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Labour pains left behind by a united and confident party conference

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Labour Party conferences have been factional and unsettled affairs for some years. Health campaigning in the Corbyn era was largely against fictional NHS privatisation. And fights then between the dominant hard left and the centrists made the annual conference atmospheres tense, if not actually unpleasant.

This was not so in Liverpool last week. For the first time in many years Labour actually seemed, sounded, and acted like a prospective party of government. This was all helped by the government's self-immolation over the mini-budget, which hit the bond and sterling markets hard.

Announcements

Labour's conference saw big pledges on the NHS.¹ Shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves promised that reversing the cut to the 45 p top rate of tax will fund a variety of increases in NHS workforce training. The money would fund a doubling of district nurses qualifying every year, 5000 new health visitors, and additional 10 000 nurse and midwife placements each year.

More than that, she told delegates, "We will implement the biggest expansion of medical school places in British history, doubling the number of medical students (to 15 000) so our NHS has doctors it needs."

Shadow health secretary Wes Streeting briefed the *Sun* that he plans to fund the restoration of continuity of primary care.²

Keir Starmer is not a natural orator but delivered by far his most convincing speech as Labour leader. There was a thematic clarity now that Corbynism is gone and, crucially, not forgotten. Just as welcome was his repeated emphasis that under a Labour government that will inherit a Tory authored economic and public sector crisis, "this time, the rescue will be harder than ever."³

He warned delegates that the restoration of the public sector will be a hard and long grind, and for healthcare this would involve reform, prevention, and using technology to free up professionals' time to care.

Starmer's promise of a new Office for Value for Money sounds like a reinvention of the Audit Commission and merger with the National Audit Office.⁴ It will be interesting to see whether this, and the public service reform promises, get fleshed out into something deliverable.

Rosena Allin-Khan, the shadow minister for mental health, repeated the pledge that the next Labour government would guarantee access to mental health treatment within a month. She did not say how.

Confidence

Confidence isn't everything in politics, but it's more than half of everything. And for the first time in 12 years Labour looks like a confident organisation with confident leadership. The Conservative and Unionist Party's lurch to the right is helping them, of course.

But Labour has avoided the most obvious nonsense, such as promising NHS reorganisation—and, crucially, it is being honest with voters that pulling the public sector up out of the gutter and back onto its feet will be costly, hard, messy, and slow work.

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