

Brandon Lewis: A Party Fit For The Future

Brandon Lewis, Chairman of the Conservative Party, speaking today at Conservative Party Conference at The ICC, Birmingham, said:

(Check against delivery)

Introduction & Thanks

"I would like to welcome you all here today to this, your Conservative Party conference.

And I say 'your' deliberately. Because conference is your week. A chance to come together, see old friends, discuss new policies, challenge leading party figures – including me at Challenge the Chairmen this afternoon.

And it is also an opportunity for me to say thank you – all of you, the members of the voluntary party for everything you do – week in, week out, night and day, rain and shine – to champion Conservative values in towns and cities, villages and communities across the country.

I know it's not always easy – particularly in today's political environment where the return of the hard-left has made political debate coarser and more unpleasant than for many years.

But everything you do matters so much. We saw that clearly in May this year, when, because of your efforts, we were able to upset the odds and deliver such a fantastic set of results in the local elections.

We defied predictions and defeated the doomsayers. We held on to Wandsworth, Westminster, Amber Valley and Kensington & Chelsea. And we made gains in places like Bolton, Nuneaton, Wigan and we took back control of Barnet.

They said we couldn't do it, but thanks to you – we did. So on behalf of everyone in our party let me say... thank you.

I would also like to thank one person in particular: our brilliant Prime Minister Theresa May.

When she appointed me to this job in January, she charged me with delivering a set of local election results that would show our ability to take the fight to Labour and win anywhere in the country. That's what we've done together.

And it would not have been possible without the professional and volunteer staff around the regions and in CCHQ, brilliantly coordinated and led by our fantastic

CEO Sir Mick Davis. Thank you Mick for the support you have given to me personally and the years of service you have given to our party.

I also want to thank my brilliant Deputy Chairman James Cleverly, my excellent PPS Luke Hall, and all of our wonderful Vice-Chairs: Helen Grant, Chris Skidmore, James Morris, Dominic Johnson, David Brownlow, Marcus Jones, Rehman Chisti, Helen Whately, Paul Scully, Kemi Badenoch, Tom Pursglove and Alec Shelbrooke – quite a team!

Opportunity For All

For me, standing here today is the culmination of a twenty-year journey. A journey that began on the streets of a ward called Hutton South in Brentwood, back in 1998.

Then I was a volunteer, delivering leaflets, going door-to-door, and putting my name forward for a local council seat – never for one minute believing I would end up standing before you as the Chairman of our great party, helping to deliver Brexit and backing our Prime Minister to get the best deal for Britain.

That is the opportunity that this party has given to me.

And providing opportunity has always been the driving purpose of my politics, and the driving purpose of our party.

The belief – set out so powerfully by the Prime Minister on the steps of Downing Street on her first day in the job – that how far you go in life should be determined not by the circumstances of your birth, but by the dreams you have and how hard you are prepared to work.

That's the very essence of what it means to be a Conservative.

It is the belief that makes us all – every single one of us – part of the Conservative family.

And like all families we occasionally have our differences. We won't always agree.

But the shared belief in delivering opportunity – a belief passed down from generation to generation – will always bring us together. It means this party is bigger than any one issue. Because we are a family.

We have the eyes of the country on us over the next few days, and we as a party have a very simple choice. We can talk only about the things that matter to us, or we can take this opportunity to show people right across the country that we are – as ever – at their service.

That we understand their priorities and hear their concerns.

And that we are alive with the ideas and the energy to make the most of the

opportunities ahead as we leave the European Union and chart a new course for ourselves in the world.

I believe that is what we must do. Because we saw in Liverpool earlier this week that the Labour Party wants to undo everything that we have achieved as a country and take us back to square one. In Birmingham this week we are looking ahead, focusing on delivering a great Brexit deal, and on making the most of the opportunities of Brexit too.

Beyond Brexit

Because vital though delivering Brexit is – vital though it is that we get that great deal for Britain and regain control of our money, our borders and our laws – it is just the place we start.

We have so much more to do.

A stronger, fairer country to build.

A greater ambition to fulfil.

We want to tackle the injustices that hold too many people back – things like homelessness, discrimination and the growing problem of mental health.

We want to get on with delivering our long-term plan for our fantastic NHS...

...and to continue our mission to give the best education to every child.

...and deliver our 25-year environment plan so that we leave the country in a better state for our children.

And we want to celebrate and support the thousands of small businesses and entrepreneurs across the country who I meet week in and week out.

Those who take the risks, put in the work, employ the workers, pay the taxes, who invent and adapt and innovate every day to drive our country forward and keep our economy strong.

And remember, they're also the people we interact with in our own communities every single day. From the publican and the shopkeeper in our villages, to the owners and managers and staff of the firms in our towns and cities.

They're people like my parents, who saw an opportunity, took a risk, gave it a go and grew their own business. People who want to work hard and do the right thing. People who deserve our support.

So these are the things we want to do. The things I came into politics to achieve – and I suspect many of you came into politics to achieve too.

They are the things that I as a husband, as a father, as a Member of Parliament, believe politics should be about.

The simple desires of people to do better tomorrow than they did today.

But also we need to be honest with ourselves that many in our country today feel we have lost sight of these things on many of the issues that are of greatest concern to them – they are not hearing what we have to say.

So this week is an opportunity to set our focus on the things that matter to the people we are here to serve.

Because that is Conservatism at its best. It is pragmatic. It's about getting things done.

It's rooted in the everyday worries people have and in the belief that it is our job to make their lives that bit easier that bit better.

That it is our responsibility to give them every opportunity to be who they want to be.

So throughout this week together we will set out new policies to help us deliver on the essential Conservative promise of opportunity for all.

A Party Fit For The Future

But as the task begins at home we have to look at our own house. In our party.

Because we can't just talk about opportunity for all. We must act on it. It's the right thing to do, but it also matters because if we don't, we face an uncertain and – let's be frank – an uncomfortable future.

Our country is changing – becoming more diverse. Young people are increasingly politically active, inspired by social media, the referendum and political campaigns. New movements are emerging – putting issues like gender equality, fair treatment and equal opportunity at the very top of the agenda.

So how do we respond?

Now we can be proud of our record. You all know the story.

Which political party in Britain has elected not just one female prime minister, but two? This one.

Which party put the first female Muslim minister in the Government? This one.

Which party appointed the first ever female Lord Chancellor? This party. The Conservative Party.

And we have done so much more.

We are the party that passed the Equal Marriage Act ... recognising in law that love is love no matter who you want to marry.

We are the party that took action by reforming stop and search... so that young black men were no longer unjustly targeted and confidence in the system could be restored.

We are the party that shone a light on the problem of discrimination... with a pioneering audit of the way public services are delivered, designed to overcome that discrimination for good.

It's a proud record. But if we are honest, it hasn't done enough to change the perception some people have of our party today.

So we must do far, far more to show that we understand and reflect modern Britain. That means building a party that is really fit for the future We have made a start.

I have set an ambition to ensure 50% of the people on our candidates' list are women, with a plan to make it happen. Within two months of announcing that ambition, almost 100 women have signed up to take the first step on their journey to Parliament. That's a great start.

We are focusing on attracting more young people to our party – and I am pleased to say we have record numbers of young people at our conference this week.

But our greatest challenge still lies ahead: winning more support from black, asian and minority ethnic communities.

I don't underestimate the size of this task. Our vote among ethnic minority voters is stalling. Yet we can be their natural home.

Because these are the people who have done so much to build Britain.

100 years ago, in the First World War, at least 1.3 million Indians volunteered to fight for the British Army.

70 years ago, many travelled from around the world to make their home in this country and help build our fantastic NHS.

Today, Muslim communities in Britain give more to charity than any other group – donating around £100 million to charities every year, a stunning example to us all.

And the values that these things speak to – country, aspiration, self-reliance, hard-work – are our values too. They are Conservative values.

So I want us to become the natural home for ethnic minority communities within a generation.

Since our last conference we have appointed two Vice Chairmen responsible for reaching out to Britain's diverse communities.

And we need to open up a real conversation with communities where we are under-represented, helping us to better understand where we not doing enough and to know how we can turn it around. That is why we are expanding our outreach team.

And we have set up a Communities Working Group to ensure every community is part of our policy-making process, so that we better understand how every policy will impact on the lives of those who too rarely have a voice in British politics.

And today I can announce that we are establishing a dedicated mentoring fund to support those who are under-represented in our party. A fund to provide guidance and training to help them pursue a life in public service, and to encourage more people from diverse backgrounds to stand for Parliament, become MPs and help us truly represent the face of modern Britain.

For if we don't make these changes, this party – the oldest political party in the world – faces a challenging future.

This is essential to our continued success as a party. To our ambition to remain the most successful electoral force anywhere in the world and to our determination to represent and serve every community in our country. To live up to our name as the Conservative & Unionist Party.

The Fight Ahead

Our voice and place at the heart of British politics has rarely been more important.

Because as we saw last week, the destructive and divisive spectre of socialism is back. The belief that the government knows how to run our lives better than we do has returned. The dangerous dogma that says there is no problem that can't be solved by simply throwing more and more of your money at it, is alive once again.

So we are engaged in a fight for the very future of our country. A fight with a Labour Party that wants to unravel the policies that have made our economy strong, unwind the Brexit people voted for and take us back to square one.

That would be a disaster for Britain.

Because we know that even the best Labour governments end up leaving the country in the same state: out of money. Out of ideas.

And today's Labour Party does not represent the best of Labour – it's the worst.

An unreconstructed party of the hard-left. A reversion to the bleak days of the past. A time that we thought was long gone. A time of militants, Marxists and misogynists. Of nasty prejudices and nonsensical ideas.

So we must engage in this battle and turn our fire on the enemy: Jeremy

Corbyn and his dangerous hard-left ideas.

For when we focus only on ourselves we lose sight of the real threat to the future of our country. It brings us closer to a government led by him.

So let us come together and take the fight to Labour.

Because the choice in British politics has rarely been so important or so clear.

It's between a Conservative Party – the party of the union – that wants to spread opportunity and bring people together...

and Jeremy Corbyn, a man who sanctions and tolerates division and hate...

turns a blind eye to anti-Semitism...

embraces militants and extremists...

and supports our enemies against our friends...

a man who through his actions and his words over many years has shown himself to be unqualified, untrustworthy and unfit to govern this great country.

Conclusion: Opportunity For All

So it is up to us take the fight to Labour. To show people around the country what we stand for and to say how we will shape a brighter future for us all.

To fight and win the battle of ideas that rages in our politics today.

To show how the essential Conservative beliefs of freedom, fairness and opportunity can build the stronger Britain that we need.

Let that be our focus as we join together this week.

As we look beyond Brexit to the future.

As we show how we will make the most of the opportunities ahead.

As we work together as one Conservative family and take the fight to Labour.

So we can build a country – and a party – of opportunity for all.”

ENDS

For further information, please contact the Press Office on 020 7984 8121.