

There exists a disjunction between Tory preoccupations in Birmingham and the more fundamental challenges the party actually faces

Tim Bale describes the typical party conference atmosphere and argues the Conservatives' obsession with issues like Europe, visa restrictions and Boris only distract from far greater and more pressing concerns facing the party.



I'm off to the Tory conference on Wednesday – teaching at [Queen Mary](#) precluding me going any earlier – and very much looking forward to it, not least because I get to spend the evening in the convivial company of Aston's [Professor Simon Green](#), German politics whizz and all-round-good-egg.

I'm not an expert on conferences *per se*. Indeed, if you asked me to say anything half-way sensible about how they work and what they're really all about, I'd probably send you straight off to read [a fascinating book on them](#) by my friend [Florence Faucher-King](#), who teaches at Sciences-Po in Paris. However, having been a few times before, I confess I do find them both fun and anthropologically fascinating.

When it comes to the Conservative Party conference, the thing that always strikes me most is the disjunction between how the delegates appear *en masse* and what they're like when you get chatting to them over a cup of tea or a drink at the bar.

If you pop into the main hall to hear some of the speeches or even visit some of the better-attended fringe meetings, your stereotypes are by and large confirmed. The rank and file don't literally buy for blood – well not many of them anyway (boom-boom). But they do exhibit a depressing tendency (shared of course with their counterparts in other parties) to clap and cheer in near-pavlovian fashion to the most crushingly predictable button-pressing from the podium. If you share their instincts, you will be mightily reassured. If you don't share their instincts, it's a bit like being trapped with no visible means of escape inside a 3-D Imax version of the *Mail* or the *Express*.

But wander for a while outside the hall or the fringe, and things are very different. Share a table or a seat at the bar with an individual delegate (actually, they often come as couples, but never mind) and you almost always find yourself chatting to an incredibly friendly, open-minded character with a whole host of interests and a wealth of experience; much of it practical and most of it, of course, gained way outside Westminster.

Quite what happens, then, when these people gather together in greater numbers – a kind of reverse alchemy that turns gold into base metal – I do not profess to understand, it being more psychological than political. Perhaps someone should do a PhD on the subject? Come to think of it, someone probably has.

One thing I do know, however, is that there will also be another notable disjunction this week. That's the one between what the Party will be preoccupied with in Birmingham and the more fundamental challenges



it actually faces.

According to media reports anyway, [Tories in and around the ICC](#) this week will be mulling/obsessing (take your pick) over the following: Europe (and the threat from UKIP); reducing the time limit on abortion; avoiding placing more crushing and unfair burdens on people all-too-easily caricatured as filthy rich; stopping additional benefits that would go to poor people who have more children (presumably at the same time as reducing their access to abortion); HS2; axing plans to legalise gay marriage; and slapping visa restrictions on EU migrants. Oh, and Boris.

What they really need to worry about, as candid friends like [Michael Ashcroft](#), [Tim Montgomerie](#), [PlatformTen](#), [Bright Blue](#) are determined to keep reminding them, goes rather deeper. Personally, I'd include (at the very least) the following:

- 1) How is a Party which [only managed to win 36% of voters in 2010](#) going to get the additional 5 or 6% that it needs to win an overall majority if, as looks to be the case, its economic policies are making a swift return to growth less rather than more likely?
- 2) Why, when research continually shows that most British voters are pretty centrist on the economy and public services and pretty authoritarian (as opposed to libertarian) on matters social, do the most creative minds in the Tory Party still seem to think that the way forward lies in combining small-state neo-liberalism on the former with social liberalism on the latter?
- 3) If social liberalism actually does make sense in the long run – and there are good arguments why, given how desperately the Tories need to improve their share among the young, the educated middle-classes, and ethnic minorities, it might do – why are their less creative counterparts still allowed to bang on so loud and long about the sort of stuff that those voters find such a turn off?
- 4) Can a Cameron really hope to get away with what Thatcher got away with when a) he's facing a Labour Party that has inconveniently decided not to implode and produce a policy platform that not even its best friends would vote for; b) real wages are pretty stagnant and c) he's forced by fiscal realities to attack the middle-class welfare state – something Mrs T. never dared to do.
- 5) Oh, and Boris.

All is not lost, of course. Stranger things have happened. The Opposition's lead is nowhere near what it could or should be. Likewise voters aren't too sure about its leader. Some of its values are way out of kilter with those of the electorate.

This, after all, explained John Major's surprise victory in 1992 – a triumph that is recently coming back into fashion in Conservative circles. Unfortunately, almost exactly the same could have been said of the situation that Gordon Brown's government faced before, during and after '[the election that never was](#)' in 2007. Then it was little more than whistling in the dark. Will it be any different this time round?

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