘the best place in the world to launch and scale a business’, the party proposes changes including extending full expensing to software and intellectual property; improving reliefs for founders and investors; reviewing the Patent Box; introducing expert pre-approval of R&D claims and restoring the Office of Tax Simplification. It favours bringing capital gains closer to income tax rates while protecting entrepreneurship, replacing business rates with a commercial landowner levy and using an ‘active family farm test’ for inheritance tax relief.

Labour in Liverpool: New Kid in Town

Labour’s conference was dominated by Andy Burnham’s arrival as Prime Minister and his attempt to relaunch the government two years into the Parliament. Emphasising a break from ‘politics-as-usual’, Burnham delivered a speech that barely mentioned his political rivals, focusing instead on the country’s broader economic and political direction.

The speech offered a prospectus for national renewal: ‘growth in every postcode’, with devolution and regional development as the engine; an industrial strategy in which artificial intelligence would play a central role; and skills reform focused on technical education and young people outside work or education. Stronger relations with Europe and a commission on electoral reform reinforced the sense of a fresh direction, although most major institutional changes were deferred beyond this Parliament.

The largest announcement was a National Care Service providing free personal care. Burnham proposes partly financing this by reforming the state pension triple lock from 2030. However, with the triple lock unfunded beyond 2030, the policy is still likely to require significant tax increases.

The conference revealed a tension between fiscal caution at the top of the party and demands for more radical tax reform from delegates and trade unions. The new Chancellor, John Healey, used his speech to manage expectations ahead of the Budget, promising to meet the fiscal rules and maintain control of borrowing. But on the same day, the conference backed a union-sponsored motion arguing for a wealth tax, a bank windfall tax and an end to frozen income tax thresholds. The vote

does not bind ministers, but demonstrates the pressure from unions and party members for the government to pursue a more redistributive tax agenda.

Fringe debates also highlighted calls for taxing wealth, capital gains and property more heavily. More than 100 Labour MPs are now thought to be part of groups advocating for residential property taxes to be overhauled. Andy Burnham may well agree. He has previously said that he has ‘long been persuaded of the argument’ for reforming property taxes. Both a proportional property tax and a land value tax have their supporters. But concerns remain about the political and practical challenges change would bring.

Conservatives in Birmingham: Get it right next time

The Conservatives left Birmingham looking more united and more optimistic than they have for a long time, but with the party still polling below its dire 2024 performance, the jury is still out on whether they are convincing voters.

The conference sought to distance the party from Reform while advancing a clearer economic offer centred on growth, lower taxes, deregulation and wealth creation. Leader Kemi Badenoch framed the contest as a ‘battle for the soul of the nation’ between high-tax, high-spending Labour and a renewed Conservative Party defending aspiration.

The intellectual core was ‘The Right Way’, Badenoch’s pamphlet which argues that Britain has lived beyond its means under governments of both parties and that wealth must be created before it can be distributed. The paper repudiates the 2022 mini-Budget, warning against tax reductions without credible spending plans. So are their plans credible? They depend on delivering a massive £71 billion of savings (about 5% of total government spending), mostly by cutting social security, overseas aid and the size of the civil service. A ‘Golden Economic Rule’ would split each pound of savings between debt reduction and tax cuts or defined investment.

The main retail policy at the conference was a £6 billion inheritance tax cut. Badenoch promised that family homes would be exempt from inheritance tax and couples could leave an additional £1 million tax-free, while retaining total abolition of inheritance tax as a longer-term ambition. The party also repeated its pledge to reverse restrictions on agricultural and business property reliefs. Critics argued that the housing exemption would favour wealthier households, distort investment

towards property and discourage downsizing. The policy forms part of a broader pro-home ownership pitch, including abolition of stamp duty land tax on main residences as well as Labour's high-value council tax surcharge.

New Shadow Chancellor Andrew Griffith promised 'lower, simpler and fairer taxes' and said he aspired to abolish at least one tax at every Budget. He targeted high effective marginal rates, beginning with the childcare cliff edge above £100,000, and suggested a wider ambition to end cases where government takes more than half of additional earnings.

The party's business offer combined relief with deregulation. Employer National Insurance would be halved for workers aged 21 to 24 on earnings up to £50,270. The party would scrap the 'packaging tax' (Extended Producer Responsibility levy), expand business rates relief, pause Making Tax Digital and replace the IR35 off-payroll rules.

Green Party in Brighton: Let me show you the way to go

The Green Party met for its 'biggest ever' conference following a year of electoral and membership growth, but with poll ratings having slipped back as Labour recovered under a new leader and the Greens encountered a series of political controversies.

Leader Zack Polanski used his speech to claim his party was successfully pushing Labour in a more progressive direction, though he also called out what he sees as gaps between the new Prime Minister's rhetoric and his actions. The headline policy announcement was a three-year 'emergency brake' on private rents. His clearest tax message remained that wealth and capital should contribute more. He renewed support for an annual wealth tax, higher taxation of capital gains and investment income, and a windfall tax on large banks' domestic profits.

On the environment, the conference suggested a shift from support for a single economy-wide carbon tax towards a broader carbon-pricing framework based on an expanded carbon border adjustment mechanism and emissions trading. Other motions gave tax a behavioural role through road pricing, higher aviation taxes, environmental charges and food-price incentives.

Plaid Cymru and the SNP: Come with me and escape

Meeting in Llandudno, Plaid Cymru's first annual conference since forming the Welsh government focused on greater fiscal autonomy and how it could be used to improve the economy and public services.

First Minister Rhun ap Iorwerth demanded a 'new deal' placing Wales at least on an equal footing with Scotland. Party members backed reform of the Barnett formula, higher borrowing limits, greater flexibility over the Welsh Reserve, Wales-specific income tax bands and devolution of air passenger duty and energy regulation.

In Aberdeen, meanwhile, delegates to the SNP's conference backed plans to develop proposals for a system of land taxation in Scotland. The party is hot off the heels of a fifth successive Scottish election win, albeit without the overall majority it hoped would spark a second independence referendum. Ministers said they would 'push at the limits of what is possible under the current constitutional arrangements' to deliver a land tax, but that it was currently the UK government that held most of the cards. Delegates also endorsed a call to devolve powers over retail taxes from Westminster to Holyrood, with the seconder of the proposal arguing that a wider tax base would give Scotland 'more flexibility' over how the tax system should 'look and operate'.

Reasons to be cheerful?

So what did we learn from this year's conference season?

First, that there is more agreement on the problems than on the solutions. Weak growth, high living costs, strained public services, fragile business investment and an overcomplicated tax system appeared in almost every analysis. On one thing, at least, the parties agreed: something better change. There were also elements of agreement around activist government: even parties advocating a smaller state proposed targeted reliefs, industrial strategies or tax incentives designed to change behaviour.

Next is that all parties are prone to a certain amount of 'administrative populism'. Business burdens and the inefficient state make an easy punchbag when looking for the causes of low growth. That's not to say parties are wrong to look at this area. Technology surely can make, say, tax administration easier to navigate. Devolving

power to those closer to the action may make for better decisions (though at what cost to simplification?). Some regulations may well be doing more harm than good. But, as the Shadow Chancellor acknowledged in his conference speech, promises to slash red tape have been heard before and not delivered upon. Ultimately, politicians need to go one step beyond such rhetorical flourishes, setting out detailed proposals before we can judge whether they make sense.

There is a clear dividing line between the parties over who should pay. The Conservatives and Reform propose to spend less on social security, overseas aid and the civil service to free up money for tax cuts, though they disagree on what those tax cuts should be. For the other parties taxing big business and the wealthy a little bit more to either boost public services or cut taxes elsewhere remains the name of the game.

Every party is struggling to manage the tension between fiscal discipline and making an attractive retail offer to the electorate in a crowded marketplace. Labour's care pledge lacks durable funding; Conservative and Reform tax cuts rely on large, politically difficult spending reductions; Lib Dem income tax cuts depend on a future agreement with Europe; and Green revenue estimates depend on taxes with uncertain behavioural effects. All are dreaming of faster growth without any guarantee it will come. None fully acknowledges the pressures on the public finances that will force any government to find more money going forward just to maintain existing levels of provision.

Relitigating Thatcherism has helped both Andy Burnham and Kemi Badenoch define themselves and their respective leaderships. However, the challenges of the 2020s are very different to those of five decades ago and so are the politics. Turning platform dreams into programmes that combine popularity with fiscal and administrative credibility will be hard work. No party has a one-way ticket to the good times. But priorities and directions of travel have been set. And whatever you want from your political heroes when the election comes the choice on offer looks set to be wider than ever.