



STARMER DRAWS A LINE

LABOUR LEADER LOOKS TO MAKE A CLEAN BREAK WITH THE CORBYN YEARS AT VIRTUAL PARTY CONFERENCE

Tuesday's keynote speech by new Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer marked a clear turning point in the party's direction and political positioning. "This is a party under new leadership" he declared, as he gave his first major set piece pitch to the nation. The message was clear: Labour is changing, and Starmer wants to win.

It was an overwhelmingly political speech, stopping short of any major policy announcements. Under the conference strapline of 'A New Leadership', the shadow Leader sought to draw a dividing line between himself and the Prime Minister, as well as between the current Labour Leader and his immediate predecessor. Labour, he said, had deserved to lose the last election. It was time to "get serious about winning".

Reasserting Labour's key attack lines against Boris Johnson, Starmer was scathing about the Government's record, arguing that their ineptitude is "holding Britain back" and that they have lost control of the coronavirus crisis. Hammering the message home, he accused the Government of "serial incompetence" and attacked their record on public services: "For a party called the Conservative Party, they don't seem to conserve very much."

Keir Starmer also turned his fire on the Prime Minister himself, attacking him for not being "serious" and arguing he is "not up to the job". In a sign of where Labour will seek to draw dividing lines in the months to come, he drew stark parallels between himself and Boris Johnson. "While Boris Johnson was writing flippant columns about bendy bananas, I was defending victims and prosecuting terrorists", he said, adding: "While he was being sacked by a newspaper for making up quotes, I was fighting for justice and the rule of law". We can expect to see these comparisons reiterated in Labour's narrative over the coming months.

Starmer also used his speech as an opportunity to distance himself from the Corbyn years, saying that "when you lose an election in a democracy, you deserve to" and "we have to change, and that's what we're doing". He reflected on his promise to "root out the antisemitism that has infected our party" and committed again to rooting it out "once and for all". In a sign of the internal challenges that remain within Labour, the Corbyn-supporting group Momentum hit back, arguing that the Leader's focus should be on "solidarity with the working class", rather than "empty slogans".

All in all, it was an assured 25-minute speech, designed to set out Starmer's vision and values, whilst positioning the Labour Leader as a credible alternative to Boris Johnson, and demonstrating that the party really is under new management.

CONFERENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID

It's fair to say this is not how Starmer would have envisaged making his first conference speech as Leader of the Labour Party. His address to an online audience, against the backdrop of the Danum gallery, library and museum in Doncaster, could not have been further from the packed hall at the Brighton Centre where Jeremy Corbyn's every other line was cheered by thousands of members this time last year.

But the alternative format did allow him to make a symbolic point: Doncaster's two Labour MPs clung on at last year's election, but the area is now surrounded by blue seats – including the nearby Don Valley, represented by a Conservative for the first time in its 100-year history. Starmer's message to traditionally Labour areas like Doncaster is: 'We hear you, and things have changed. Take another look at Labour.'

Cheering crowds at party conference do not always translate into electoral success, as Labour experienced most recently at the 2019 election. Starmer is more likely to be worried about the extent to which his words cut through to the public. Party conference is one of the truly agenda-setting moments for a party out of power; an opportunity to dominate the airwaves and beam your message out to voters.

But this year's Covid-stricken event was largely overshadowed by the UK's surging coronavirus rates, and the news – briefed to the media just hours before Starmer took to his feet – that severe new restrictions to people's freedom were about to be reimposed. With virtually no policy announcements of significance, it's unclear whether this virtual event will have done enough to really connect Labour's new leadership with the public.

KEY QUOTES

"Never again will Labour go into an election not being trusted on national security, with your job, with your community and with your money. That's what being under new leadership means."

Sir Keir Starmer, Labour Party Leader

"We will be campaigning on three economic priorities. Jobs, jobs, jobs. We will speak with one voice as one labour movement."

Angela Rayner, Deputy Leader

"As Chancellor, I would restore that trust with business. Because I understand what a critical role business plays in creating jobs and supporting livelihoods across the country."

Anneliese Dodds, Shadow Chancellor

"This pandemic has exposed a fundamental truth about the condition of Britain. Ten years of Tory rule left Britain weaker and exposed to a pandemic at the very time when thanks to climate change, pandemics are becoming more likely not less."

Jonathan Ashworth, Shadow Health Secretary

WHAT WAS LABOUR'S MESSAGE TO BUSINESS?

Labour this week conducted a wide-ranging outreach programme with the business community. The three-day virtual Business Forum featured discussions on a range of topics including Brexit, the recovery from coronavirus, and industrial strategy, (amongst others). The programme kicked off with a Q&A with Keir Starmer, and also included panel events with Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds, and Shadow Business Secretary Ed Miliband. The agenda featured a number of roundtable discussions to complement these panels, which were attended by various members of the Shadow Frontbench.

It's evident that the Labour Party under Keir Starmer are now keen to constructively engage with business, and that this Business Forum marks the turn in the relationship. Even on the big thornier issues, such as nationalisation, spokespeople were clear that a dialogue is important to the Labour Party at this time. Such positive engagement on so many areas, with such clear buy-in from the Labour frontbench, sets a welcome new direction.

CORONAVIRUS

When the pandemic began earlier this year, Starmer went out of his way to present Labour as a constructive Opposition that was prepared to put party politics to one side in the national interest. As public support for the Government's handling of the crisis has gradually fallen away, his tone changed markedly – and he was unforgiving on this topic in his keynote conference speech. The Government's incompetence on coronavirus is slowing Britain's economic recovery, he claimed, pointing to problems with testing and PPE, wasted public funds and a failure to get children back to school. A second lockdown would be "a sign of Government failure, not an act of God", he said. In a highly personal attack on the Prime Minister's character, he accused him of lacking the seriousness required to lead, responding to problems either by "wishing [them] away" or "lashing out".

Starmer will be conscious that while frustration with the Government over coronavirus is real, the public also recognise that it is much easier to criticise than to govern. Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds' three-point plan to revive the UK's economy – recover jobs, retrain workers and rebuild business – was designed to show Labour has some answers as well as criticisms. However, with policy commitments absent from this conference's agenda, the public don't yet know what the Opposition would do in power. The Government's credibility has taken an unquestionable hit in the eyes of voters, Starmer now needs to prove that Labour is a serious alternative under his leadership.

BREXIT

In an unlikely nod to David Cameron's speech to his own party conference 14 years ago, Starmer insisted that Labour would not be "a party that keeps banging on about Europe". His attempts to draw the line under the Corbyn era are matched by his efforts to do the same with his own former position on Brexit. The "grown-up way" to handle Brexit is to go out and get a deal, he said. The debate between Leave and Remain "is over".

It seems an age ago (it was in fact two years) that Starmer upstaged Corbyn by announcing to conference that Labour would back a second referendum on Brexit, with an option to remain in the EU. At this conference, his message was clear: Brexit is done, and the Leave-Remain divide only hurts us. But we will continue to hold the Government to account if it fails to live up to its promises and leaves the EU without a deal. If the Prime Minister manages to reach a deal with Brussels, the next big decision the Leader of the Opposition will have to make is whether or not Labour should vote for it. He is keen to show Brexit-backing heartlands that Labour understands their concerns, but he will be wary of waving through a deal negotiated by a Prime Minister he has repeatedly dismissed as incompetent. There is some way still to go before the party can put its split over Europe behind it.

REACTION



Jess Phillips MP
@jessphillips
Shadow Home
Office Minister



For me the best thing about Keir's speech is the idea that you have to deliver not just say things. The recklessness of promising the world, or even just the basics (like a test or a school that's open) and delivering nothing undermines trust, hope and ruins our country.

10:01 AM · 22 Sep 2020



Frances O'Grady
@FrancesOGrady
General Secretary
of the TUC



Great speech by @Keir_Starmer Keir proves he's in touch with what working families want - a chance to get on in life, a decent job and a guarantee that hard work pays. #LabourConnected

9:38 AM · 22 Sep 2020



Andrew Scattergood
@AJScattergood
Co-Chair of
Momentum



Breaking your promises to your electorate is no way to win back trust. If Starmer wants to win this country's confidence, he must show he's a man of his word, not a careerist politician who'll say what is needed to win power and then abandon his promises once he gets there.

11:31 AM · 22 Sep 2020



Stephen Bush
@stephenkb
Political Editor,
New Statesman



By not talking about policy at all, Starmer ensures that what little coverage his speech gets will be his preferred "Labour: now non-threatening!" coverage. And, of course, covid provides an incidentally unimpeachable justification for that.

2:00 PM · 22 Sep 2020



Torsten Bell
@TorstenBell
Chief Executive,
Resolution Foundation



Quite good this. Radical ideas include 1) winning's better than losing 2) you might want to address the questions the country is asking now, not the ones you cared about two decades back. An unusual combination of blindingly obvious and well worth saying.

09:38 AM · 22 Sep 2020



Dan Hodges
@DPJHodges
Political Commentator,
Mail on Sunday



Very, very strong from Starmer. The Tories have a proper fight on their hands now.

09:36 AM · 22 Sep 2020

ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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