

By a special correspondent

There's been a devil striding the floors at the UK's Conservative Party Conference. There's a ghost, and a bogey man too. The devil looms out of the crowd. He's shaven-headed, except for two coxcombs dyed red, which from the front and the rear have more than a passing resemblance to horns.

The late Kenny Everett, an "adaptable" DJ, was notorious for declaring "Let's bomb Russia". He'd get a round of applause from fringe meetings today. The new bogeyman is that funny little Iranian guy with an unpronounceable name. If the Iranian people don't vote him out next June, Dr Liam Fox MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence says every option is on the table – and it will come to force.

The defence industry has almost as low a profile in Birmingham as it did at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester. BAE Systems sponsored another fringe meeting, as did EADS (see separate reports). One or two representatives from defence companies made it to what they may see as the next Government – although the fresh-faced Cameron/Osborne team has been squeezed off the front page by global financial meltdown. (Wonder how Labour's spin doctors organised that?)

There are no industry stands – but whatever some say, some things never change. I call in evidence the Kennel Club, the Countryside Alliance and the Fur Trade, plus the cut glass ladies' accents and the paucity of regional ones. It's unclear if the Prayer Rooms (segregated by sex, unoccupied) are a Conservative or venue facility, but Labour won the battle of the hand dryers with the high-tech Dyson.

And so to a lunch-time meeting without lunch. Room hire prices were extortionate I'm told, but still...

There's nothing like an ex-CIA man to add spurious gravity to proceedings, especially when he tells the audience he wasn't in the White House in 1999 when the Israelis came to tell them about their plans to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. (We didn't say no, we said hell no, apparently). The International Atomic Energy Authority reported Iran was 6-18 months away from getting "the bomb" according to reports of September 15th. We'll check, update our Iran nukes timeline and post it here!

"Sanctions short of war have not worked" we're told. Even tougher ones from the United Nations were called for – but how they'd get round Russian and/or Chinese UN Security Council vetoes wasn't specified.

Dr Fox, who seems to have been on a world tour to rival the Rolling Stones, paused from playing to the substantial gallery for long enough to make an interesting and important point.

It's hard to work out where the power lies in Iran. There's a lack of genuine understanding, hindered by a lack of investment by the UK in the Embassy. We can read every number plate in Tehran, but we don't know who to talk to. He also noted the West's dependence on imported oil and gas – some of which comes down the modern-day equivalent of the Silk Road south of the Caucasus, now dominated by Russia – and opined that like any addiction we need to be weaned off it (that's the medical doctor in him talking, no doubt). He reminded us that "pushers can get very pushy"!

The silence over defence policy was deafening. The pledge to a defence review is fair enough, bearing in mind the 1998 planning assumptions inter alia could take no account of the wear and tear on equipment in hot and sandy places. When invited in effect to support Typhoon Tranche 3, the opportunity was passed up.

This correspondent wasn't there, but apparently Dr Fox had espoused the Carswell line of buying more and more off the shelf, ie. from our good friends and allies the Americans. This policy, it was said, hadn't been agreed with Alan Duncan and his Business team, who'll scratch out the eyes of anyone deciding such matters unilaterally. Indeed, Dr Fox said in the context of the Future Surface Combatant that it shouldn't be quite top-of-the-range so that it could be more exportable to defend British jobs. Will the real policy please stand up?

But the flip side of a defence review, highlighted by Dr Fox but not picked up by anybody else, was that although the Conservatives would be willing to fully fund current commitments "we can't afford to do everything." As "our Army is too small for what we are asking them to do", shortages of armoured vehicles and helicopters were specifically mentioned, and as "we've consistently backed the new carriers", where do the cuts come? Maybe that's why the Falkland Islands had a stand...

A further dichotomy lies in Europe. At a weekend conference in Luxembourg, Conservative policy of taking a hard line with European allies was spelled out. Dr Fox berated them for taking the insurance policy without paying the premiums. They don't have the political will to help out, it seems. But if you take a hard line in the euro-conference chamber, how are you going to persuade them to spend money, deploy troops, and have the right rules of engagement? Back to the drawing board on that one, methinks...

That's the thing about bogeymen and political fringe meetings. It doesn't always make sense, but anyway, be afraid, be very afraid...