

Was that spineless blue creature that I spotted by the sea a Tory jellyfish?

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TAXI DRIVER (it happened this week): “You a journalist, then? Attending party conferences? They make speeches attacking us motorists, don’t they? All saying how green they are. But have you noticed? Nobody talks about where they get the petrol from. From the centre of the Earth, innit? Don’t you see? It’s full of petrol down there, millions of gallons. And there’s fire down there too, lava, hot rocks. So if a volcano ever touched the petrol — bang! Whole world blown to bits. It could happen.

“The way I see it, we’re doing the world a favour, us motorists. We’re draining all that petrol out of the Earth’s centre before sparks from a volcano set it off. Why doesn’t anyone ever talk about that at party conferences, eh? I bet they know, but they don’t say it.”

And he was serious. This man has a vote. The old lady I met here in Bournemouth who hardly knew which conference she was at has a vote. The Tory parliamentary candidate who introduced himself to me — “I’m afraid I don’t tick the boxes: I’m not a woman, I’m not a hunchback and I’m not black” — has a vote. The alcoholic with the bruised face who lurched across the seafront to shake my hand has a vote.

Isn’t democracy a curious thing? From the votes of millions of individual minds, hardly one of which one would trust on any important question of fact or opinion — shaky, flaky, often downright loony — something solid, even wise, is made. Perhaps the individual lunacies, pulling every which way and that, cancel each other out; and what persists are the judgments-in-bulk, the opinions in which most people tend to concur. You may ask a panel of 100 people the name of the capital of Chad and not one will know, but many will take a stab and the most popular answer will almost certainly be correct. From myriad individual uncertainties a near-certainty may be made.

AND SO to the Tory Conference. Tory representatives arrived clutching newspaper accounts of how David Cameron once rescued the historian Andrew Roberts from a jellyfish. Now we were to see the hero close up.

Well staged, well managed, its tone constructive, its atmosphere light, green, amiable and sunny, and its speakers and presentations genuinely interesting, this conference made only a gentle splash, but a pleasing one. And yet. This ought to have been a most unusual occasion: the first conference since 1991 in which the Conservative Party could genuinely contemplate winning power. It didn’t feel like that. It didn’t feel like the conferences of 1977 or 1978. It felt dutiful enough, but bemused, tentative, exploratory.

After his speech, they liked George Osborne a bit more than they had expected to. After Mr Cameron’s speech they liked him just as much as they had made up their minds to, even before arriving here. But the speech did not take wing. Nothing took wing. Even the predicted rebellion over tax failed to get airborne.

Why? As the week proceeded it became fashionable among us media people to aver that “Cameron needs to put flesh on the bones” of Tory policy and philosophy. The reverse was true. He needs to put bones into the flesh. There was quite a lot of detail, plus many warm words about compassion, about values and beliefs. The Tory leader was persuasive in his argument for holding fire on policy. He appeared likeable and strong. But somehow the whole thing started — and ended — the week still in need of a spine.

Perhaps it will come. My guess is that it will. Otherwise we may be tempted to reflect that as Mr Roberts struggled with the jellyfish while Mr Cameron breasted the waves, Mr Roberts may have found it at first difficult to know which was Mr Cameron, and which was the jellyfish.

I WITNESSED the scrum at a big, round room called Media Village at the conference centre, when on Wednesday Boris Johnson became trapped within a party stockade at its hub and we all started shouting for him, throwing Mars bars over the partition he was hiding behind and finally climbing ladders to see him. Luckily the atmosphere was one of jollity.

GEORGE OSBORNE, the Shadow Chancellor, told the Conference that “we will deliver more than we promise”. Was that a promise?