

Conservative Party Conference – Tuesday

Today at Conference

Key Shadow Ministerial Activity

Transport and Housing: Shadow Transport Secretary Theresa Villiers; Shadow Housing Minister Grant Shapps

The Economy: Shadow Chief Treasury Secretary Philip Hammond; Shadow Chancellor George Osborne

Business: Shadow Business Secretary Ken Clarke

The Green Economy: Shadow Energy and Climate Change Secretary Greg Clark; Shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary Nick Herbert

Key Fringe Events

- **Reform/Legal & General**
Future support for flexible retirement
- **Conservative Technology Forum**
Accessible broadband for all
- **The Enterprise Forum & STEP Fairness for the Elderly:**
Dignity in Retirement, Pensions & Long-term Savings
- **Reform/BBC**
Digital Britain: White paper or white noise?

Proceeding with Caution

Yesterday



The opening day of the Conservative Conference in Manchester was unsurprisingly upbeat – but the message from senior Conservatives to the Party faithful was more sombre: this is our election to lose. The charismatic Party Chair, Eric Pickles MP, set the tone, saying the next General Election should not be considered ‘in the bag.’

The Shadow Cabinet took part in a very polished, expertly stage-managed display, titled ‘*Get Britain Working*’ which built on Cameron’s heavily trailed announcements over the weekend on welfare dependency and job creation. In his welcome address, Cameron tackled criticisms of inexperience amongst his Front Benchers, first by welcoming the return of Kenneth Clarke to the Cabinet and later declaring himself ‘guilty as charged’ of having youth and energy on his side against a tired Labour Government. He said that all Labour could talk about in Brighton last week was the Conservatives, though it was noted that a Party video shown as soon as he sat down had an emphasis on Labour.

With a somewhat cautious atmosphere amongst many of the Front Bench, it is unlikely that we can expect any bold or off message statements this week other than in the carefully considered main policy speeches. We understand that Cameron’s Press Secretary Andy Coulson issued an ‘information blackout’ on the media last weekend and banned all Shadow Ministers from speaking to the press. One senior journalist told *Insight Special* that he called the operation ‘*incredibly cynical*’. Today, the Conservative spin machine was in full swing, denying a rift between Boris Johnson and Cameron on the issue of a referendum on the Lisbon treaty.

Today at Conference

Today’s key speeches will focus on the economy, with George Osborne taking to the podium where it is expected that he will announce an increase in the retirement age to 66. This is likely to save the Treasury billions in pension

payouts. There will be considerable pressure on him to perform – he has been criticised by business leaders, the media and other Conservatives over the last year. However, it is worth remembering that it was Osborne’s speech two years ago, where he announced proposals to radically reform Inheritance Tax, which destabilised Brown enough to call off a General Election.

Other speeches today will include Grant Shapps and Caroline Spelman on Housing and ‘The Low Carbon Economy’ from Greg Clark and Nick Herbert.

This morning also sees a poll from Populus in The Times that finds that only 28 per cent of voters think the Conservatives are doing better because they have genuinely changed, while 68 per cent believe the party is performing well “mainly just because the Labour government has become so unpopular”. The party hierarchy will be alarmed by this news, but if wise, they will use it this week to drive home their message that they still have a huge mountain to climb.