

# LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE ROUND-UP 2023

## LABOUR FIRES STARTING GUN ON ELECTION

“Protest? Or power? That’s why we changed our Party”.

So responded Keir Starmer after he was physically ambushed at the start of his speech – a helpful metaphor, some would say, for the message he intended to deliver at this year’s Labour Party Conference.

Businesspeople, Trade Unionists and the Party faithful descended on Liverpool over the weekend for what may be their last Conference before a likely autumn general election next year. This context set the backdrop for an annual gathering at which members of Starmer’s freshly-reshuffled Shadow Cabinet sought to present themselves not just as a viable alternative to the Conservatives, but as a government-in-waiting.

This year’s Conference has been overshadowed to some degree by events elsewhere. Saturday’s terror attack on Israeli civilians has ensured a solemn sense of perspective prevailed in Liverpool, but it has also afforded Starmer an opportunity to showcase just how far he has brought the Party since Corbyn’s leadership. Those who might seek to justify the horrors of Hamas’ terror in the name of ‘resistance’ are now confined firmly to the sidelines – rather than sitting in the Main Hall – and Starmer’s words on Israel’s right to defend herself will have been a relief to many Jews both within the Party and across the country.

At this Conference, Labour politicians have exhibited the mix of cautious optimism, clarity of thought and party unity that only happens fleetingly in the course of an election cycle. The Party is united behind its leader and his plans for government, where UK party conferences are often shows of disunity.

This year, the prospect of regaining power is the driving force, and it’s clear that the wish to demonstrate competence and an ability to govern is accompanied by a genuine belief that the Labour Party is indeed a government-in-waiting.

Starmer’s keynote this afternoon reflected that growing belief as he set out Labour’s plans for “a decade of national renewal” – a two-term approach – delivering the “rock of stability” people require, and pledging to “invest in their future”.

Pat McFadden, Starmer’s election chief and party fixer, justified this long-termism because “looking at the state of the public finances, the inheritance we would get demands that candour”. But, he said, the party “would rather take tough decisions every day than spend another five years in opposition”.

Starmer’s speech was ultimately a serious-yet-optimistic look ahead to what he knows would be a difficult period in government – the speech of a man who is prepared to take on the challenge ahead.

*I have to warn you: our way back from this will be hard. But know this: what is broken can be repaired. What is ruined can be rebuilt. Wounds do heal. And ultimately that project – their project – will crash against the spirit of working people in this country. They are the source of my hope.*



## THE MOOD ON THE GROUND

“This is the biggest conference I’ve ever been to” said a grizzled veteran of Conferences past, of a gathering whose size surpassed even the most optimistic predictions. There is a genuine buzz of excitement amongst Party members: another remarked to EGA that the mood was one of “confidence but not arrogance” – a sentiment backed up by others we spoke to on the ground. The buoyant atmosphere is not without caution, however: some more experienced parliamentarians told EGA that there is a lot of work to be done before it’s completely clear what Keir Starmer stands for.

Those journalists hoping the uptick in attendance would afford them more headlines have been disappointed: message discipline has been impeccable after Morgan McSweeney, the party’s top election official, briefed candidates and MPs to speak only about their own patch – and leave it to frontbenchers to speak about policy.

D:Ream’s Things Can Only Get Better, the theme tune to the 1997 General Election when Labour last won power from opposition, has been ubiquitous at every social event – yet the mood has been one of looking not to the ‘glory days’ of the past, but to the future. ‘Blairite’ and ‘Brownite’, ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Labour are no longer the definitions being used about the Party’s policy agenda: a Shadow Cabinet member told EGA that “the 1997 solutions are not going to work in the 2020s, and I’m glad we’re moving beyond that, at last.”

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BUSINESS

While business has had an at-worst difficult and at-best indifferent relationship with Labour during many of its years in opposition, business has steadily flowed back to Conference since Starmer took over. This was even more apparent this year with CEOs, Chairs and senior industry figures flocking to the conference centre, keen to meet with advisers and potential future Ministers.

The sheer scale of the corporate presence at the Fringe – with every sector of the economy represented – shows the degree to which the policy challenges faced by industry are being discussed. Key organisations like the Tony Blair Institute, the IPPR and the Institute for Government all convened panels of experts to explore possible solutions. These are challenges that Starmer’s Labour is clearly alive to, and nowhere was this more evident than in his Shadow Chancellor’s speech. Reeves’ keynote was centred around the need for stability and discipline: stability in the markets and in our supply chains, discipline in our economy and their ambitions for spending taxpayers’ money.

However, such a magnified attendance from business only intensifies the demand for policy detail from those seeking to govern. A more thorough outline of what Britain’s business and regulatory environment would look like under a Labour government was the key ask of the Party this year, and early reports suggest they have largely managed to quench this thirst: business leaders told EGA they have had genuine engagement and not much party politicking.

With this said, Labour has sought to manage expectations about the level of detail they can provide – a wise approach, perhaps, given that EGA spoke to a number of Shadow Ministers who had evidently not quite got to grips with their new brief following the reshuffle. Nonetheless, clear direction has been evident in many policy areas, not least in Reeves’ pledge to stick to “iron clad fiscal rules” above all else; “the foundation upon which progress is built.”

Where there is detail, the scale of the party’s ambitions – including fundamentally reforming entire sections of

the economy and infrastructure – has seen conference-goers struck by the amount of work that will need to be done. Key figures within Labour are acutely aware of this – and how those concerns are addressed in practice will be more important for business than any finely-crafted soundbites from the last three days. It is the answer to these questions which will ultimately dictate just how quickly a Labour government can actually get things moving.



## WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GENERAL ELECTION?

For the Opposition, the annual Conference is the key moment other than a general election to showcase its offer to the electorate. All other major events – the King's Speech, the Budget, and so on – are entirely within the control of the Government, so Starmer and his team really needed to make this one count: the next time he gets this much airtime will, in all likelihood, be on the campaign trail.

The Labour Party made its intentions unequivocal with its choice of slogan for this year's Conference; Let's Get Britain's Future Back is as clear a signal as it's possible to give that it intends to take power in 2024. Over the entire Conference, Labour spinners have been making sure journalists know that the plans Starmer and Reeves are outlining require two terms in Government – as they promise to “turn their backs on never-ending Tory decline with a decade of national renewal”.

Labour has certainly managed to land its key message ahead of the next polling day: Britain is broken under the Tories, and Starmer is the man that disenchanted voters should put their faith in if they want to see the country fixed.

Ultimately, then, the mission for Starmer at this Conference was to offer an answer to a fundamental question: is Labour ready to govern? There is no doubt that it's been a massive boost to his chances of winning back disenchanted Labour voters, many of whom will feel relief after returning from the political wilderness into which Corbyn led them – but the jury may still be out amongst the wider electorate.

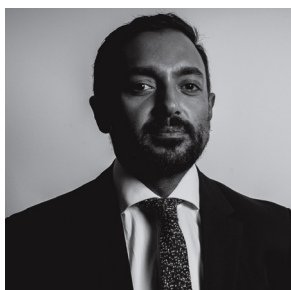
Between now and the general election, Keir Starmer has a clear-cut goal – and it's the most important one of his political lifetime. Quite simply, as he has already done this Conference, Starmer must channel his inner Clement Atlee and ask the nation to give Labour the mandate to do the job, and allow him and give practical effect in Parliament to his policies.

As a veteran Minister of the Blair and Brown governments summed up to EGA: “the election is Labour's to lose”.

## KEY POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Reforms to the planning process to unlock construction and build a series of new towns
- A new ‘Charter for Budget Responsibility’ – essentially a fiscal lock, preventing any government from making significant economic changes without OBR oversight
- An ‘Energy Independence Act’ to reduce dependence on imported energy
- Civil Service reforms to reduce spending on transport and consultancy, and a new commission to recoup fraudulently claimed COVID loans
- A new National Wealth Fund to provide ‘catalytic investment’
- A review of every ongoing major capital project and reforms to infrastructure planning
- A ‘genuine living wage’ and a commission to end the gender pay gap
- Reforms to defence procurement and an acceleration of spending to rearm Britain, resupply Ukraine and boost British industry

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