

Conservative Democratic Organisation (CDO) Conference 2023

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Special Conference Report from Bournemouth, plus video

By CIBUK Communications Director, Ben Philips

On behalf of those who take the health of the nation's parliamentary democracy seriously, CIBUK headed down to Bournemouth last Saturday to observe party politics in action as Conservative grassroots members came face-to-face with their elected representatives in Parliament in a frank exchange of views which will be made known to Number 10 in quick time.



The brainchild of Lord Peter Cruddas and former MEP David Campbell Bannerman, the CDO's main objective is to re-connect the Parliamentary Party with its loyal foot-soldiers who remain outraged by the removal last autumn

of two Prime Ministers without any say in the process by the voluntary membership.

To that extent the aims of the convention will chime with

voters up and down the country who feel increasingly alienated by the growing gulf which appears to have opened up between the political establishment in Westminster and the views and values of those on the ground they are supposed to represent.

Conference Highlights

MP and Opera Singer!

A particular gripe with many voters is the lack of real-life experience among the recent parliamentary intake, many of whom are elected through a carefully orchestrated ballot to represent his or her party with little or nothing to distinguish them from their colleagues. Where are the characters, we ask, or those who have done something distinguished, interesting or unique as part of their backstory?

Step forward Andrea Jenkyns MP, who we were told, once trained as an opera singer. The member for Morley and Outwood duly stepped up and led the delegates in a rousing three-verse rendition of the National Anthem on the overhead screen to remind everyone present why they were there. More of that, one feels, would work wonders for democracy.

Conservative Democratic Organisation Conference from BH Live on Vimeo.

‘A simple thank-you goes a long way’

It fell to Conor Burns, MP for Bournemouth West, former Minister for Northern Ireland and Trade, to initiate proceedings and remind his parliamentary colleagues that a simple note of thanks to those who give up their time to work for the party is never wasted.



Photo source: Twitter @ConorBurnsUK

It is a lesson which all members of the House would do well to remember. For years Labour took its support in Scotland for granted and was accused of treating it like a 'branch office.' We know what happened next.

The Tories too appear guilty of the same and what became a running theme as the day developed was a realisation that the parliamentary party in Westminster could achieve nothing without the support of those who give up their time to sell the party's message on the doorstep.

Chairman's report and speech

David Campbell Bannerman provided the conference with a key-note address outlining the debilitating effects of over-centralisation of politics, with particular reference to the Parliamentary Conservative Party.



"The Party is dying as an institution. We've got to renew it like a plant that is fading."

"For anyone who believes in grass-roots democracy as a way of revitalising our main parties, today's figures for the incumbent government should give us all concern. Grass-roots membership of the Conservative Party has plummeted from half a million in the late 1990's to 170,000 and the number of prospective Conservative candidates applying for any given constituency has also been reduced from around three hundred to three."

"Furthermore, not only had the quantity and quality of its members declined but there was a worrying drift in policy away from the core values on which the Party and its members were elected in 2019."

"We want to be a true party not a new party"

A fundamental re-calibration was required, he suggested, both in terms of internal party democracy and in a renewed focus on the core policies and principles as advocated by the party's grassroots activists.

Mr. Campbell Bannerman was at pains to differentiate the CDO from Labour's *Momentum*. CDO is not a pressure group designed to impose its will or policy programme on the rest of the party. Rather it has been established to re-energise the party and revitalise the links between its members in Parliament and those who support and/or work for them out in the country.

Speech by CD0 President – Lord Peter Cruddas of Shoreditch



These points were amplified in the speech which followed by the CD0 President, Lord Peter Cruddas.

Image source: Twitter @peteratcmc

In an impassioned speech to the floor, he expressed his own and many others sense of betrayal at the manner and method of Boris Johnson's removal as Party Leader and Prime Minister which led in turn to the creation of the CD0 and its first annual conference in Bournemouth.

"Fewer than 60 Conservative MPs decided to ignore fourteen million voters and forced a resignation of our sitting Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

This was done undemocratically with systematic resignations, collusion, secret meetings and plotting behind the back of our elected leader by Conservative MPs including some of the 1922 Committee who were complicit in this shameful and appalling behaviour.

This autocratic approach demonstrates the need for constitutional reform of our party.

"Whatever way you look at it, the constructive removal of our Prime Minister was an abuse of power and members were

powerless to do anything about it. And that lack of members' power," he concluded, "is why we are here today."

On the business of winning elections, he ended with a sober warning to delegates as to what the future might hold if the Party does not take its members with it.

"If Labour wins a big majority at the next election, they will reduce the voting age to sixteen, they will abolish voter ID and they will introduce proportional representation, making it almost impossible for the Conservatives to win an outright majority in the future."

'Take Back Control' was the rallying cry during Brexit. It still is if the CDO Conference in Bournemouth is anything to go by.

Jacob gives us a history lesson



Delegates were given a history lesson by the Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP who called on the party to renew itself as a mass movement.

Citing the Primrose League in the late 19th Century and the reforms of Lord Woolton after the Conservative Party's drubbing in the 1945 election, the former Business Secretary urged the conference to look to rebuild a third mass movement along those lines.

History also tells us that parties need to be loyal to their leaders especially in the run-up to a General Election. He urged delegates NOT to challenge the Prime Minister but to support him up to 2024. Otherwise he said, *"we are toast."*

Photo : Copyright Richard Vardy 2023

Series of Constitutional Votes/Motions

A series of constitutional measures were also voted upon at the conference under the auspices of John Strafford, CDO Constitutional Advisor.

For CIBUK supporters in particular, what is striking is the huge gulf which continues to separate the Parliamentary Conservative Party from its membership over the central issue of Brexit.

Seven years after the result, 60% of Tory MPs voted to remain in the EU whilst 70% of members wished to leave. Scarcely can the views of both sides have been more polarised. To this observer, it points to a parliament that continues to be instinctively wedded to the European Union and would like to return to some kind of 'dynamic alignment' at the earliest opportunity.

To those who say 'Brexit is done', that message still seems not to have been hoisted on board by those in charge. For that and for other reasons, proposed changes to the Party's constitution were voted on including changes to the way the leader of the Party is elected.

Legal Eagles come to UK's defence

Paul Diamond and Steven Barratt provided their legal voices to the debate, the former deploring the lack of internal democracy in the appointment of the Party's current leader and expressing his dismay at what is currently being promoted and taught in schools which will chime with parents up and down the country.

Confining himself to the legal interpretation of international law, Steven Barratt made the point that when the UK left the

EU, it rescinded those parts that pertained to EU law and was quite entitled to do so.

Rebuilding our Grassroots

During the afternoon session, the floor was open to delegates around the country to have their say on the Conservative Party's future development.

Jacob Rees-Mogg's younger sister Annunciata re-iterated her commitment to the Party after her foray into Eurosceptic politics with the Brexit Party at the time of the 2019 General Election.

Perhaps the most eloquent speaker was Councillor Mimi Harker, from Buckinghamshire whose patience she said was at breaking point in terms of the treatment meted out by those at the heart of the Parliamentary Party towards their own voluntary workers.

This has been an accusation common to both the major parties over the years. To those on the outside looking in, the poor treatment of local party delegates by those they work for never ceases to amaze.

To end as we began, the word 'Sorry' still seems to be the hardest word.

Responding to the debate

Priti Patel – MP

The darling amongst Conservative grass-roots activists and local association members, the former Home Secretary gave a tour de force on behalf of the membership and implored the Parliamentary Party to acknowledge, support and work closely

with its army of volunteers, stressing the vital contribution of volunteers in any successful political campaign.

“Turning their back on the membership”



Remarking on the way in which Boris Johnson was summarily removed from office without recourse to the membership, she said colleagues in Westminster had *“turned their back on the membership and broken that golden thread in terms of the democracy from the bottom of the party right up to the top and we have to rebuild that.”*

“Our members are the most authentic voice of the Conservative Party. You stand up for what we believe in... and in my view, we do have to stand firm on this because we risk losing votes if we forget who we are and what we stand for.”

In a swipe at the current leadership she said the Party had rolled back on its 2019 General Election commitments which now look as if they are being re-written. On Europe she observed, *“that once in a generation opportunity the people had given and trusted us to transform our country, when it comes to EU matters, looks like it’s being diluted and frittered away.”*

Her attacks were not confined to EU policy alone. *“And what at the end of the day radical, innovative Conservative manifesto we all got behind back in 2019 which reflected our values and beliefs we can’t let that be confined to a corner somewhere, we have to stand up and continue to champion that.”*

CONCLUSION

In speaking as she did, the Essex MP spoke for party political activists and voters everywhere who are deeply frustrated at the lack of cut-through in Westminster and the gulf which still exists between those who are sent to Parliament and the volunteers who work on their behalf to get them there.

Party politics is nothing without its supporters. In that sense this conference has been a demonstration of democracy in action and for that at least we should be thankful and acknowledge the contribution of CDO to that process. We shall see where it goes from here.

***By Ben Philips, Communications Director, CIBUK
18/05/23***



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