

Liberal Democrat Spring Conference York 2016

[Ciarán Morrissey](#) visits the Liberal Democrat conference, finding a more lacklustre affair than the last despite some interesting votes, and a party that seems to have accepted the reality of the 2015 defeat

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As students poured out of York at the end of term, a new group were arriving and setting up shop for the weekend, for a different sort of experience; the Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, held at the Barbican.

The mood at this conference was decidedly different to their previous conference in Bournemouth last September. Back then, it was one of jubilation, of self-assuredness, of the strong belief that the 2015 election was a blip and the party was on its way back up. The party passed One Member, One Vote in Bournemouth in order to improve internal party democracy, and it was generally felt that the Lib Dems were on their way back up.

Fast forward to March, and while conference passes still said #LibDemFightBack, the crowd was not the same excited bunch of newbies they were six months ago. Nonetheless, there were a number of key votes, and there were murmurings of the unveiling of a new grand campaign strategy.

In a landmark vote on Saturday, [the party overwhelmingly voted to legalise and regulate cannabis](#), becoming the first major Westminster party to adopt the position. The motion was led by Norman Lamb, MP for North Norfolk, previously Minister for Care and Support 2012-15 and, more recently, leadership challenger to Tim Farron last year. It follows previous initiatives by the party to move toward a more evidence-based health policy.

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In addition to cannabis regulation, the second major conference vote was on improving the diversity of the party’s elected members, a motion that remains controversial within the party, particularly the provisions calling on the party to use all-women and all-disabled shortlists to select candidates. The debate continued for over an hour, with a number of speakers from both sides receiving standing ovations. There were two suggested amendments to the motion, though the first was struck down. The motion’s main opposition seemed to be from a group of female members of Liberal Youth, several of whom were called to speak while wearing bright pink T-shirts spray-painted with the slogan ‘I AM NOT A TOKEN WOMAN’ in black. However, despite the obvious disagreements between both sides, the debate did remain largely civil, and in the end the motion was passed overwhelmingly.



Former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, attending Lib Dem Pint. Image: Hannah Hunter

Since last May, there's been an initiative to get members in local areas to buddy up and socialise, called LibDemPint. It was started by a number of new members, shot up in popularity when Nick Clegg turned up to the first one, and has remained incredibly popular, with this conference playing host to a former MP and two prominent party activists. At least, this was what was scheduled until Nick Clegg, former Party Leader, dropped in 'unexpectedly' to deliver a rousing speech on the benefits of EU membership.

Taking extremely precise aim at figures such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg, Clegg passionately made the case for continued membership of the European Union, arguing for internationalism, co-operation, and continued prosperity. He accused the Brexit camp of making 'specious and mendacious' claims about our country's future outside of the EU, and instead implored Liberal Democrats to win over the hearts and minds of ordinary Brits who just want what's best for 'their children, their families, and their communities'.

Clegg's speech - and LibDemPint in general - was an uncharacteristically charged and ideologically-driven night at an otherwise uneventful conference. There were two major, landmark votes; legalising cannabis and increasing diversity via targeted shortlists, both of which passed very painlessly and with a clear majority of voters in the room.

Yet it felt that something was missing. It was lacking the fervour or passion so often seen at other conferences, and despite the conference hashtag, and radical policies passed, was a rather sober and bland affair. The fringes, the discussion, the pints, and the banter were all enjoyable and welcome, but it is still difficult to see the party, its people, or its policies making any national headway any time soon.

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