

**Brendan Barber, TUC General Secretary, Interviewed 23.9.11 by Peta Steel.  
Filmed by Paul Rey-Burns**

**PS: I'm talking to Brendan Barber, who is General Secretary of the TUC, who has been working here since 1975. Brendan, were your parents trade unionists?**

BB: My father was a member of the Teachers' Union but he wasn't particularly an active member. He worked as a bricklaying instructor in an "Approved School", what in modern jargon would be called a Young Offenders' Institution. And I was born in Southport. My parents had moved just a year or two before to Southport for my Dad to take up this job. So there wasn't a particularly strong family connection with trade unionism. He was a member but not particularly an active member.

**PS: Now you went to a grammar school.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: Did that have any effect on what you thought and how you formulated your ideas?**

BB: I guess it must have done, I guess. Your schooling affects everybody one way or another. It was a Catholic grammar school in Crosby, halfway between Southport and Liverpool. A place called St Mary's College. It was run by the Irish Christian Brothers. It was kind of, rather strict environment, schooling environment. But I can't think of any feature of that kind of part of my life that particularly kind of led me towards Trade Unionism. I mean, immediately after school, I did a year working as a volunteer teacher in Ghana for VSO and that was probably the point in my life where I started thinking more openly and actively about issues of social justice, poverty, the inequalities in the world and what were the things that lay behind that.

**PS: Why did you decide to do that? Because it was --**

BB: Well, it just seemed a fantastic opportunity. Another lad at the school had heard about VSO and he started talking about it, thinking about it, and I thought that's sounds amazing. The idea of the chance to go to some exotic, other part of the world for a year and try and make yourself useful. It just sounded a fantastic opportunity. And so it turned out!

**PS: As you say, it had an impact upon you and then you went to City University where you did Social Services.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: Is that one of the reasons why you did Social Services, or what made you do that?**

BB: It was a complete coincidence that I did Social Science! I was in Ghana ... I'd got rather poor A Level results. I think it was a C and two Ds. I was not a particularly distinguished academic performer in terms of my school results ... So while I was away in Ghana, a letter suddenly arrived from my Dad saying that the deadline for sending in applications through the Universities Admission System, UCCA [Universities Central

Council on Admissions] it used to be called, had come up more quickly than anybody had realised and somebody at the school had got in touch and said if you want to make any application on Brendan's behalf, it's got to be in quickly. So between themselves, my Dad and somebody at the school, they quickly dreamed up six places to apply to and filled out the form for a range of courses. One being Social Science at City University, which was number six in the list. In those days, you had to put six options in preference order. So over the succeeding months, letters arrived from home. They took about two weeks to arrive. Telling me the first choice had turned me down, the second choice had turned me down, and the third, fourth, the fifth. And on the sixth, City, I got put on the waiting list. And then when I actually got home in the summer and so on, then finally that became an offer. So it wasn't my choice. Neither City University as an institution nor Social Science as a course. I think somebody at the school had told my Dad that was the one I had the best chance of getting into. With my rather poor A Level results.

**PS: But in a way, it subsequently had a very great influence upon your life. Because whilst you were at university you became President of the Students' Union.**

BB: Yes.

**PS: And of course found yourself in negotiations.**

BB: Yeah. In a way I did, yes. One of the things that we did during my year as President of the Student Union was negotiated for a block of flats that the GLC [Greater London Council] at that time were looking to pull down in a year or two's time, so the flats were vacant. Tenants had been moved to other places and offered other places, so there was these old blocks of flats right next door to the university, only within five minutes' walk, that were lying empty for a couple of years. And I managed to do a deal with the university's support and with the GLC to make those flats available. So I think there were about four hundred flats that were then used by students for the next two or three years.

**PS: Now, you became president. Why did you become President of the Students' Union? Why did you stand?**

BB: Well, again, it was there. The opportunity was there, I guess. I'd got involved in the Student Union, went to their meetings, I joined some of the debates on things, I got involved in some of the social side of the Students' Union as well, Rag Week and that kind of thing. And as I was coming up to the end of the degree, there were mates who said why don't you stand for president? So I thought, OK, well, why not? So I did. And got elected.

**PS: Your first job in 1974 was working with Ceramic, Glass and Mineral Product Training Board. Why did you do that? How did you get into it?**

BB: Well, again, this was not a grand choice, carefully considered as part of my pathway through life. Nothing like that at all! Like a lot of people coming to the end of their time at university, if you haven't got a clear vocational route lying ahead of you, you're looking for a kind of ... almost any job anywhere to try and make a start. And see what you might do. And so I saw a job advertised. It was a kind of research assistant kind of role, it seemed. I thought, well, maybe I could do that. Applied and I got the job. So I was there only about a year before coming to the TUC. I got involved in the union, representing the staff of the training board. Learnt obviously quite a lot about the public policy debates about industrial

training. My first job at the TUC, that was actually the role they were recruiting someone to take on, preparing policy advice on industrial training policy issues. So I did it for a year. Quite enjoyed it.

**PS: A year later you joined the TUC as a policy officer involved with training. Why did you join it?**

BB: Again, I just saw an advert in the newspaper. And in those days the TUC's approach to recruitment was not particularly sophisticated. The job I think was Assistant in the TUC Organisation and Industrial Relations Department. And I thought, well, what's the Organisation and Industrial Relations Department? No idea. What's an assistant? Not too sure what that is either. But the idea that the TUC had people working for it and potentially a way of earning your living was to work for an institution like the TUC ... I thought well, that sounds fantastically interesting. I was active in the union in the Training Board, so I thought it's got to be worth a try!

**PS: It was at a time that the Labour government had come back in and tripart talks were taking place, with the advent of the Social Contract. What was it like working at the TUC at that time?**

BB: One of the key responsibilities ... Just before I joined the TUC, a body called the Manpower Services Commission had been established by legislation and this was a powerful government agency responsible for delivering employment and training services. Managing significant budgets. I mean, all the big public programmes, ranging from what are now called JobCentres, JobCentre Plus, that whole employment service was managed and delivered by the MSC. And it was the MSC that oversaw the work of all the industrial training boards. So all the public institutions responsible for trying to improve training arrangements all came under the umbrella of the MSC. And within the MSC, the governing body, the commission itself, had I think it was ten or eleven members, three of whom were trade unionists nominated through the TUC. So the judgment had been made that that team of TUC-nominated commissioners needed strong research support and briefing support for their work within the commission. So the key job, the central kind of role I had, was very actively supporting the commissioners in producing policy briefs for each of the meetings every month, going to other meetings with MSC officials as people inside the commission were preparing their recommendations and advice, and so on. That was the biggest part of my job at that time.

**PS: It must have been a fairly dynamic time, too, as well, because so much was going on at the time.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: Who were the people who stood out for you within that particular sphere? I'll ask you later about the other people, but the people who stood out, particularly dealing with the government? And of course, Labour Party was tripartite at the same time.**

BB: Yeah. Well, obviously, the wider context was that it was a very interesting time. This was '75 when I joined the TUC, September '75. We just had the Fox and Goose dispute at the Congress, where the Transport and General Workers Union were temporarily ejected

from the TUC over a dispute with a licensed house manager. But in terms of the wider economy, clearly it was a very difficult time. The issue then that was centre stage was trying to contain inflation. And it was just when the TUC was on the brink of the period of the so-called Social Contract, the agreement with the Labour government on incomes and prices to try and bring inflation down from levels that reached the mid-twenties. Twenty-five percent. So the economic backdrop and the most politically charged debates within the TUC at that time really revolved around the incomes policy issues and what was the right approach, to what extent could unions support a centrally prescribed policy on pay or to what extent were unions committed to what was called free collective bargaining. Uninhibited by government kind of centrally directed approaches. So politically it was a very lively time. Obviously the General Secretary then was Len Murray, central to all of those debates, all of those issues. Norman Willis, Deputy at that time. Ken Graham, very actively involved in the Manpower Services Commission. He was one of the commissioners for a significant period. And in the Organisation Department, where I was based at that time, I worked closely with John Monks. In the part of the department that I was based, dealing with the training issues, and some other issues too, John had some key responsibilities. So those were the people inside the TUC at that time that I was working with most closely.

**PS: What about also working with the various General Secretaries? Because at that stage, during that period you had people like Jack Jones, Hugh Scanlon etc., and of course then they were gradually phasing out. I mean, '76 you then moved within the department, becoming Assistant Secretary and that's when you dealt more with industrial relations and also inter-union disputes.**

BB: Yes.

**PS: Fortunately missing the Fox and Goose, I remember it well!**

BB: Yes.

**PS: How much influence were they having, apart from the changes going around then, on what your work was, your perception, what was happening?**

BB: Well, at that time, obviously, I was a junior TUC official, so at that time the culture of the TUC was very hierarchical. The work with the committees of the TUC, it was the heads of department who would lead in making presentations to committees and so on, rather than the more junior staff within departments. And the manner of engagement with the union leaderships was rather formal, so letters to a union general secretary would go from Len Murray, as the TUC General Secretary. Even though I might draft a letter, it would formally go from the General Secretary. So it was a very much more hierarchical kind of place. The feel was very different. So from my rather junior position, you'd be rather respectful of these great general secretaries and so on. I mean, obviously, the biggest figures as you say, people like Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlan, very dominant in the debates, particularly on the wider economic issues. In terms of some of the particular work I was doing, I remember Danny McGarvey from the Boilermakers' was on the MSC for awhile. Got to know him a little. Roy Grantham from Apex, as was. So I got to know some of the general secretaries particularly involved in MSC work and obviously other officials around other unions involved with the industrial training boards, for example. The industrial training boards were tripartite kind of institutions with employers, unions, some

independent members as well, so the trade unionists who served on ITBs, I got to know a little bit on the training policy issues.

**PS: When you moved in to do more of the sort of industrial relations --**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: – moved away from the MSC and things like that.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: Was sort of role did Ken Graham have influencing more of the industrial relations side of things?**

BB: Ken was very much kind of Len Murray's right hand man on disputes, inter-union disputes and the kind of major industrial disputes that began to come down the track as well. Ken was very much a savvy, practical, experienced trade union negotiator. So certainly on inter-union things like Fox and Goose, which happened before I'd arrived, Ken would have been the Secretary to the Disputes Committee, that would in our procedures, make an adjudication on an issue that's not been able to be resolved through conciliation and so on. So he had the biggest role on that industrial agenda. And as I kind of took on the broader role ... I was at this point Assistant Secretary in '76 as you say, I began to get a little bit of experience in alongside Ken and John. John by then very much involved in handling some of those issues. And began to see the dynamics of the kind of TUC role as a conciliator, often trying to bring unions together, and get people to forge common purpose rather than kick lumps out of each other! [Laughs]

**PS: Taking that sort of period from '76 to '79, things ... the TUC had terrific influence, was very much a big body. People listened to what the TUC said.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: And gradually more problems started to occur. Why do you think that was?**

BB: Well, there was this tension running through the TUC over incomes policy. I mean, from '76 through to '78 for two years, the TUC held the line on an agreed incomes policy with the government. Jack Jones played a big part in forging that alongside Len Murray. With some original ideas about the flat rate pay increase that everybody should get. An egalitarian approach to pay. And as a result of that policy, and neither the TUC has ever been given the right to credit historically for this, I don't think, inflation was brought down from about twenty-five percent to under ten percent. About eight percent. In a two year period. There was fantastic restraint exercised. But the restraint did carry with it big tensions. I mean, the TUC had been put in the position of having to tell unions you're not allowed to try and negotiate a better deal for this group of members. That would be a breach of the policy we've agreed with the Labour government. So the TUC in the role of policeman on pay policy that inevitably brought real kind of stresses and strains. And the pressures for a looser, freer approach, call for free, collective bargaining, which was always there, obviously grew stronger over that period. And then eventually obviously we saw the accord with the government in effect broke down. In '78 an attempt to reach an understanding about the approach for pay bargaining for a third year just didn't get there. A

tied vote, and the President of the TUC that year who was in the chair, exercised his casting vote to say that the policy hasn't been carried. That was the convention in his union that in the event of a tied vote, the president would be expected to say the proposition has not been carried. The unions have different traditions, so if it had been somebody from a different union in the chair, they might have exercised their casting vote differently. And there might have been an agreement with the Labour government led by Jim Callaghan with Denis Healy as Chancellor, but it wasn't to be.

**PS: The TUC was coming in to conflict with the Labour government, and in some ways own General Secretaries. Were they listening more to their own members than they were to the TUC itself?**

BB: Well, I mean a key kind of component of the TUC obviously was the T&G, Transport and General Works Union and Jack had given that very strong leadership, but he was coming to the end of his term as General Secretary of the T&G and he suffered a defeat at his own conference on the issue about whether there should be a further period of pay policy. And the incoming General Secretary, Moss Evans, he kind of when it came to that critical meeting, he voted against and the other T&G people on the General Council at that time, voted against. They'd been expected probably to have supported it, I think. I think that would have been Len's expectation. But in the event the vote went ... they voted against. So, the change of leadership certainly had an impact in some unions with a different approach being taken.

**PS: What thoughts about mistakes that were made? But some very good things also came out of the Social Contract.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: Such as Child Benefit, things like that.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: Again, how much influence do you think ... Did the TUC just have to try and fight to get the Labour government to agree to some of these things?**

BB: Yeah, very much so. And again, as you say, the idea that this wasn't just a policy about restraining pay, it was about establishing the social wage. Some of the other things that were very important to working people. Not just the things that are in the pay packet. So, I mean, that was the time when the Equal Pay legislation was carried, the Health and Safety legislation, a landmark piece of Health and Safety legislation was carried though and all of these things were regarded in a sense of a part of the deal, if you like. That there was some progressive social change on some of these issues, alongside the more difficult acceptance of pay restraint on our side.

**PS: You became Head of Media in 1979, just before the General Election and before the Winter of Discontent.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: Why did you do that?**

BB: Well, because it was suggested maybe I should think about going for it! When the vacancy arose, somebody you knew well, of course, Brian Murphy, who was my predecessor as the Head of that department, when he indicated he was leaving so there was a vacancy in that area ... I mean, the thought never entered my head, frankly, initially, that I might go for that job. But both John Monks and Roy Jackson, another very good colleague who later became Assistant General Secretary, at that time he was Head of the Education Department in the TUC. Both of them said to me, why don't you think about going for that? And I thought, well, why on earth would I be regarded as a credible candidate for that? I have no journalistic background of any sort. No experience in the media or dealing with the media of any sort. And they both kind of said, well, I think what Len Murray will be looking for, he'll want a kind of safe pair of hands with kind of nouse, political nouse. And not gonna drop him in it. And you write well. You're not a journalist by background but you write pretty well, and so on. So maybe ... I didn't know what Len Murray's view ultimately would be, Len Murray hadn't asked them to tap me out, nothing of that sort. But this was just their kind of thought that maybe I could do a decent job for the TUC in that role. So I thought well, OK, maybe I'll give it a try. What do I lose if I go for it and I don't get it, that's fine. So I gave it a try and he did give me the job and I think it was those kind of factors. It was a very difficult, stressful period. High stress job for him always and a part of that is kind of managing the media relationship. He thought I could learn the kind of tricks of the trade in terms of working with the media but hopefully with some kind of basic skills that would be important, too.

**PS: You came at a terribly difficult time, to put it mildly.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: And the TUC in particular, and the trade unions, were receiving really bad publicity.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: A terrific onslaught was coming at them. Why do you think it had broken down so much?**

BB: The relations with the media?

**PS: Yeah.**

BB: Well, it was a product of the events of the time, I guess. I mean, the Winter of Discontent, as it was called, was an extraordinarily difficult time with these huge disputes that generated massive, massive media coverage, almost all of which was relentlessly negative. And Margaret Thatcher came to office with a kind of strong sense that she had a mandate to sort the unions out and take the unions on. They weren't representative of their members in the way they should be, they'd caused considerable economic damage, considerable social disruption, the public sector disputes, leaving the dead unburied ... Things of this sort, which the media ... were always only a small part of what happened but the media put absolutely up front, as if this was characteristic of some of the disputes in a bigger way. So the wider political atmosphere was very negative around the trade union movement and the media obviously was a part of that.

**PS: In some ways ... I remember somebody saying to me who was one of the Ford Shop stewards ...**

BB: Ah.

**PS: ... he was saying to me he was horrified after the '79 election because he realised most of his members had actually voted for a Conservative government. Why do you think that reaction ... because it was changing the members, who somehow changed ... Why do you think that happened?**

BB: Well, it was a period where there had been this type ... pay restraint period, and that was difficult for people. Living standards were being squeezed. If you were being held down to a tight pay rise and inflation was running at twenty-odd percent initially ... So there'd been that real difficult period of falling living standards. And then the big bust-up with the major disputes that came on the back of that. The atmospherics were just very difficult for unions. The broader atmospherics. And the wider public, I mean, trade union members, they are the public and we must never, ever forget that. Obviously active members, their voices are heard inside union structures, but beyond the active members there are an awful lot of just ordinary members and ordinary members of the public. And their views are influenced by the wider political atmosphere like anybody else's.

**PS: Was there a change in strategy? Because to a certain extent ... I mean, when I worked here, there was a terrific economic thing, there was the Economic Department, that was seen as the very heavy thing, and gradually it seemed to be heading more towards the industrial organisation and the economic side seemed to be less part of what was going on because they hadn't got that influence anymore. Was there a change in strategy within the TUC?**

BB: I'm not sure in a deliberate way quite like that, but certainly the focus shifted because the new government wasn't interested in a pay policy agreed with the TUC. They were going to manage the economy as best they could but they certainly weren't going to sit around negotiating with the TUC leadership on what the economic policy should be. And they embarked fairly quickly on the programme of legislation to reduce trade union rights, attack unions' ability to organise, to represent people effectively, and we saw successive pieces of legislation rolled out over the years of Conservative government. So within the TUC, there was a lot of work on some of the difficult disputes that arose then with the Conservative government in office, so the focus on disputes remained very strong, and handling them, managing, trying to support unions to find a way through them. And the focus on labour law was very strong. The kind of politics of the relationship with the Conservative government, the key prism through which that was kind of channelled was the debate over labour law and trade union rights, employment rights rather than economic policy. I mean, clearly there were periods where economic policy did come strongly to the fore, issues around cuts in spending and the recession of the early 1980s which had such devastating consequences, but the initial focus, labour law, was more strongly the issue at the centre stage.

**PS: There were you, Head of the Press Department, Media, trying to get over the TUC point of view throughout this.**



BB: Yeah.

**PS: How difficult was it?**

BB: Yeah, it was difficult and I remember we produced a pamphlet. The concern over the media coverage of unions was so strong that there was a decision by the General Council to establish what was called the Media Working Group, chaired by Bill Keys, the General Secretary of SOGAT at that time. Moss Evans, General Secretary of the T&G chaired it for a while as well. And we produced some reports looking at the way the media covered trade unions stories. And the core argument was essentially, they only really had covered disputes in any volume, that all the rest of the work that unions do day in, day out wasn't reflected in the media portrayal of unions. And even in terms of their coverage of disputes, it was almost always focussed very heavily on the effects of disputes rather than the causes of disputes. So in particular, disputes that inconvenienced the public in any way, acres of coverage of train strikes, things that mucked up things for the public, with not very much serious understanding of why had this dispute arisen? What were the underlying causes? And the injustices that perhaps workers were facing that lay behind the dispute. So there was a kind of very lively debate around the media policy area and why did the broadcasting institutions, the BBC and so on, even though they have charter obligations to cover industrial issues impartially, were not their news values being influenced by the press news values in their coverage of industrial affairs and unions and so on.

**PS: Lots of problems, certainly on the media side and on the press side because a lot of disputes were also media-type ones --**

BB: Yeah, yeah.

**PS: [unintelligible] News Group, News International subsequently at a slightly later date.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: And of course, the miners strike as well. With the miners, to a certain extent, there was a picture somehow came out of the TUC being in dispute with some unions ... And do you think to a certain extent that unions might have been seen as a bit slow to react to what was going on around them? Technology was going to come in, there were going to be these changes, and the whole time we were seen to be reacting to them as opposed to being able to ...**

BB: Well, you're right that there were certainly very significant media disputes and the Stockport Messenger dispute with Eddie Shah was a pretty pivotal moment in terms of unions' relationships with the law and there was a very difficult internal debate within the TUC about, in effect, whether the unions should abide by the law in prosecuting that industrial dispute or whether the TUC should be seen to be actively supporting illegal actions. And that was a very difficult dispute. But the wider point perhaps about the media dispute was the extent to which perhaps they coloured newspaper proprietor attitudes to unions and therefore editorial lines and the editorial approach to union issues. Because the industrial relations of Fleet Street was ... this was an area where unions did wield enormous power. And obviously, then we saw what happened at Wapping with the Murdoch move to in effect break the union hold over the kind of industrial relations. And all

of that background within the industry, I think probably did have an impact on the approach they took editorially to union issues more generally.

**PS: The work of the TUC was also influenced very much by what was happening abroad. Why has the TUC always been so involved with this?**

BB: I mean, it's always been an internationalist movement, trade unionism. From the earliest days, attempts to build links with other workers' movements in other parts of the world, the history of the TUC international work is a rich and fascinating history. I mean, at the time that I became actively involved and so on ... I mean, some of the big issues were certainly about the pretty profound political change taking place in central and eastern Europe. I mean, again, there had been pretty bitter, divided views down the years over relations with the Soviet Union and eastern European trade union centres which some people saw as not genuinely independent movements, under the control of the Communist Party systems in those countries and so on, but with others saying but there should still be decent links with workers' organisations. Now obviously in the '80s, we saw the profound changes starting to take place with the growth of Solidarność in Poland and then the rest is history, as they say. So for us to be engaging with some of those new organisations that began to emerge ... very often people looking for kind of genuine advice and counsel on all the issues involved in establishing new workers' organisations and so on. That was a fascinating kind of period and I think absolutely important for us to be engaged. In a slightly different way, the campaign against Apartheid in South Africa, the tradition of trying to give succour and solidarity to workers' organisations facing sometimes a fantastic degree of oppression from dictatorial regimes and governments, I mean, that's an important part of the tradition, too. Obviously, that was a period where in South Africa where things were beginning to move in a different way. There was a period of ... state of emergency and so on, but then eventually there were moves toward some serious political change. The release of Nelson Mandela and eventually the establishment of a new South Africa. The trade union movement was absolutely pivotal to that. To that change. And the international support that COSATU and the other South African unions secured, that support was absolutely crucial to them. Not only the sense that they were not alone in the struggle that they were facing, but some of the practical support and assistance that sometimes on a modest scale but nevertheless they regarded as really important. We were able to give and establishing new training systems to train up their new cadres of activists and representatives for example. So the international dimension to the TUC work was always very important.

**PS: 1987 you went back to Organisation and Industrial Relations as its Head.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: And now you were entrenched with the Tory government. Many things you were being involved with, industrial training boards, etc., were all on their way out or about to go.**

BB: Yeah.

**PS: How difficult was it coming to terms with what was happening, with what was going on?**

BB: It was a very difficult time and at that time, I would say there wasn't a lot of optimism around in the TUC. The Tory government seemed well entrenched, there were kind of further negative moves to roll back any opportunity for meaningful dialogue for the TUC with the Conservative government. The Manpower Services Commission, which is where I came in, so to speak, was abolished in '88, '89, after a disagreement over a key policy issue and the Conservative government decided, well, we'll abolish it. We don't need to have that kind of body to actually engage with the unions and the employers to deal with this area. So that locked us out of any meaningful kind of dialogue. And that sense of being locked out was felt very strongly right across the TUC. So it was a very difficult period, yeah.

**PS: Also to a certain extent you weren't working with the Labour Party because the Labour Party was in such disarray as well. So very much it was the TUC and the trade unions who to a certain extent were the opposition.**

BB: [Nods]

**PS: How ready was the TUC for that fight in a way?**

BB: Yes, I mean we were the opposition in a sense, but obviously we were trying to certainly work with the Labour Party as well, to restore their kind of political fortunes. And through the '80s, Labour had been heavily beaten in the '83 and '87 ... '88 elections? '87 I think. Suffered major defeats. So then in running up to the 1992 election, I mean there was a sense of optimism that potentially there could be some real change. And we worked with Labour to try and help develop some of their policy thinking, to have a different kind of vision to take to the electorate. As it happened, obviously Labour suffered a ... not as big a defeat as previously of course, but they were defeated so we had five more years as it turned out to face with still with the Tory government.

**PS: And the Tory government didn't have anything to do with the TUC. Was there any contact at all?**

BB: Very little. There was some occasional exchanges with ministers, but very little. I don't think ... I'm not sure we met John Major once during his time as Prime Minister. I mean, maybe once on an international basis. I don't recall a single TUC delegation meeting with John Major. I mean, he was wrestling with a fantastic divided Conservative Party, riven by huge splits over Europe, in particular. And one of the few things that he could be clear about in a way that united the Tory Party was just being hostile to the unions! And for example, resolutely opposing the social dimension of the European Union, the social chapter and so on. So he had no political incentive, as he saw it, to perhaps take a different tone to the tone that Margaret Thatcher had struck toward the unions.

**PS: In 1993 John Monks became General Secretary and you became Deputy General Secretary. You two were seen as the two modernisers. Why?**

BB: Well, it was to try and certainly give the TUC a lift and a sense perhaps of a new kind of era starting. So John's particular key initiative when he was elected General Secretary was to launch the project that was called the kind of re-launch of the TUC. And I was appointed Deputy General Secretary and very much involved in supporting that. And essentially it was saying that the TUC needed to modernise its internal structures to

become more outwardly focussed, that we carried on with internal structures and institutions, lots of committees and so on in a way that wasn't having any impact. I mean, we were still trying to do detailed policy work even though the reality was that people on the other end weren't interested in detailed TUC submissions on whole range of different areas of public policy. The government wasn't listening. And didn't want to listen. So we needed to be much more effective at identifying some key themes on which we needed to then build a much wider, broader public support. That it wasn't just good enough any longer to think that you could just turn up and say, we're from the TUC and therefore somebody ought to listen to us. You had to be able to demonstrate that you were carrying the British people with you more widely. So that re-launch project in 1993 involved transforming our internal structures, giving, I think, TUC staff a different sense about what their role should be. Less deferential to all these committee structures, more prepared to take some risks. More TUC staff seen externally, to be representing the organisation. Doing media work, going out and speaking at public events, taking the TUC's message out in a much more confident, active way. Established a new Campaigns and Communications Department with a broader remit. Obviously press relations continued to be a very important part of that work, but thinking more strategically about campaigning around key issues and not just the media dimensions but the wider kind of public affairs work that was needed too. So it was a kind of period saying to the unions, look, we all need to shake ourselves up and take new approaches if we want to have an impact. And we should be testing ourselves against that measure. Has a piece of work that's been done, has it had an impact? Has it changed somebody's opinion somewhere? Has it made it more likely that we might be able to win progress in a policy area, or has it just been to make ourselves feel good?

**PS: And of course a Labour government came back in again.**

BB: Yes.

**PS: Did the relationships change? Was it like the old days or again, because things had changed so much and of course the TUC had changed as well, had that dynamic changed, too?**

BB: It had. Obviously, a lot of work was done with Labour on preparing what their manifesto would be in the run-up to the '97 election. And we had established some core commitments from Labour on employment legislation. With the commitment to legislation on trade union recognition, on some stronger individual rights, commitment too to sign up to the European Social Chapter, which John Major had kept us out of, so bringing us into the European mainstream in terms of the idea of decent protections for people at work. But obviously, Tony Blair had by then become leader, after John Smith's untimely death, so Tony Blair had established himself with his style as leader. Clearly, he was a Labour leader who didn't feel that he kind of owed the trade unions a great deal. He hadn't had particularly strong union support when he was elected leader. Many of the unions had not favoured his candidacy. But nevertheless he had committed himself to a progressive agenda in some of these key areas. So when Labour was elected obviously, there began to be a sense of a whole new political opportunities though I have to say on the election day ... the next morning, after the election results had been counted, there was a breakfast meeting in this room with some of the leading general secretaries and there was a very apprehensive air that this new Labour government, would they really want to talk to the TUC in they way that we would want and expect and really engage with us positively?

Or would they be holding us at arm's length? Desperate not to be seen to be in the union's pockets and so on. So there was no great euphoria on the morning of ... was it May the second, 1997? No great euphoria. But certainly, obviously, after eighteen years of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, it's got to be better!

**PS: Now we've got another Labour government, John of course has now left and you're now General Secretary, which is a ... Did you ever imagine yourself being in that role?**

BB: No! [Laughs] Obviously, when I became Deputy General Secretary then clearly the prospect was there that potentially I might become General Secretary. Prior to that point really, I never really thought about it as a real possibility. And when I started in the TUC back in the 1970s, I mean, Len Murray was initially this kind of rather remote, lofty, rather stern figure. And this office, I never went into very often at all, and always with a high degree of trepidation. Len could certainly have that effect on junior colleagues, even though he was a thoroughly, thoroughly decent fellow, who I admired immensely. So no, I never started my working life with any particular thought or expectation of finishing up doing this role, no.

**PS: Ed Milliband coming in on trade union vote, is there going to be the same relationship, is the TUC still talking to Labour? Are the same views going forward, are --**

BB: Yeah. Well, in the run up to the last general election, when there was clearly a strong prospect that there might be a change of government, I mean I did talk actively to the leadership of the Conservative Party. I talked to David Cameron and some of his colleagues. To try and, in a sense, establish the basic principle that the TUC represents a very, very important, bona fide legitimate interest group that any democratic government should be prepared to properly engage with. And the fact of the affiliation of many of our individual affiliate unions to the Labour Party, that that shouldn't in some way be used to justify cutting off proper dialogue with the trade union movement. And there was a kind of basic democratic principle involved here that in effect, I thought, the last Conservative government had breached in the way that they just cut off any opportunity for a proper conversation. And he basically accepted that argument, I think, and confirmed before the election that in the event of the Conservatives winning the election that they would continue with the arrangements for consultation for different government departments, different structures in some case, and so on, that they'd continue with those in the event they won the government. Won the election. Now, obviously we've now got a coalition government, after the election there were the Tory/Lib Dem negotiations that led to the formation of the coalition ... In essence, so far, the coalition have followed through on that commitment. Having said that though, clearly the agenda is massively difficult and we have a huge division with the government over their approach to economic policy. And this core judgment they've made to focus on cutting the deficit with these massive spending cuts still just coming through even now, we think is a profoundly wrong decision and that it won't solve the deficit problem and it will cause a great deal of suffering and we're seeing people's living standards squeezed, so in terms of our relations with the government, the coalition, it's a little different from the previous government. At least there are opportunities for regular dialogue, and I see some ministers fairly regularly, with other colleagues, but there is clearly a big divide on policy. But at least opportunities for dialogue. With Labour, the challenge is a bit different, I think, and the new leadership, Ed Milliband, there's still

work to do to really establish a basis of dialogue that I think is what's kind of needed. I mean, we have been coming through, and still not out the end, of the biggest crisis in the world economy that any of us have ever seen. Massive failure in the financial system. And we're all now paying the price for that, and continuing to pay the price for that, and we need some pretty profound re-thinking about that relationship between finance and the wider economy. And the unfairness that's been growing. The inequality that's been growing. And it's not just been growing over the last eighteen months since the coalition took office, it's been growing over the last thirty years, the economy doubled in size and yet the earnings of ordinary people has nowhere near kept pace with that growth in national wealth. The proportion of the GDP that goes into the wage packets of ordinary people over the last thirty years has fallen from sixty-five percent to just over fifty percent. All that wealth has been sucked off by an elite at the top. And we need some radical new thinking about how to re-shape our economy in a much fairer way. Now, I hope Labour can do that, can think their way through in a positive way to a much more progressive vision, and we have a big part to play in trying to help them do that.

**PS: What's the role of the TUC in the future? And does it have a role?**

BB: We still have a very big part to play. We're the biggest volunteer organisation in the country, around six million members. Many fewer than we had some years ago, but still a significant force, and obviously we've got to face up to that huge organisational challenge to re-build our membership strength. But, I mean, while acknowledging that, we've still got enormous potential to make a real difference. We make a difference in an awful lot of work places. Unions are still a powerful force for good. Sword of justice effect. We deliver better safety standards. The evidence shows that absolutely clearly. Much more likely to have a decent occupational pension if you're in a union, much more likely to have your schools invested in and decent training arrangements in your workplace. You're much more likely to have fair pay. And be treated in a proper, dignified manner. All of these things, the evidence is there. And overwhelmingly the evidence is that the public still support trade union values and objectives as broadly as ever. So we've got to convert that latent support into bigger membership. But we've got a big part to play in the battle of ideas, as well, about what kind of country we want this to be and what kind of society we want it to be. And in thinking about that big challenge that I was describing a moment or two, about really fashioning a more ambitious, more radical response to the huge crisis we've been going through, I want to see the TUC as a big player in that debate. And I think we can be. And I think we come to that debate with a lot of strength representing so many people. So I'm confident the TUC has got an important role to play.