

The missing agenda

The government used conference to announce a few modest policies and spending plans. There was the much promoted ban on employers deducting money from tips, the freeze on fuel duty, £2 m for the Midlands Engine Partnership, a welcome £240 m extra for social care, future guidance on the maximum time young people should spend on social media, a higher rate of stamp duty for foreigners and a statutory duty for employers to consider flexible working for new jobs.

The financial items made no overall difference to a £2trillion economy being slowed by a combined fiscal and monetary squeeze, which went undiscussed. The other big gap in proceedings was the absence of detailed positive plans department by department on how they are going to take advantage of Brexit from next April. We did have a confirmation again that the new migration policy will reduce numbers of people coming to seek low paid work or benefits, and will be fair to the whole world. But where was the detail? Where is the draft legislation so we can have it in law by March?

It was the caution, the refusal of the whole government to engage with the big picture and to show energy in using the new freedoms and the freed money which Brexit will bring which drove delegates from the main conference hall to the fringe. There on the fringe were the bold ideas, the bigger picture, the wish to grasp the opportunities Brexit brings. The irony was not lost on many that the single word slogan was Opportunity for the conference as a whole, but all too many cabinet Ministers chose not to take any of the opportunities on offer for our country as we leave the EU.

So let's have the agenda filled. Let's have a farming policy that promotes home grown food, a fishing policy that puts UK interests first, a borders policy that provides the law to back up the aspirations, spending policies that reflect popular priorities. Above all let's have some tax cuts which can be the best driver of enterprise.