

Party animals



THE CONFERENCE SEASON IS A TIME FOR THE BIG BEASTS OF PARTY POLITICS TO ROAR TO THE FAITHFUL – AND FOR THE ACT TO MAKE THE CONTACTS THAT WILL BENEFIT THE TREASURY COMMUNITY. **JOHN GROUT** REPORTS BACK FROM THIS YEAR'S THREE BIG CONFERENCES.

All the UK political parties organise “business days” which the ACT attends in an attempt to influence the political environment to the benefit of corporate treasurers. The aim (well, the hope) is to get to meet the key ministers and their shadows dealing with topics of treasury relevance. And to meet some of the MPs who take an interest in those topics – including members of relevant select committees. MEPs are there too, including members of relevant European Parliament committees.

Other policy wonks who care about some of the same subjects are in attendance too. Indeed, there is much to be gained from comparing notes – even in learning about things they are advocating that the ACT might want assiduously to oppose.

The general calibre of the politicians of all parties put forward to meet the ACT delegates, their general appreciation of the issues and their stamina are always impressive. Organised events start at 8am or earlier, and some events kick off at 10 or 10.30 in the evening.

Last year Labour had an excellent business day, with various formats of meetings with key players and a good long networking reception in the evening to which just about any MP, MEP, minister, journalist, etc who had ever heard of “business” came – except for the prime minister. And there were good fringe events. Ministers, some of them very impressive at working a room, went out of their way in receptions to bring others over because they thought you should meet them or they should meet you. Last year, though, some ministers had an “end of an era” aura about them and could be seen openly consulting their BlackBerry while supposedly listening to a question they were about to answer. So last year!

This year, the Liberal Democrats, in Liverpool, had the best organised conference of the three main political parties, coming over as mostly bright, engaged, accessible

and perhaps surprised to be in office. Not one could be seen tinkering with their BlackBerry when they were on parade. A very good business day indeed. In the evening, there was a so-so reception but an excellent business dinner with useful Liberal Dems around the tables and Nick Clegg there throughout, spending time with each table.

Labour, in Manchester, offered a stark contrast to the Liberals (and indeed themselves last year). They were a bit shell-shocked. Only one ex-minister was attending to the BlackBerry. Some senior figures were still engaging, serious about the issues and thoughtful about the future, but many had still not really accepted the election results or got to grips with the why of it.

A poor choice of some meeting formats did not help, although some ex-ministers were excellent over the informal lunch. Of course, all focus was on the leadership elections. After topping the poll earlier, Ed Miliband came to the evening reception (Labour doesn't do a business dinner) for a few minutes but had had an exhausting day and still seemed to be getting his head around being the new leader of the party. Alistair Darling came to the reception but it did not have last year's quota of senior figures, nor its buzz.

In Birmingham, the Conservatives were mostly well organised. Access and

engagement were good, with just one MEP sneaking in BlackBerry time while on a panel answering questions. But the chancellor and the PM were only to be seen on the main conference platform. They had a shambles of a business reception that lacked substance. Like many others, the ACT did not attend the business dinner, which cost four times the going rate. The following day, the policy wonks who had gone said it was not a good show; the Evening Standard reported as much in some detail, lamenting the empty chairs and lack of senior Tories.

So, overall, attending the three main party conferences was a good exercise for the ACT this year, and essential stuff. It was good to show the ACT flag to those we would struggle to meet in the ordinary course. Some very important points were picked up on and useful contacts made – for example, about the status of some important negotiations in Brussels. But it was also very tiring. And, like much of what ACT policy and technical gets up to, a material amount of time had to be spent on topics such as telecoms in the Isle of Man.

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