

In Parliament – Party Conference Season

Over the past three weeks the three major political parties have all hosted their annual party conferences. The conferences are a gathering of politicians, party members and interested groups providing an opportunity to discuss policy, develop constructive relationships within the parties for the future and to bring members of the profession together with key figures within the political parties.

The Society's government and parliamentary affairs unit organised a full programme of events and office holder led one-to-one meetings at each party conference. The programme was intended to both raise the profile of the solicitors' profession and to provide an opportunity for the Society to develop closer working relationships with key decision makers and influencers within each party.

This briefing provides a summary of the major conference announcements and speeches, and the Law Society's activities.

Liberal Democrats – Brighton, 22 - 26 September

Nick Clegg warned the Conservatives to "stick to their side of the bargain" at the Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton. While the coalition persisted, said Clegg, "the Tories could not force a turbo-charged right-wing agenda on the country".

Many Liberal Democrat members are unhappy with the party leadership, following the loss of the referendum on electoral reform, the abandonment of the party's cherished ambition of reforming the House of Lords and continued disquiet over the introduction of increased tuition fees.

Reflecting the grassroots scepticism of the coalition there were several policy debates in the conference hall where the membership voted against the Government line.

Lib Dems reject relaxation of planning laws

Party members voted unanimously to oppose coalition plan to relax planning laws, which could allow people to build extensions of up to 25ft and conservatories without planning permission. Delegates argued the proposals were against the party's commitment to localism.

Secret courts plan receives blow at Lib Dem Conference

The coalition's plans, in the Justice and Security Bill, to extend the use of Closed Material Proceedings ("secret courts") to a wider range of civil cases was overwhelmingly rejected by conference delegates.

Lib Dems support free vote on assisted dying

Conference passed Medically Assisted Dying, a policy motion reaffirming the Party's support for a debate and free vote in Parliament on legislation allowing medically assisted dying in limited circumstances and with extensive safeguards.

Law Society events

Monday 24 September

6-8pm: Law Society drinks reception – kindly hosted by DMH Stallard LLP with Lord McNally, Minister of State for Justice; Lord Wallace, Advocate General for Scotland; and Sir Alan Beith MP, Chair of the Justice Select Committee.

8-9pm: Liberal Democrat Lawyers Association Fringe Meeting – Nick Fluck, Law Society Vice-President, will speak alongside Sir Alan Beith MP and others on the subject of access to justice.

9-11pm: Law Society dinner – a private dinner bringing together leading practitioners, members of the Liberal Democrats and senior Liberal Democrat politicians.

In addition the Vice President, Nick Fluck, met with Lord McNally, Business Secretary Vince Cable MP, Lord Clement-Jones and Lord Phillips of Sudbury.

Labour – Manchester, 30 September – 4 October

Ed Milliband, the Labour leader, made a pitch for the political centre ground in his speech to the Labour Party conference by declaring that Labour is now the “one-nation” party.

He said: “When David Cameron says to you ‘let’s just carry on as we are and wait for something to turn up’ don’t believe him, don’t believe him. If the medicine isn’t working, change the medicine”.

However, Shadow Justice Secretary, Sadiq Khan, said in his speech to the conference that a future Labour Government would not increase funding for criminal justice, but would look to promote “more effective and less expensive alternatives to custody and price competitive tendering for criminal defence services”.

With more than two and half years until the next general election, Khan’s speech was slim on policy details. However, he did announce four new Labour justice proposals:

1. Establish a Women’s Justice Board – to emulate the success of the Youth Justice Board and reduce the number of women in jail;
2. Give a justice minister specific responsibility for dealing with the high number of people in the criminal justice system who have mental health problems;
3. Make it compulsory for courts to consider restorative justice with every sentence they pass; and
4. Extend the reach of the Freedom of Information Act to cover private companies running public services, including prisons.

Law Society events

Sunday 30 September

7.30-9pm: Law Society and Society of Labour Lawyers drinks reception in association with Russell Jones & Walker.

9-11pm: Law Society dinner – a private dinner bringing together leading practitioners, members of the Labour Party and senior Labour politicians.

Monday 1 October

6-8pm: Law Society drinks reception – kindly hosted by Addleshaw Goddard LLP with Sadiq Khan MP, Shadow Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice.

8-11pm: Law Society dinner – a private dinner for members of the profession based in Manchester.

In addition the Deputy Vice President, Andrew Caplen, held private meetings with Shadow Justice Minister, Lord Beecham and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Legal Aid, Yvonne Fovargue MP.

Conservatives – Birmingham, 7 - 10 October

David Cameron vowed that “Britain can rise again” and that the Conservatives would “get behind people who want to get on in life” with the objective of creating an “aspiration nation” in his speech to conference goers.

Cameron sought to emphasise the global nature of the current economic crisis, issuing a stark warning: “the truth is, we’re in a global race today. And that means an hour of reckoning for countries like ours. Sink or swim. Do or decline.”

In addition to Cameron’s keynote, there were several announcements made on the conference floor:

Chancellor announced “shares for rights” scheme

George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, used his speech to announce new Government proposals for new employees in to be able exchange some of their employment rights, including unfair dismissal and redundancy, for shares in the business they work for which will be exempt from capital gains tax.

Victims to choose punishments, says May

In other key speeches, the Home Secretary, Theresa May announced proposals for victims of anti-social behaviour to be allowed to choose the punishments those found guilty receive. She told the conference that they would pick from “a list of options” ranging from “restorative to punitive” and that these “could be carried out nearby or as far away as possible”.

Change the law on self-defence against burglars, urges Grayling

In an effort to disassociate himself with Ken Clarke’s tenure at the Ministry of Justice, the new Lord Chancellor Chris Grayling used his conference speech to announce plans to change the law on self-defence against burglars so that “disproportionate” force could be used. The planned change would be an update to the current law, recently clarified in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which stated that “reasonable” force was acceptable.

Tories to review Human Rights Act

Chris Grayling used his conference speech to announce that, while the coalition prevented any changes to the Human Rights Act in this parliament, “we cannot go on the way we are” and so he would formulate a plan for the next election so that “the party has a clear plan for change”. However, the plan was quickly rebutted by the Attorney General, who warned that “Britain could become Belarus if it abandons human rights legislation”.

Law Society events

Monday 8 October

6-8pm: Joint Law Society, Bar Council and Society of Conservative Lawyers drinks reception addressed by the Attorney General, Dominic Grieve MP and attended by the new Minister of Justice Helen Grant MP, the new Solicitor General Oliver Heald MP, amongst other parliamentarians and leading party activists.

8-11pm: Joint Law Society, Bar Council and Society of Conservative Lawyers dinner

In addition the Vice President, Nick Fluck, met with Robert Buckland MP, member of the Justice Select Committee, and several ‘opinion formers’ in think tanks and Conservative policy organisations.