

I say, there's an iceberg ahead.

Shall we tell the Captain?

He says we're unsinkable.

Oh.

Do you think the danceband has the sheet music for "Nearer my God to thee" or do you think they'll busk it?

It's another not quite day in Brighton, the Labour Party Conference. The security is not quite what it was. We're still confined within the island. But it seems very slightly easier to get in. Or maybe they've cracked it after these years of practice. If only I could remember where I was born.

The hardware toted by the security forces don't seem to be quite what it was. But at least some feel safer with less guns around even though they are in the hands of "our guys". There was a helicopter briefly, but I haven't seen a naval patrol recently.

The fringe meetings are well attended - but not quite as packed as they were. The Defence Matters one was full, but in a smaller room than the Lib Dems had, and not so many standing.

There's not quite the atmosphere of doom and gloom some media would have us believe. But that's because they're not talking to the rank and file, a clannish, loyal lot. They're talking to their pals from the Westminster village who are briefly taking the south coast air, and who are part of the club - they all understand "lobby terms". No name, no pack drill.

The sandwiches and nibbles are not quite food. They're not quite the same at each meeting, but close enough for practical purposes. They're fuel, washed down with something red and/or something white which is not quite decent wine. If you can get a cold beer, that'll keep you going.

The crowds in the bar are not quite impossible, as before, or as may be in Manchester next week. There is actually somewhere to stand, and you can get through to buy a drink or three. It's all not quite what it was.

The stands are not packed in quite so tight. There's storage room. The odd corner. A bit more spread out. The defence industry is there in person but not a physical presence. BAE Systems gave up a year or so back, the last of the companies to do so.

There's still the stalwarts of the "Keep our future afloat" campaign. They had a useful gizmit - their fallback if global warming is not quite yet, or quite what's expected - a sturdy windscreen ice scraper.

And the World Disarmament Campaign. A charming, polite crew with their mission to change aeons of inhumanity.

The delegates weren't quite enthusiastic about their leaders. The standing ovations seemed an effort. Applause was often desultory. The not-quites who couldn't get tickets for the Prime Minister gathered in knots around the TVs. But they couldn't quite clap ambition like beating cancer in this generation. Although, quite surprisingly, they seemed to approve of proportional representation.

Despite a strong fringe showing - report on the Demos "Where next for British defence policy" to come - defence is relegated to the graveyard session in the main conference hall, as part of Britain in the world, just before the conference closes on Thursday.

It's not quite what we might have hoped after the Armed Forces Minister said that defence would be a campaign issue at the General election for the first time since 1983