

Report on the Labour Party Conference, Brighton 2021

John Gillatt, Delegate – Bolton West CLP

As promised when I “made my pitch” to be one of your delegates to the 2021 Labour Party Conference I attended every session of conference usually from 9:45 – 10:00 am until 6:00 pm on each day. On the Saturday of conference I was involved in the compositing of Bolton West CLP’s motion on a Green New Deal and that dragged on until after 11:00 pm. In addition I attended at least two fringe meetings each day – usually one at lunch time (though I did skive off one day and actually have lunch!) plus at least one in the evening. I also attended events at the This World Transformed – a socialist festival that runs alongside conference each year. The three Bolton West CLP delegates were me (from Heaton & Lostock), Julie Hilling from Atherton and a member from Horwich North East.

Julie attended several other meetings during some of the conference sessions and she will report on those separately.

For Julie and I the whole conference was overshadowed by the outrageous suspension of Bolton West’s third delegate over a ridiculous claim of anti-Semitism. In 2019, during the general election campaign she posted on Facebook one article and shared another, both from Jewish writers, one of whom wrote that as Jews there was nothing to fear from a Corbyn government.



At the NW Regional Briefing meeting which took place on the Saturday morning, before conference proper started, I protested loudly against this disgraceful attack on a dedicated and hard-working member but of course they weren’t interested in doing anything and in any case had no power to do so. We were assured

that her card votes (more about card votes later) would be electronically shared out between me and Julie. We have no way of knowing if they were!

During the six days we were in Brighton we met many other members who had also been suspended or expelled from the Party some of whom only found out about it when they were refused entry to the conference itself. This whole shambles was and is an absolute disgrace and as far as we could see aimed solely at those on the left of the Party.

However, most of the mainstream media seems to consider the conference a triumph for Keir Starmer and I suppose if you look at it from the point of view of “the person on the Leigh omnibus” it probably was – if it registered on their consciousness at all! One thing stood out for me though. When Starmer was asked, I think on the Andrew Marr Show, what was more important to him – a Labour government or Party unity he unhesitatingly chose the former. And while we all want a Labour government more than anything else that’s less likely if there isn’t Party unity as well. His reply should have been “both”.

As this was my first Party conference in 48 years of membership I didn’t know exactly what to expect – despite reports I’d heard from other delegates over the years. But I have to say it was fantastic – hard work, rushing around from place to place, a never-ending stream of leaflets, Conference Arrangement Committee (CAC) reports every day to read (and get prepared to respond to almost immediately), getting to know other delegates and understand their often different points of view. But it reaffirmed my belief in the Labour Party as the only vehicle to bring about the change in our society that millions of people need. I heard pleas from many speakers on the left of the Party, including Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, etc for those thinking of resigning or already left to not do so or re-join, to not let the right set the agenda, because we are the only Party that can transform our society into one where everyone is treated decently and has the necessities to lead a happy and fulfilled life.



Delegates, including trade union representatives voted for motions on the following topics to be debated:

- A New Industrial Strategy for a Post-COVID Recovery
- Afghanistan
- Black Lives Matter
- Community Wealth Building
- Electoral Reform
- End Fire and Re-hire and Protect Workers’ Rights
- Green New Deal
- High Street and Business Recovery
- Housing
- Immigration and Asylum Policy
- Israel and Palestine
- LGBT+ Rights
- Mental Health in the Workplace
- Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme
- Public Ownership
- Public Services
- Right to Food
- Social Care
- The NHS
- Violence Against Women and Girls

Motions on all of these were passed other than the one on electoral reform which the Chair reckoned “too close to call” and it went to a card vote, despite a very impassioned debate in which all but one speaker were in favour. In the card vote, CLP delegates voted about 75% in favour whilst the trade unions voted almost 95% against. The vote was therefore lost and I think that means that the matter cannot now be discussed for three years. It was a bitter disappointment to me because Bolton West had voted in favour and Julie and I were therefore mandated.

The debate on the Green New Deal was excellent though during the compositing process (which I heard one delegate refer to as “composting”!) the two groupings couldn’t agree on a single motion so there were two. The first was close to the one we had originally considered at Bolton West CLP but which we subsequently amended to make it more acceptable and the second was one strongly supported by the GMB, who have many members in the nuclear power industry and therefore wanted nuclear as part of the “green energy mix”. Debate was very passionate with many very young delegates making excellent speeches in favour and no speakers against – though one or two did say “vote for motion one but not motion two” and vice versa. Julie and I voted in favour of both.



The first motion which was essentially Labour’s policy as laid out by Rebecca Long-Bailey in the 2019 general election was passed overwhelmingly. The second didn’t get such strong support but was eventually carried on a card vote.

I was very pleased that the motion on Israel and Palestine was passed overwhelmingly as it is a cause very close to my heart. But it seems that Lisa Nandy has already said openly that the Leadership will take no notice of it. It seems that it was “ever thus” – the Leadership ignoring the wishes of the members!

The motion on Public Ownership was limited to Royal Mail and BT Broadband (it was proposed by the CWU) but bearing in mind Starmer’s statement that he won’t nationalise the main utilities if he becomes Prime Minister I don’t have much hope of this being implemented in the foreseeable future.

There was a lot of criticism from delegates that so much time was spent on debating rule changes when there were much more important matters that we should have been discussing. I voted against most of the proposed changes because I felt that they would diminish democracy in the Party and stifle debate (one rule change was to reduce from 20 to 12 the number of topics that delegates to conference can select for debate). I also voted against the idea of requiring Leadership candidates to require the support of 20% of MPs since an analysis of nominations since the system was introduced showed that no female or BAME MPs would have been put forward and in 2020 there would have been a choice between Keir Starmer and, err, Keir Starmer. In a democracy, shortlists of one are never a good idea. As for all rule changes there was a card vote and it was narrowly carried, though the vote would have gone the other way had the UNISON person who voted on behalf of their delegation not done so against the express decision of their Executive!



One quite important rule change was a decision against the wishes of the Leadership that ordinary CLP members must make the final decision about their Parliamentary candidate even when a snap by-election or general election takes place. Delegates from the NE spoke about the disaster that befell us in the Hartlepool by-election when a candidate was “parachuted” in by the NEC.

David Evans, the then Acting General Secretary, himself asked for a card vote to confirm his appointment and I voted against. He was of course confirmed in his post but in the CLP section the vote was only 51 to 49% in favour of him with 95% of the trade union votes for. He is not a popular figure and is seen to be the person responsible for the suspensions and expulsions that are taking place.

Whatever my feelings about the set-piece speeches by “the people at the top”, especially Shadow Cabinet members, these were of a very high quality overall. I know that they are designed for public consumption rather than for we “poor bloody infantry” and I personally did disagree with some of what they had to say. But on the whole they came over well and made me realise, as if I didn’t know already, that we do have a very talented team.

Angela Rayner (Deputy Leader)– many don’t like her accent or the way she constantly refers to her hard upbringing and early life. Also, her publicly quoted comment that the “Tories are scum” hasn’t gone down well with the person on the street (though she is right of course!). But she said, amongst many other things, that from day one a Labour government would focus on workers’ holidays, sick pay, ending bogus employment methods such as companies making all their workers contractors, end zero hours contracts and fire and re-hire. She received a long-standing ovation.



David Evans (General Secretary) started with an attempt at football related humour (to appear a “man of the people” I suppose – as others did too!) which fell completely flat. But it was amusing when he asked delegates “Why did you join the Labour Party?” to be replied with shouts of “Jeremy Corbyn”, at which he visibly squirmed! To me his speech was full of platitudes, telling us how wonderful he is. Although he did say “Keir Starmer has served the public all his life, Boris Johnson has served himself all his life”!

Annelise Dodds (Shadow Leader of the House) spoke on her Equalities Report and compared our approach to that of the Tories in their Police and Crime Bill. She spoke strongly about the scourge of violence against women and girls and pledged to give that “utter priority” in Labour’s plans for policing and justice and she acknowledged that trans rights are human rights and should be regarded as such. It was a very good speech and she obviously fits into her new role better than when she was Shadow Chancellor. Later in the week I was walking down the street and I chatted to her for a few moments. She seems a very pleasant woman and I gained a lot of respect for her.

Ed Miliband (Shadow Business and Environment) was superb and he really does seem to have reinvented himself. He is a natural and convincing speaker, passionate about the fight against climate change. He spoke about COP 26 saying that Boris Johnson is “the wrong man, in the wrong place at the wrong time”. He pledged a Labour government to spend £3 billion to prime the conversion of the British steel industry to “green steel” and invest public equity in green manufacturing such as electric car and battery production. He received an enormous standing ovation and there is obviously a lot of “love” for him in the Party.



Jo Stevens (Shadow Culture, Media and Sport) – a good speech, I think. But I didn’t make any notes so it couldn’t have been that outstanding! Maybe I went to the loo!!

Lisa Nandy (Shadow Foreign Secretary) – a very popular figure, though she has blotted her copybook a bit lately. She of course spoke about foreign policy, announcing that a Labour government would end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and cotton imports from Kashmir (though I wasn’t entirely clear about that!). She said that she would seek a new foreign policy partnership with the EU especially to fairly and humanely tackle the refugee crisis. It was a good speech but not exactly rousing stuff.

John Healey (Shadow Defence) – a sombre speech talking about the armed forces and the support they have given during the COVID crisis. He said that a Labour government would spend an extra £35 million on help and care for veterans suffering from mental health problems. He pledged to plug the “black hole” in the defence budget – not something that I would be happy with when there are many more urgent priorities.

Jonathan Reynolds (Shadow Work and Pensions) – 6 million people will be affected by the £20 cut in the Universal Credit uplift – the biggest welfare cut in history and an unmitigated disaster. He said that we will radically reform Universal Credit to enable lower paid people to keep more of what they earn. He called for “security and hope for everyone”.

Rachel Reeves (Shadow Chancellor) – an excellent and detailed speech. She really does seem to be fitting into her role very well. She gave a thorough breakdown of the government’s disastrous economic policy. Even before the COVID downturn the economy was declining, missing target after target that the Tories had set themselves. She said, “I will not balance the books on the backs of working people”! She pledged to end the charitable status of public schools - £1.7 billion a year and use it for state education, increase the Digital Services Tax to 12.5% (“If you can afford to fly into space you can afford to pay your taxes on earth”!), create an Office for Value for Money and spend £38 billion a year (YES - £38 BILLION!) for 10 years to implement Labour’s Green New Deal. It was an excellent speech and received a sustained standing ovation.

Mark Drakeford (Welsh First Minister) – spoke with passion about what Labour had managed to do in Wales despite the fiscal constraints. A hugely inspirational speech and it shows just what can be done when you have a bold vision and are not deterred from implementing it.



Steve Reed (Shadow Communities and Local Government) – Labour will not let our high streets die (cries of “they already have”!). We will abolish business rates and replace them with a much fairer system designed to help small businesses and entrepreneurs. Land banking will be tackled, requiring developers to build the 1 million homes for which there is existing planning permissions. Priority spending will be in those areas that need it most – not the leafy suburbs of Surrey! He promised much greater local devolution.

Louise Haigh – (Shadow Northern Ireland) – First female Shadow or Secretary of State for NI since the wonderful Mo Mowlam. “The Tory government is undermining the Good Friday Agreement by the disaster that is the Brexit settlement”. She gave a competent, though not exactly inspirational speech.

Anas Sarwar (Leader of Scottish Labour) – a very good speech. “We have heard a lot about the fall of the red wall but the first red wall to fall was Scotland”! He said that the SNP and Nicola Sturgeon are not progressive, they are not our allies and never will be. He reminded delegates that Labour will never win a majority in the UK Parliament if we don’t win a majority in Scotland. That’s not exactly true as the 1997 general election result showed – but it was a good soundbite.

Kate Green – (Shadow Education) – a very convincing speaker, praising teachers for all they had done for students during the COVID crisis and condemning the government’s handling of it. She talked about schools working in partnership with the communities in which they are situated and again mentioned the removal of charitable status from public schools.

Wes Streeting (Shadow Child Poverty) spoke well and passionately about his brief. “We need to change the balance of spending from tackling child poverty to preventing child poverty”. The last Labour government started doing that with initiatives such as Sure Start but the Tories have undone all the good work. The next Labour government will tackle the problem even more vigorously. He claimed that private education will become redundant as we radically improve the state system.

Jonathan Ashworth (Shadow Health and Social Care) – a long – as you would expect – and very well received speech. He said that the NHS isn’t in crisis because of COVID, it’s in crisis because of the government’s

neglect, underfunding and privatisation. The NHS will be seriously hit by the increase in National Insurance contributions – designed in theory at least – to partly support the NHS! “Poverty makes people ill and illness often forces people into poverty. Don’t lecture us (you Tories) about levelling up when you have spent 11 years smashing down”! He spoke passionately about poverty, especially child poverty and the effects it has on health, on dementia and social care – promising to “fix the care system”. A Labour government will double funding for dementia research.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Shadow Home Secretary) – when it comes to refugees Labour will never lose sight of our obligations under international law. Refugees from Afghanistan have been badly let down by the government and those that have arrived here are being treated appallingly – like criminals. A Labour government will bring back Community Policing to cut antisocial behaviour and enable people, especially women, to feel able to go out alone at night. There will be huge drive to recruit many more Special Constables. He announced excellent initiatives on:

- Tackling violence against women and girls, including domestic violence
- Immigration and asylum policy
- Black Lives Matter

David Lammy (Shadow Justice) – his parents were Windrush immigrants and he was first stopped and searched when he was 12 because he “looked like a mugger who was reported in the area”. The Tories have closed 295 courts and there is a backlog of 60,000 cases. Prosecutions for rape are at an all-time low and 51% of the people in our prisons are BAME; this cannot be right. Labour will reform the Judicial Appointments Commission to ensure that judges appointed are more representative of the community, especially in terms of gender and race. He said that the government wants to water down our rights – Labour will strengthen them. The UN Rights of the Child Convention will be brought into British Law.

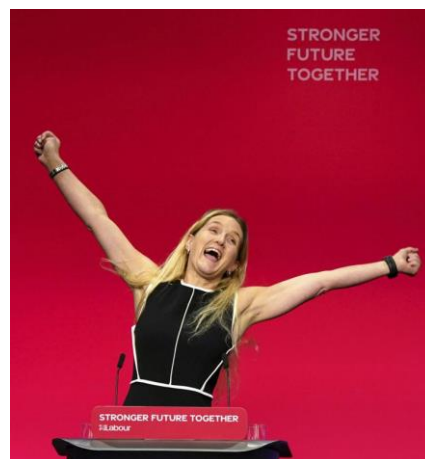
We will fast-track rape, sexual assault and domestic violence cases and make sure that legal aid is available. Misogyny is a crime and will be made one.

A competent speech but I thought he could have done better.

Kim Leadbeater (victor in Batley and Spen) – literally danced onto the stage. She gave a great down to earth speech about the horrible things that had happened during the by-election but praised the hundreds of volunteers who had made her victory possible. She is a very popular and likeable person and was received with great cheers (especially from the Yorkshire contingent). I’m sure that she was asked to speak to liven things up as it was early in the morning and many delegates had had a very late night (NOT yours truly!).

Shabana Mahmood (National Campaign Coordinator) – nothing very special in my opinion, though her role is vital if we are to win the next election which she warned could be just 18 months away! In 2019 we said that we were ready but we most definitely were not. At present we still are not but we are starting to work very intensively to build for a 2023 election.

There was then a break whilst the conference hall was prepared for the Leader’s speech. Police, some armed, came in and searched for anything “untoward” – such as dangerous pieces of fruit (I had an orange in my jacket pocket and was asked “what’s that for”?!). Empty spaces were filled up with visitors from the galley (one person sitting in front of me was a contractor working on the lighting!) and the upper galleries were rearranged to make them look full. Obviously, this was for the media and I wasn’t at all surprised at these shenanigans



The Leader's Speech

I won't go into great detail on the Leader's speech as it has been so well reported in the press. So, I'd like to give my general impressions and mention a few things that I noted.

First of all Keir Starmer was introduced by Baroness Doreen Lawrence who has done an incredible amount for race relations and equality since the murder of Stephen in 1993. When Starmer became Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) he was apparently of great assistance to the Lawrence family and she was unsurprisingly very positive about what he had done for them.

I had decided after all that had happened in the run up to conference and outside the hall during it that I wasn't "too pleased" with the Party Leadership. I wasn't going to join in any overt action – protests, waving flags or banners or heckling but take a neutral stance, sit quietly and listen. So I and quite a large number of others simply didn't take part in the standing ovations.

Julie pointed out to me that the speech is, in any case, designed for the media and the general public, not the Party or the delegates in the hall.

Starmer is not a natural orator as some Leaders have been; the speech, at 90 minutes, was very long, ponderously delivered and I think it unnecessarily dragged on. Having John and Penny Clough present who he had also helped when he was DPP, after their daughter had been murdered by her ex-partner in 2010 I thought rather mawkish as were the continual references to his parents. The jokes, especially the football related ones, were weak and not well received.

A few quotes:

- About the crisis at petrol stations "Johnson talks about levelling up but with the Tories you can't even fill up".
- "My dad was a toolmaker. In a way I suppose Boris Johnson's was too".
- "Boris Johnson assumes that the rules don't apply to him".
- "Boris Johnson isn't a bad man (to cries of "oh no?") he's just a trivial man".
- "He's a trickster who has used his one trick".

The heckling was a gift to him, and he dealt with hecklers very quickly and effectively. Most of them were shouted down by other delegates anyway.

He didn't say anything about NHS privatisation or opposing it but did promise to fast track prosecution of those responsible for rape, sexual assault and domestic violence attacks.

He promised that a Labour government would ensure that people get mental health care in the NHS within a month and that priorities in the NHS in general will be shifted towards prevention. Every community will have an open access mental health care hub.

We will launch the most far-reaching school improvement plan in a generation with every child given the chance to play a competitive sport and musical instrument. Practical life skills will be prioritised, not Latin, two weeks of compulsory work experience will be re-introduced and every young person will get to



see a careers advisor. Digital skills will be made as important as the three Rs. But I was disappointed that there was no mention about removing the charitable status of public schools, as had been announced by Rachel Reeves.

He spoke about the need for innovation in the manufacturing industry and pledged a minimum target of 3% of GDP spending on Research and Development. "If we want to have a good society we have to create a strong economy". "It's not enough to 'Get Brexit Done' you need a plan to make Brexit work, which the Tories don't have".

"The greatest burden of taxation shouldn't fall on ordinary working people. Labour will make sure that all pay their fair share and that people get value for money. We will make no promises that we can't keep or plans that we can't pay for. Under my Leadership Labour will be back in business!"

He spoke about climate change – the biggest crisis of our time mentioning the Green New Deal that had been debated earlier in the week. We will include a climate investment pledge to cut back emissions this decade. The UK has the least energy efficient houses in Europe; we will commit to insulate every home to modern standards that needs it. A Clean Air Act will be introduced to make the air in our towns and cities safer, especially for children. We will invest £28 billion each year for 10 years to tackle climate change.

He talked about the integrity of the UK and "the union" (though not the Bakers' Union that had announced its disaffiliation from the Party a couple of days earlier!) saying that we are far better together than apart.

He spoke of inspirational young people such as Marcus Rashford (whose name was trotted out by speaker after speaker during conference!) and said that "in this hall we are patriots" (cue "illegal" waving of small EU flags by a few people!). He praised the military who put themselves in harm's way to protect us and expressed his pride of what they had done in Afghanistan. "We will do right for the Great Britons who serve in our armed forces".

The speech was, of course, followed by a prolonged standing ovation.



I thought it was weak, lacked imagination and there were very few concrete proposals. But it seemed to go down well with the majority of delegates and has been very positively reported in the press and media which was I suppose the main objective.

Starmer and his wife then did a tour of the conference hall but left before the singing of the Red Flag and Jerusalem.

Then it was over – six days of very intensive debates, discussion and speeches many of them affirming and quite inspirational. I went to fringe meeting after fringe meeting (I saw John MacDonnell speak four times on different topics and Richard Burgon on three – a very inspirational speaker though I do wish he had a volume control!) and enjoyed them all and came away feeling able to continue as Heaton & Lostock Branch Secretary for at least another 20 years! I made some good friendships too – especially with Bernie Gallagher, the delegate from Bolton NE and Angus Heberton from Bolton SE.

I walked back to the station with our suspended third delegate and on the way we met Barry Gardiner, MP who was promoting "End Fire and Re-Hire" and had a lovely short chat to him. A very pleasant man and he immediately offered to speak to our CLP – an offer that we must follow up on.

I would most sincerely like to thank the members of Bolton West CLP for sending me as one of their delegates, for putting their faith in me and I hope that I have represented you well. I'll be very pleased to be invited to Branch meetings to give a talk to members and answer any questions they might have.



Fringe Meetings/Events Attended



Not The Andrew Marr Show's "Brekkie on the Beach" organised by Crispin Flintoff of "Stand up for Labour" comedy fame with John McDonnell, Howard Beckett, Matt Wrack, Ian Hodson, Pamela Fitzpatrick, Mish Rahman, Andrea Gilbert, Luke Smith, Jennifer Jones



"Labour, the Anti-Semitism Crisis and the Destroying of an MP" – book launch by author Lee Garratt about the expulsion of former MP Chris Williamson from the Party. Chaired by Chris Williamson himself.

"Take the Fight to the Tories" – John McDonnell, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Richard Burgon



SERA Rally: "A Fairer Greener Recovery" – Ed Miliband, Preet Gill MP (Shadow International Development) Luke Pollard MP (Shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

“How the Far Right is Exploiting Climate Change” – Paul Mason, Nelini Stamp, Seema Sayeda

“How Can We End 20 Years of the War on Terror” – Jeremy Corbyn, Lindsey German (Stop The War), Andrew Murray (Unite)

“Where Next for Labour and PR?” – Sandy Martin (Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform), Tessa Milligan (Open Labour), Prof Jeremy Gilbert (Univ. of East London)

Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs Rally – Jeremy Corbyn, John MacDonnell, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Richard Burgon, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Apsana Begum, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Zarah Sultana

“La Lucha continua”!

John Gillatt
September 2021