

Is May for turning on Chequers? Conservative Party Conference report

CIB committee member, political scientist Dr Anna Bailey, reports on the Conservative Party Conference. Was there any sign that Chequers could be chucked?

The fringe was king at this year's Conservative Party Conference. While the regular ministerial speeches in the main hall were poorly attended, Brexit-related fringe events were packed to the rafters.

Even queuing an hour or more in advance did not guarantee entry. Sunday's Brexit Central rally saw delegates queuing out of the building for a chance to hear Jacob Rees-Mogg and other Brexiteers. A lucky 300 made it inside, while a similar number were turned away.

In many ways, this was a pleasing development. The active fringe showcased the lively intellectual movement that Brexit now enjoys, with think tanks, backbench MPs – and yes, even some ministers – brimming with ideas on how the UK can utilise the opportunities offered by its post-Brexit sovereignty.

Just as importantly, delivering a meaningful Brexit was clearly top of the agenda for regular party members. There can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of Conservative grassroots delegates were not only firmly committed to Brexit, but also decisively opposed to Chequers.

There was a widespread awareness among grassroots members that the so-called 'common rulebook' would prevent the UK regaining sovereignty in any meaningful sense. 'Chuck Chequers' badges and stickers were widely worn. Once you were wearing one, other delegates would approach you enthusiastically and ask

where they could get their own.

The problem, of course, is that today's Conservative Party is the least internally democratic of any UK political party, a point devastatingly made by the Campaign for Conservative Democracy at the Brexit Advance Coalition's Alternative Conference event.

Even the near-universal support of party members for a Brexit that restores full UK sovereignty does not count for much in terms of realpolitik. The membership has little to no influence over the party leadership or MPs. No wonder the Conservative Party now has fewer members than the SNP.

Listening to Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab on the fringe was revealing, if rather painful. Despite his valiant efforts to remain relaxed and upbeat, Raab was clearly struggling to find a way of tiptoeing through the minefield of not criticising May or Chequers, while also avoiding contradicting his own true Brexiteer preferences (which, I strongly suspect, are to abandon Chequers and pursue a free trade deal). As a consequence, he was able to say very little of substance.

Raab has faced a lot of criticism from Brexiteers who feel he has sold out his principles by backing Chequers to further his career. Personally, I take a more charitable view. It is vital that we have a Brexiteer in the post of Brexit Secretary as a bulwark against Brexit being diluted still further. I hope and believe that Raab is not a sell-out, but is gallantly sacrificing his reputation and principles to the cause.

So what will happen now? Has anything changed as a result of the conference?

We certainly didn't see the fireworks or a large-scale challenge to Mrs May that some predicted. The European Research Group (ERG), which is estimated to enjoy the support of around 70 Conservative MPs, had a clear tactic. Convince Theresa May to abandon Chequers in favour of seeking a

'Canada+++' free trade deal, rather than seek to overthrow May herself.

At fringe event after fringe event, ERG MPs bent over backwards to avoid criticising May personally. They were scrupulous in only playing the ball (Chequers), not the player (May). If she wanted an opportunity to move away from Chequers while not losing any authority as leader, it was there for the taking.

It was noticeable that May carefully avoided using the word 'Chequers' in her conference speech. However, there is nothing to suggest that this was anything other than her abandoning a toxic brand, rather than a signal of policy change.

We know from Tim Shipman's excellent book *Fall Out* that May's *modus operandi* is to isolate herself from her ministers and the parliamentary party as a whole, and plough stubbornly on in 'splendid isolation'.

Reports today suggest that government whips are lining up Labour MPs to cancel out ERG opposition to Chequers and push it through parliament. It would appear that, rather than using conference as an opportunity to listen and change course, May has just treated it as a hurdle to be overcome.

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For anyone who would like to catch up on the best of the fringe events at Conservative Party Conference, head over to our Facebook page. We have posted numerous livestreams of Brexit-related fringe events, courtesy of CIB affiliate member The Bruges Group.