

## 'A conservatism that keeps the British dream alive' – the rhetoric of Theresa May's conference speech



*During her conference speech, Theresa May was subjected to events which were out of her control – a cold, a prankster, and falling letters. But this explanation may mean little to those who were not in the conference chamber, writes [Andrew S. Crines](#). He analyses the speech and concludes that the PM could pay a high price for the events that took place around her.*

"I take responsibility for that. I led the campaign. And I am sorry". With these words Theresa May opened her 2017 Conservative Party conference speech. It was an admission she needed to make in order to deal with a huge elephant in the room. Namely – she called an unnecessary election, and lost seats. Rhetorically, the apology was an attempt to re-gain some of her lost credibility, especially given the loss of the first Tory majority since 1992, which had been hard-won by Cameron only two years earlier. Yet this request for forgiveness came after May reminded her audience that they had won more votes since 2015, 42% of the vote, and that this was due to the hard work of Conservative activists. However given the system of First Past the Post, the end result does not forgive such different indicators of electoral success.

She then went on to argue for her vision for conservative renewal. This was predicated around 'the British Dream'. This is an ideal based on essentially aspirational concepts, in which a more prosperous country can be built through an ongoing process of improvement. Put simply, each generation will be better than the last, and that anyone is capable of success if they work hard. For May, it is a 'dream of progress between the generations' that inspires her conception of conservatism. Rhetorically, this aims to inspire her audience into believing that Britain's future can always be better because of the aspiration of individuals to succeed. She also warned that the battle of these ideas is ongoing and that they are currently being challenged by the consolidation of hard left socialism in the Labour Party. Given this speech was delivered to the Conservative conference this message is likely to resonate.



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Another core element of May's argument was to 'never allow the Left to pretend they have a monopoly on compassion'. To do this she presented a list of governing successes in areas of social care, education, healthcare, amongst others. By doing so she was seeking to emotionally highlight the compassionate policies the Conservatives introduced. However, this also acted as a warning to her audience of the trap of defending a record without articulating a new vision for policy renewal. Indeed, she argued 'the world doesn't stand still', and that by doing so the Conservatives had to present a renewed sense of optimism for the future *vis-à-vis* the British Dream.

Another central argument was her commitment to the free market. As an essentially conservative concept, May argues the value of the free market is part of a battle of ideas that needs to be won all over again. For May, the free market has brought millions out of poverty across the globe but it is being 'brought into question by those who will imperil our future by adopting the failed experiments of the past'. This argument aims to remind her audience of the values of economic liberalism, whilst highlighting the historical failures of a statist economy. She went on to argue that the free market represents a key avenue through which Britain will integrate with the global economy. Indeed, it 'ushered in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism' in the Soviet Union.

As May moved on to discuss Corbyn, her speech was briefly interrupted by a comedian who handed her a fake P45. At this point it is very difficult for any speaker to re-gain the attention of an audience, especially as that of the press had already shifted. However, dealing with hecklers and distractions is one of the burdens faced by all politicians and how they respond determines whether they are able to return to the speech. In May's case, she was supported by the audience who chanted 'out!' at the perpetrator, whilst she re-captured the mood saying 'I was about to talk about someone I'd like to give a P45 to, and that's Jeremy Corbyn'. With this use of humour, the audience burst into applause and she resumed her speech.

She emerged from the interruption speaking in a more confident manner, attacking Corbyn's positions on tax, defence, antisemitism, and misogyny. May also accused Corbyn of aiming to copy Venezuela's economic model for the UK. The audience responded positively, applauding her attack as she continued to highlight the Conservative Party's duty to the UK, particularly over Brexit. Here she reassured listeners that *every* eventuality is being planned for by the British government. These messages are designed to solicit applause from the audience, and to demonstrate their support for her leadership.

Unfortunately for May, at this point her voice began to succumb to effects of a cold. However she continued with her speech to highlight how the economy was improving both in the public and private sectors, and that the UK has created 'record numbers of jobs'. Whilst delivering this argument, the audience responded to her declining voice by applauding the message she was aiming to give. This reaction is indicative of a supportive audience that wants to hear the message being given.

Indeed, attendees remained supportive of her speech throughout as she pledged the UK's commitment to international aid, trade, and housing. For May the British Dream is intrinsically linked to home ownership to such an extent that she pledged to dedicate her Premiership to fixing the problem of young people being able to buy their own homes by building more properties. This gained her a standing ovation.

However, alongside the interruption and her declining voice, one of the most reported moments of the speech has been the falling 'F' from the slogan attached to the wall. This has overshadowed the message she sought to give and has helped shape the post-speech political narrative.

As a speech, May was subjected to a series of events which were simply not of her making. However, this explanation does not penetrate the audience beyond the conference chamber because all they see is the reported spectacle. For that reason, she may have to pay a high price for the unavoidable events for which her speech will be most remembered.

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