

## **Where now on Brexit? What to look out for at Conference - in conversation with Asa Bennett, The Telegraph's Brexit Commissioning Editor**

Speakers: Joe Mitton, PLMR Head of Brexit Unit (Chair); Asa Bennett, The Telegraph's Brexit Commissioning Editor;

Mitton introduces the discussion. He begins by asking whether there is anything more to say about Brexit during conference after Theresa May's Florence speech, especially as there seems to be a growing consensus over the transition period:

Bennett says May has said her piece on Brexit now, and while ministers might freelance on the topic to the press sometimes, they're broadly united now. The thing that binds them together is that the government wants to follow through with the process, and this can only be done through the prism of leadership. For Tory Brexiteers it's worth waiting patiently for a couple of years as then they will get their end goal. They don't want to squander this.

Mitton says that May looked keen to put Brexit to one side during her Marr appearance –he asks whether Bennett thinks she'll be successful doing this over conference:

Bennett says it seems like the policies which are coming out so far are quite panicked – policies such as a tuition fee freeze look like they're falling into the trap of doing what Labour is doing but in a 'Conservative' way, and this is lost on people who are attracted to Corbyn's Labour. He says lots of fringes have discussed appealing to young people, but at the same time it doesn't seem like they're seeing the full picture, for instance one fringe focussed on young people being unable to get on the housing ladder because they go out for brunch – missing the point that there are wider problems. Bennett goes on to say that despite the focus on all these policies not to do with Brexit, Europe will not be sitting silently by, so May has to strike a balance between the Tory Brexiteers and the MEPs in Brussels. He talks about May's Lancaster House speech versus her Florence speech – Florence showed she wants to do business and be friendly despite being outside of the bloc. It will be the same here, but she will also want to explain to members that she understands why Brexit happened, and show how it will be a success.

Mitton asks whether Bennett thinks the foreign media will be following what is happening here:

Bennett says that in previous years May has looked too far inwards at conference, and appealed to Tory core whilst ignoring the concerns of EU member states. He says the EU remembers those speeches and will be listening to what's being said this time round. In particular, it will be interested in whether Cabinet bickering is still taking place.

Bennett goes on to discuss Vote Leave, which disappeared after the election, and how Boris Johnson stepped in to continue the line of thinking, which he says explains the media interventions that he makes. He says that Johnson hasn't wanted to tread on David Davis and Liam Fox's feet, but still needs to say his piece.

Mitton asks whether other voices, such as Hammond, will weigh in on the Brexit debate whilst here:

Bennett says Hammond will be true to his beliefs in terms of the EU and his tone. He discusses his last conference speech, and how this one will be about maintaining stability. He also says Hammond

will probably reinforce May's focus on a two year transition period 'or there about', as opposed to Johnson who says 'not a second more'.

Mitton asks about the younger generation of MPs and their voice in the Brexit debate:

Bennett says the younger generation are less divided about Brexit, and despair over how fractional the Cabinet can get and their inability to toe the line. Although people like Jacob Rees-Mogg have been held up over recess as rebellious, he will always toe the line. The younger generation want to show they're the future of the party and have the intellectual clarity to go with this.

An audience member asks whether Theresa May is right in moving away from Brexit:

Bennett says he would defend the primacy of Brexit as an issue, but think it's right for May to move on to other things. He discusses the protestors outside the conference centre, and says in 2015 they were much more fierce and this experience bound the party together. After last week's "Corbyn fest" in Brighton and the jubilation there, he hopes the Tories will realise there are bigger battles to be fought.

Conversation moves on to the impact that businesses are having when it comes to communicating what they need from the Government in terms of Brexit. Mitton says that he thinks messages are getting through but on a sector by sector approach. Business does not have a unified voice on Brexit – even the CBI struggle to articulate this beyond general points about free trade. In the financial sector it is interesting to see how much PR and public affairs resources going into Brexit, whereas there's not much from the agricultural sector. So certain sectors doing it well, others not so much.

Bennett says business groups and entrepreneurs taking different approaches, but can be broadly summarised as wanting to have clarity. On this point perhaps they are being heard as that's what ministers are trying to achieve.

Conversation then moves on to the lack of input there currently is from EU businesses. Bennett says he imagines EU businesses will start to express more concerns as talks progress. They are increasingly aware that there is stagnant progress so concern will build if this is the case.

An audience member asks how businesses can be reassured about Brexit:

Mitton says that again this can be broken down sector by sector. He talks about the aviation sector's concerns about Brexit, whereas financial services are in very different position. He then discusses how there is a large focus on trade but a lot of small businesses don't trade, and those who do trade only do when they've been approached.

Bennett says the Government can reassure businesses by making it clear they're getting ready for life beyond Brexit. He talks about Brexiteers having to hang tight on their vision of Brexit, because that isn't what businesses want.

The conversation moves on to whether doing things like enforcing ECJ rules less vigorously will please Brexiteer members of the Conservatives. Bennett says this is a delicate balancing act. May will want to show members what is possible, but knows Europe is listening and they can force her hand in terms of negotiations. Theresa May will have to pick her words very carefully as every speech has an international dimension to it now.

Bennett is asked whether he thinks George Osborne will reign in on the Brexit debate while he's at conference?

Bennet says he can fully imagine that every journalist at conference will try and flood the room Osborne speaks in, and he will probably ignore the topic of Brexit for that reason and simply focus on the Northern Powerhouse. Beyond this there isn't much need for him to speak about the issue, as we can see it in his editorials. Bennet says his hatred of May actually makes more Conservatives more sympathetic towards her.

Bennett goes on to talk about the lack of information concerning national debt and government spending. He says the Conservatives forgot to focus on this during the election, which has allowed Corbyn to set the terms of debate about austerity. The Conservatives played down the plus sides of austerity.

Regarding Macron's recent speech, Bennet says it shows the two headed rhetoric coming from the EU – sometimes they say we can come back, and Macron's speech built on this. However this would mean the EU changing so much that UK wanted to join again, but the leaders want to centralise more and this is the opposite of what the UK wants. The only reason this would happen is if the Liberal Democrats got into power and made us fully re-join again.

On topic of social care, says Bennett says that May is haunted by the history of social care reform during the election. So while she will want something substantial on domestic reform to come out at conference so it's not all about Brexit, this probably won't be social care precisely. They're also not in a place to throw out a bold agenda of policy reform, they want continuity.

The conversation moves on to the language used by the BBC in terms of populism versus democracy. Bennett says Brexit is sometimes reported in very one sided way – when EU leaders talk, it is reported as if it's gospel. The whole thing is a PR operation, so the journalists are actually being spokespeople for EU in this respect. They shouldn't take the EU's side unquestioningly, and critique the British side relentlessly. Both sides should be treated the same.

Regarding negotiations, Bennet talks about how neither the EU or UK are leaking to talking to the press at the moment because it is going reasonably well, and both sides wanted to criticise before because no progress was made. The work now is unglamorous so they need to just get on with it. In this sense, silence is a good thing. He also talks about how the EU wants the UK to negotiate to their deadline, hoping that Britain panics and caves in. The same thing happened with Greece when they were negotiating their bailout.