

Labour Party Conference 2018
Dan Iley-Williamson | Oxford East Delegate Report

It was a great privilege to attend conference as a delegate for Oxford East.

Many thanks to the CLP for sending me and to my fellow Oxford and District delegates for the pleasure of their company.

In the run up to conference, there had been fears that it would be dominated by divisions, but instead it was an incredibly positive conference, demonstrating serious engagement with the issues and a powerful unity of purpose.

I came away confident that united behind Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, we can transform Britain for the many.

Motions

Both motions Oxford and District Labour Party had voted to send to conference – on Brexit and Windrush – were selected in the priorities ballot (where delegates vote to decide the topics on which motions would be tabled).

As part of this process, motions on the same topic are composited – i.e. combined into as few motions as possible (preferably one). For some topics, this requires a simple and short meeting. This was not, however, the case for Brexit.

More than 150 motions had been sent to conference, with some significant differences in their proposals. These differences mainly revolved around the party's position on a second vote on the UK's relationship with the EU.

Delegates representing CLPs and unions that had passed these motions were given the daunting task of trying to reach an agreement on a single motion that would then be proposed to conference. Becky Boumelha and I represented Oxford East in this meeting.

For much of it, there seemed to be little chance that we would reach this agreement, with passionate and well-argued cases being made on both sides of the argument. But after nearly six hours of discussion, an agreement was finally reached.

The motion that was agreed upon emphasised that the party wants a General Election and failing that, we would keep all options on the table – including a public vote.

This was then debated on Tuesday and it achieved the remarkable feat of garnering almost unanimous support from the conference floor.

It wasn't all Brexit, though.

Motions on the economy, government contracts, housing, in-work poverty, schools, Windrush and Palestine were all proposed – and all were passed with widespread support.

The motion on Palestine was my highlight of conference. It called for a freeze of arms sales to Israel, the immediate and unconditional end of the illegal siege of Gaza, and for the UK to increase its funding for UNRWA (the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees, which has had its funding drastically cut by the Trump administration).

It was moved by a comrade from Harlow CLP, whose fantastic speech was met by spontaneous chants of “Free Palestine” from across the hall and the waving of thousands of Palestinian flags.

It was a beautiful and defiant stand in support of the Palestinian people, honouring Labour's best internationalist traditions.

Democracy Review

Another major focus of conference was the party's Democracy Review, which had been launched by the leadership at last year's conference.

Recommendations from the Review had gone before the party's National Executive Committee, which in turn made proposals that were to be considered by conference.

Although some of these proposals were more limited than what many had hoped, they still marked an important step forward in building a democratic party capable of transforming the country.

One notable proposal was to reform the Westminster selections procedure, known as the 'trigger ballot' system.

For CLPs with sitting Labour MPs, this procedure required more than 50% of branches and trade union affiliates to vote in favour of having a selection, else the incumbent would be automatically reselected. This was widely recognised to make it very difficult for members to hold their MPs to account.

The NEC proposed to reform this procedure, with a selection triggered if 33% of branches *or* affiliates voted for it. I spoke in favour of the reform in the debate, arguing that whilst not perfect, realistically we faced a choice between this improved procedure, or retaining the status quo. The proposal was passed with the support of 65% of the votes.

Other important reforms from the Democracy Review included enhancing the powers of BAME members and disabled members to self-organise and be represented within the party. My amazing co-Oxford East delegates, Becky and Marie, gave powerful speeches on these proposals.

A final thought...

In 2005, Walter Wolfgang was thrown out of party conference for speaking against the Iraq war.

This year, conference honoured his decades-long commitment to peace and justice.

For me, this symbolised the positive transformation the party has undergone under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. Long may it continue.