

Party conferences are far from perfect, but our democracy would be worse off without them

By Democratic Audit

*The Liberal Democrats began their party conference over the weekend, with Labour and the Conservatives following suit before the month ends. But with their democratic purpose being hollowed out, there is some confusion as to what role they actually play. **Dr Robin Pettitt** argues that although they aren't what they once were, they still serve an important purpose in our democracy.*

What is the point of British party conferences? 'Preciously little' would seem to be the prevailing view considering their perceived lack of any significant decision making role. Certainly for the three main parties, the annual conferences are often seen as being little more than tightly controlled celebrations of each party's magnificent successes and the genius of their leaders. This then raises the question of whether these events would be missed if they ceased to be. The answer is a resounding 'yes'.



(Credit: the Liberal Democrats, cc by nd 2.0)

One of the key things to keep in mind when considering the annual conferences of the three main parties is that they are not now, nor have they ever been, democratic. The Conservative Party has never even pretended to be run on democratic lines. The party's Constitution explicitly says that 'The Leader shall determine the political direction of the party'.

There is a popular belief in the Labour Party, held particularly strongly by the tattered remnants of its left-wing, that Conference (the definite article is often left out) used to be democratic, but Blair and New Labour killed it. This is incorrect. It is very true that the ability of delegates at Conference to defeat the leadership's line has been reduced. However, it is equally true that the leadership has always had the ability and the will to ignore Conference decisions they did not agree with. As early as 1907 Conference passed a motion reading:

That resolutions instructing the Parliamentary Party as to their action in the House of Commons be taken as the opinions of the Conference, on the understanding that the time and method of giving effect to these instructions be left to the Party in the House, in conjunction with the National Executive.

'The time and method of giving effect' has effectively meant that the parliamentary leadership had the power to ignore Conference decisions – which it has done numerous times. Tony Crosland confirmed as much when in 1963 he wrote that the enthusiasm of the party activists was maintained 'by apparently creating a full party democracy while excluding them from effective power' and that the Parliamentary Labour Party had 'complete independence' from Conference decisions. What changed with New Labour was not the ability of Conference to control the Parliamentary Labour Party – since that power never existed. What did change was the ability of Conference to embarrass the leadership by passing motions the leadership disagreed with and would therefore have to ignore. This ability is now much reduced.

The Liberal Democrat conference is probably the one that currently looks the most democratic in that delegates have a habit of ignoring the wishes of the leadership. In this it resembles the Labour Party Conference of old. However, as the tuition fees debacle shows, the Liberal Democrat parliamentary leadership can ignore conference decisions just as much as the Labour leadership has always been able to do. This has only now become truly apparent when the Liberal Democrat parliamentary leadership has had the chance of actually doing things in government. If there was disagreement between conference decisions and leadership wishes in the past it did not really matter as the Liberal Democrats never had the chance of actually implementing their policies at the national level. Now they do have that power, and such disagreements become painfully obvious – as has the lack of real intra-party democracy in the Liberal Democrats.

In short, the party conferences of the three main parties have at most (had) the power to embarrass the leadership, but little real influence. That then returns us to the question 'what's the point?'

And there is a point, and one that has real democratic meaning. Party conferences do not make policy, and increasingly they cannot even disagree with the leadership. I suspect that if the Liberal Democrats are to have a long-term relationship with government power the leadership will have to make changes to the conference format to avoid publicly embarrassing debates and disagreements. What the annual conferences are doing is provide a venue where all elements of the party – from door knocking activists right the way through to (Shadow) Cabinet ministers – can meet face-to-face. Party conferences are the only place where a party comes together in that way. In a very real sense they are the embodiment of a party as a (relatively) unitary actor. As such they have an important symbolic role. In addition, they are one of the few times of the year when the party has the undivided attention of the watching press. For the leadership it is therefore a critical opportunity to communicate a message to the voters. Party leaders are unlikely to ever want to give up on such a rare opportunity. For that reason alone party conference will continue to go on. But from a democratic perspective they also should go on.

It is generally agreed that local campaigning, carried out by volunteer activists, is important for victory and is important for maintaining a link between parties and voters. This face-to-face link between parties and voters is frequently seen as an important element in a healthy democracy. It is also generally agreed that such activists are dwindling in number. Indeed, it can be difficult to give a good reason why someone should spend their weekends and evenings doing rather ungrateful door-to-door canvassing. A party's conference provides one such reason. Party conferences generate incentives for activism in two ways. Firstly, party conferences provide ample opportunity for activists to meet the Big Names of their party.

For the politically interested having the opportunity to rub shoulders, sometimes literally, with party leaders, ministers and other big players is a source of considerable excitement. Secondly, it has often been argued that a party conference consists mainly of preaching to the converted. However, preaching is important for the morale and enthusiasm of the converted. I have attended numerous conferences both in the UK and abroad, and at every single one it is evident that the many, indeed most, of the delegates are buoyed by the 'self-congratulatory' nature of the event. Preaching of this kind reinforces political beliefs and recharges enthusiasm for activism. If we want parties to have the ability to engage with the public on the doorstep, party conferences are an important element in ensuring parties have the capacity to do so. To paraphrase Walter Bagehot, party conferences may not do much in the way of practical decision making, but they are 'the preliminaries, the needful prerequisites of all work. They raise the army'.

Could party conferences be run in more democratic ways? No, probably not. A massive open event with huge media interest is not a good place for the debate, disagreement, and compromise necessary for policy making. As Bismarck is alleged to have said, there are two things you do not want to see being made: sausages and policy. There are very good arguments to be made for having internally democratic political parties. However, party conferences are not good vehicles for democracy. Other forms of deliberation should and can be developed to involve members in policy making. However, party conferences perform a hugely important unifying and mobilising function for political parties. As such they play a key role in maintaining healthy and active political parties – which is central to a healthy and active democracy. They are not perfect, but parties and our democracy would not be better off without them. Quite the contrary.

Note: This article represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

Dr Robin Pettitt is a Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the School of Economics, History and Politics, Kingston University.

