

TUC: Rita Donaghy: 1st April 1999  
Transcribed by Ailsa McKillop for Gil Pearson

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**Rita Donaghy is President of the TUC in 1999. She is the UNISON representative on the Council and we went to her office in the Institute of Education of the University of London, where she is Permanent Secretary to the Students' Union, to talk to her.**

**So let's talk about your education and where you come from and everything?**

Well, I was brought up in Leamington Spa, in the Midlands.

**Good Tory part of the world?**

Yes, absolutely, except at the moment it's for the first time in its history a Labour constituency, but I was born in Bristol during the War and moved up to Leamington back when this is my father's home, this is my father's home at Leamington, so we moved back there, and he was an engineer, he was very active in the Union

**The AEU, was that?**

In the AEU, as it was called then, yes, and he was a shop steward and then a convenor of shop stewards. He worked for Armstrong Siddley in Coventry, which became Bristol Siddley and then Rolls Royce. He died in '62 at the age of 52.

**That was a very left-wing union in its day, wasn't it, the AEU?**

It was a very divided union, it lurched from extremes of right and then

**What was he?**

My father was a Communist, he left in '56, a lot of Communists left the party

**Hungary, presumably?**

Over Hungary, but he was a Communist until then. Towards the end of his life he was only 52, but he'd started to get back to the Labour party.

**Did you join the YCL?**

No, no, I was never - I think it's one of these things where your parents are interested and involved, you tend to rebel a bit in your teens, so I wasn't interested at all.

**And what was your rebellion? How did it what form did that take?**

Well, he used to want to put Labour posters up during the election and I was a real, I was at the Leamington Grammar School and I was a real snobby little teenager,

and I used to be absolutely mortified when he put these posters up in the front window; I thought it was dreadful. And

**And these were just Labour, not ?**

my friends would never oh, yes.

**Not not Communist?**

No. No. I think it was just typical reaction against one's parents, you know? He was a very busy, active trade unionist, he was you know, not at home all that much, he used to have meetings in the front room of the local branch.

**So when did you get the epiphany to come back to the fold, as it were?**

Well, I think part of your upbringing is that you don't notice it happening until I went to university and I became secretary of the Labour Club at the university, you know, complete, again, I suppose, a bit of rebellion because Durham University was such an Oxbridge-orientated university, I took one look at all these Oxbridge rejects and I just didn't want anything to do with what they were taking part in, so the Labour Club seemed to be about the best, the best idea. And I just joined the Labour Party before I went up to Durham, I'd helped in one of the election campaigns in Leamington, so I don't know why, actually, I can't think back why I did, because I wasn't particularly interested, I was totally wrapped up in going to university, I was the very first person in my whole family who'd ever been.

**Really?**

And my parents were too poor to go on to college, they were both very, very bright but were taken out of school early on and didn't get to college, either of them. My father went to evening classes and used to paint and draw.

**And your mother did she ?**

Incredibly talented, she passed whatever the equivalent of the 11 Plus was, but the parents that was in Barnsley, she was brought up with four girls in Barnsley, but only one of them went to grammar school, they couldn't afford for all four to go, and yet they were all as bright as buttons, you know?

**And did she work?**

She worked in retail all her life, the Scotch Wool Shop and Scholls' Shoeshop and Woolworths, which was sorry, not Woolworth's, Woodwards, which was one of these very old-fashioned stores in Leamington, it's still there, and I don't know if you've ever seen the programme *Are You Being Served* oh, the characters are very, very similar to the kind of people that used to work there. And I worked occasionally in the summer holidays there, selling gloves and tights. I'm an expert on gloves and handbags, incidentally. So she was never an active trade unionist but she was always is, is still a Socialist. So I suppose you absorb that kind of thing, don't you?

**It must have angered you that a woman of this ability should have been shunted down a *cul de sac* like that?**

You don't think about it, perhaps, but yes, when you think of the waste of talent, and that's why what's happening in education is such a, is so upsetting, because some of us went to university for the first time, first generation, and now you see people struggling, and maybe taking choices about carrying on, on grounds of cost and money, and that's exactly what happened to my parents, you know, bright people whose, I'm not saying their lives were wasted, of course they weren't, but lost opportunities, I think.

**And is that again happening, do you think?**

Oh, absolutely, I'm sure it's happening.

**Under a Labour government?**

I can't blame Labour government, I think it's got too much damage to undo, but I think maybe it's got to see itself in terms of, you know, is it right that you've got an apartheid education system where on grounds of money you increase your chances of getting into university by up to 60 per cent. You know, only 6 per cent of our children are educated in direct grant and public schools, and yet 20 to 25 per cent of university places are filled by them. So you can literally buy your way into a university in this country, that's ...

**And is there any sign of that being changed?**

No, I don't think there is, I think probably on the sheer grounds of cost, the loans system and everything is going to go the way of students working their way through college, which I think will have an impact on the quality of the education that they receive. We're already seeing it, actually, there are studies being done already of the number of hours worked during term-time by students, and the effect that it has on the quality of their degree and whether or not they finish their course, that's already happening.

**And of course, you can observe this very closely being here in the Institute of Education?**

On the spot, yes.

**What's your relationship with the Institute? You're on the staff of the Institute?**

I'm on the staff of the Institute, yes.

**And you're called what?**

I'm called a Permanent Secretary, which is a title I like, it's that word 'permanent'.

**Permanent, very nice.**

It probably doesn't mean any more than anybody else nowadays, but it's a title I cling onto, because a lot of them are called 'managers' and things now, in student unions, there are all sorts of new-fangled titles.

**Yes. And your job is to run the whole Student Union?**

It's my job to, yes, I'm in charge of the trading accounts, which is the shop, the coffee bar, lunch counter, snack bar and bar. I'm the licensee, amongst my many talents, I'm the licensee.

**And there must be a kind of democratic structure as well?**

It's the, that side of it is run by two sabbatical officers and an elected executive committee, and they are the ones that take the decisions about how the place is run. I'm in charge, if you like, of the day-to-day practical stuff.

**You're the civil servant?**

I'm giving advice, yes, giving advice about that, and also about the relationships with the university and some of the academic committees on which the students are represented, if they want the advice, if they don't then I don't give it.

**But you can observe this change in the student structure and lament about it?**

I think that one of the things you notice is, because the pressure of the course is so great, the ability of the student to take part in activities has diminished over the years; and their willingness to take part, if it wasn't respectable, then they weren't going to take part because it might have an impact on their career. And so there's been a generation of students, what I call Thatcher's Children, if you like, and they're used to regarding life in an individualistic way, which was regarded as a good thing, of course, being individualistic, not in a collective way, hopefully that's starting to come back, there's a little bit more of a feel that there are causes worth fighting for, and I've been really heartened by some of the involvement that the students have had.

**And this must have affected the membership of the Students' Union? Of the National Union of Students?**

It's difficult to say, I think you'll always get people who are dedicated and who want to be involved, there will always be people who want it, I think you just don't get the numbers that you used to get involved, so I think to that extent it could be easier for just people who are now after a career to start to get involved, because I expect it'll be much more respectable now, to have it on your curriculum vitae that you've been an active officer in the Student Union, I don't think it will have the same what's the word? it won't be looked down on by employers as it might have done about ten years ago.

**But to get back to you, you were very active ?**

I was active at university, yes, I did English language and literature, and it was a

ghastly course, nearly a third of it was Old English, I could cope with the Middle English, but really, it was just awful.

**Pointless, isn't it?**

It put me off literature for about 15 years, so I had to do something with my time, and I'd go off to John Rex's sociology lectures, he was a professor at the time, and I was secretary of the Labour Club and I was assistant secretary of the student representative council and I was, I wrote regularly for the newspaper, and I was mistress of the College Punt, which was one of those honorary titles, it was my job to refurbish the punts and make sure that they were okay every year, and they didn't sink.

**So you're a good punter?**

I used to be, I couldn't cope now. But yes, I bummed around, basically, because I was good at exams, still managed to get a 2:1.

**And came out and did what?**

My first job was at the National Union of Teachers. I worked as a PA to Fred Jarvis, he was the publicity officer before he became General Secretary.

**And what did you do, what was your job?**

Well, it was a combined job. The PA bit of the job was to read through all the press every day and present cuttings to Fred so that he could respond for the NUT, and generally act as a sort of publications assistant for the annual report that came out and all that sort of thing, the calendar that they used to produce, and they also Fred was Secretary of what was called a Council for Educational Advance, which was a campaigning organisation of lots and lots of groups that promoted State education, equality in education, all of those, like Socialist Educationists and CASE all of those organisations were affiliated, and trade unions, and I was his secretary, so I was the one that did all the admin work for the CEA. I was there for a year and then I came here to the Institute of Education.

**Oh, you've been here ever since?**

Since 1968. Thirty years.

**And what union did you join then?**

There was no union here.

**No union at all?**

No union here.

**So what did you do?**

And well, quite by accident, somebody came from Imperial College to work in the

library here, and they asked why the salaries were different here compared with Imperial and elsewhere, and we found out from this person that our salaries were different we didn't know; we asked the management, they said: Oh, well, we're a bit broke this year, so we've not given you anything. So I got together a few people and we formed a union branch. And got the money, everything, backdated two years.

**Oh, that's great, and what union was that, then?**

NALGO, that was NALGO.

**And why did you choose NALGO? Because you presumably had a choice at that point?**

Yes, we did. What happened was, the committee it was one of the few areas in the trade union movement where an agreement was reached at the top, if you like, and the committee of vice-chancellors reached agreement with the TUC to have what was called spheres of influence agreement. So that it would cut out all the problems that the unions were having in the sixties and seventies

**On demarcation?**

on demarcation disputes, and it was a very civilised deal indeed where a university was sort of clearly marked out as AUT for academics, MSF, it was called the ASTMS in those days, was for the technicians, NUPE or the Transport and General were for the manual workers, and NALGO or NUPE or the T&G for white-collar, but universities were designated, so there were no sort of squabbles. In the London area, it was an open season for the three, and I invited all three in; we had an open meeting and they it was, if you like, a bit of a sort of beauty contest.

**That must have been fun and games?**

No, it was interesting. What was fascinating was, that the NALGO guy, I think he was the best in the sense of what he offered and the form of service, but also, what was significant around here was that it was the only union not affiliated to the Labour party, and because white-collar staff in universities are a bit, I don't know, maybe status-conscious or whatever, I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but people went for NALGO, they were most impressed by them. And

**Because it wasn't in the Labour party?**

Because it wasn't in the Labour party, yes.

**But that must have upset you?**

No, not particularly, it was never something I particularly bothered about. But then I realised there was no point in just having one branch here, we had to get going and establish branches elsewhere in the university, so we formed a sub-branch at the LSE, School of Pharmacy, Senate House, University College, Birkbeck, and I used to go in my lunch-hour and collect the subs around the place, sometimes through

the back door because the management weren't very keen on unions. And that took about seven or eight years to get about 15 branches established.

**And you were the leading spirit in all this effort?**

Yes, we were, once they got big enough, they would break away from us and form their own branch, but yes, we had about six or seven sub-branches at one time.

**It does dramatise a problem, that I think a lot of particularly young people, unschooled, feel: which union should I join? I mean, lots and lots of people in unorganised companies don't know where to join, now surely the TUC or somebody could give them a bit of guidance on that?**

The TUC is in quite a difficult position on this, because if people do ring up and say: XY and Z, which union do I join, the TUC can't say: You should join this one as opposed to this one. That is a difficulty for them, and I think we've got to get our act together on it, otherwise bureaucracy will put people off.

**I think that's true.**

The number of people I've talked to who have perhaps a market stall in their local town on a Saturday and they try and get Union leaflets out of everybody to be fair, and sometimes it's like dragging blood out of a stone to get the leaflets, the basic recruitment leaflets

**Yes, it's absurd.**

and I think we've just got to be a bit more outward-going about this kind of thing. I think people are still a bit on the defensive about taking on more work when they already feel overworked, the trade unions have been suffering just like the public services and like everybody in the job market, you know, the insecurity and the contracting of the movement from 12 million to six has meant that there's a lot of people who've just been hanging onto their jobs and, you know, they're feeling pretty tired and overworked, and I think they see a lot of the areas that there are nowadays that need recruiting, the service sector, the low-paid, the part-time, the fixed-term contracts, the people with few rights at work, are going to be hard work representing, and representation rights in small work-places is great, but where's the person power to do it, I think that's what people are thinking, that they're just tired and they don't have the energy to do it, so I think there's got to be a rejuvenation. I think it'll happen. We've missed a whole generation, and I think there's going to be a new generation who won't be bothered with all of that, and they'll just want to get going and they'll create their own rules.

**Of course, the problem for the TUC is if there's two or three a choice of two or three unions and they're all members they're all affiliates, you can't be seen to favour one or the other?**

Absolutely, yes, I think they'd soon be told off by a General Secretary of it so I think we've got to actually, if you like, the spheres of influence agreement is not a bad

idea in certain areas. One of the issues that we have there's a lot of green field sites where there are no members at all, so there ought to be a way of doing that without having a battle, but where you've got the real non-membership areas is where you've got just a few members of an existing trade union, and they just simply haven't been asked to join. And that's the big issue, that there are millions of people out there who are in a unionised workplace who simply haven't been asked.

**And of course something which could be done from here is that people, students at least, could be told if you're going into this area, this is the union, and so on?**

It's easier here at the Institute of Education because when they go out on teaching practice, there's a lot more teaching practice now in the post-graduate certificate, they're out for 15 weeks, and they appreciate the need to be covered in the event of difficulties in the schools, so there's always a flurry of becoming a student member of one of the teaching unions before they go out on teaching practice. I'm not saying they all join, but there is probably a higher appreciation here of what a union is actually about, and that is to protect you in the event of difficulties when you go into a workplace. Either because you're victimised or bullied by somebody in charge, or whether you're attacked by a, by a schoolchild, and I think there's perhaps a bigger appreciation of that, because they're already in a professional orientation.

**But that's a problem too, because there are several unions for teachers, aren't there?**

Well, that's right. There was a debate here earlier last week, actually, the *Guardian* debate between the General Secretaries of the NAS-UWT and the NUT on whether there should be a united profession, and they have a vote traditionally in the audience which was over 300 people, I understand, and the vote was that there must be a united profession, because that will be not just good for the profession but good for the union movement too, but

**I would have thought so.**

there are all sorts of divisions and difficulties.

**What holds it up, why aren't we there?**

It's difficult for me because I used to work for the NUT so I suppose you'd say, you know, it's a rather obvious thing that you'd need. There are several issues. First of all, there's a career teacher orientation and a lot of them think that one union deals with career teaching more than perhaps a basic profession and they and therefore, if you just have a standard image of a teacher, that their needs are not sufficiently catered for, so you do get these divisions between perhaps the primary schoolteacher and the secondary schoolteacher who sees a need to have some progression and therefore some status, and therefore a union that takes care of their needs. I think that it's going to happen, I'm absolutely convinced it'll happen, it's one of the biggest single weaknesses in the teaching profession, in my view.

**Yes. Now to get back to you.**

I don't like talking about myself – good at avoiding it.

**You came here and you were how old?**

October '68, so I was...

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24 when I came here

**And have been here ever since? Rising in the job, or doing the same job?**

You don't rise, you don't rise, when you're a trade unionist. I did. I did to start with, I worked in what I suppose you would call a registry in other places, I wasn't in the Student Union then, and I was Clerical III, a humble Clerical III, and you weren't allowed to join the pension scheme if you were as low as that, so there was discrimination in pensions, and it was an awful pension scheme as well. One of those very, very peculiar people who became passionate about pensions in their twenties, and it was an administrative job, I was a secretary to various committees, including one called the Committee of Principals, and they were the Principals of the 36 teacher training colleges that existed in the South-East then, representing about 26,000 teachers, teacher trainees. Shirley Williams and Margaret Thatcher managed to reduce that to six colleges, training 4,800 students, and so we had a big department when I first joined, 36 people, validating the courses and everything, and I gradually worked my way up to what they call academic-related status. In fact, I suspect that I was promoted to get me out of NALGO activity and hoping that I would join the AUT and they were horrified when I stayed active in NALGO. But it was, you know, a big department, and then when they announced the separation of the teaching training colleges from the university, we had to run down the department and that was my responsibility.

**A horrible job.**

To run down a department of 36 to nil, and I was the last person to pack up the

**What a horrible job.**

files and put them in the archives. So that was ghastly

**A horrible job for anybody but for you, for a union person must have been ghastly.**

yes, it was ghastly, it was absolutely ghastly, but it had to be done and it was done in a civilised way, in my view, you'd have to ask the people who went before me whether that true or not. And then of course I went through a series of humiliating interviews with various departments in the place, because the last person in the

world they wanted was me, and eventually I was dumped down in the student union. I think they thought that I wouldn't probably hack it, so and it was losing money, how you can lose money in a bar, I'll never know, but it was losing money, so

### **And you turned it around?**

Oh, yes, yes.

### **How quickly?**

Well, we made a profit the following year, but that was, you know, we appointed a new bar manager and made a different management arrangement, if I can put it tactfully, in the catering section, so yes, it's taken a while to build up but the turnover now is about three quarters of a million a year from something like, it was about fifty thousand.

### **Where does the profit go?**

We don't make a lot of profit, I mean, the objective is to keep the prices down because the students can't afford to pay a lot, so you aim to break even, any profit in the bar is poured back into the place, buying new equipment or refurbishing. We're hoping to move the catering facilities next year if we can, we're discussing that with the college at the moment. So it's mainly fed back into the student activities. The objective is not to make huge amounts of money.

### **So here you were, 24, here and did you get married?**

Yes, I got married the same year I came here, December 1968.

### **Who to? I mean, what kind of ?**

An Irishman from Derry in Northern Ireland. He was very active in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, and he went to Queen's University, Belfast, and was one of the many that were thrown out of Queen's in the 60s, activists in the movement. And he came over to London, and I met him in London. I was on I'd hitched down from Durham to there was a demonstration against the trade union legislation that was taking place in Ireland at the time, we were obviously very involved in Durham on these sorts of things, and we hitched down to this demonstration outside the Irish Embassy, because it was like a sort of Margaret Thatcher type anti-trade union legislation that was being passed at the time, and we met several people for the first time. We were stood outside the Embassy saying: 'Up your arse, Sean Lemass'. Don't suppose you'd better print that, but and that's when I met Jim. And then I didn't see him for a year, and we met again when I moved down to London, and yes, we got married in December 68.

### **Kids?**

No, no children. He, he wanted to be very active in the union movement too, he was active in the Transport and General Workers' Union, he worked for Whitbread's Brewery for a while and wanted to get into the union movement as a full-time official but didn't make it. Then he had problems of his own and he died 12 years ago.

But I think well, he came from a background which was a very difficult background in Derry. Mother died having the sixth child and brought up by a father who really actually couldn't couldn't cope, and he couldn't wait to leave Derry, got out as quickly as he could. So a dreadful background and quite, you know, difficult to know how anybody survives in that kind of

**And since then?**

Since then ?

**Did you have a partner?**

Oh, yes, well I was on my own for about ten years, happily, and then my partner Ted and I have been together for ten years. He has three sons, so I'm a weekend mum, occasionally.

**What does he do?**

He works here at the Institute, that's where I met him. He's the Domestic Services Officer, that's the sort of, in charge of security, the building as a whole, cleaning, and everything. They always say you meet your partner at the workplace, don't they?

**Yes, I suppose most people do, I think. And how did you rise and rise in the Union movement, to reach the Presidency?**

Well, because we were very new, the white collar this was part of the growth of white collar trade unionism, from 68 onwards, and because we were brand new, we didn't have anything in the union, no structure, we were part of local government NALGO. As you know, it was a very local government orientated union.

**Yes.**

And I couldn't see the point of this, there's only a few old what they called CATs, colleges of advanced technology that became universities, that had local government scales, and it seemed pointless to me to belong to that, and we pressed and pressed and pressed for separate status within the union and we got a national committee. It took me about five years to get them to agree to that, and then they had a national committee and I became its first chair, that was August 73. And in those days that meant you had an automatic seat on the national executive. The trade union legislation stopped that; they stopped automatic seats, and every seat now has to be directly elected from the membership, but in those days, if you became chair and a leading negotiator of a group, you were automatically on the NEC. So at the age of 29 I was on NALGO's NEC, and I was a raving leftie, of course, from their point of view, the Masons had only just been kicked out of the building, it was very Masonic in the fifties and sixties and I was really on the left, I was kept off all the major committees for ten years.

**Not many women, I shouldn't think?**

No, very few women, very, very few women.

**And then how did you make the breakthrough? What ?**

One of the interesting things because of the university white collar staff the salaries finished at about £10,000, and then you became academic related, so the only people on the committee were women, it was the only NALGO committee where all of the national committee, one from each other, 12 regions, were women. And they were looking after, if you like, the bottom half of the salary scale, where people's interests were different, they were more interested in holidays and reduction in hours, in establishing a pension scheme for the first time and being able to join it, in having pro rata rights for part-timers, maternity leave rights, issues like having the same rights if you had a still-birth as if you'd given birth to a live baby. We were discussing those in the early seventies, because this is what we were interested in, and I became a trustee and established a pension scheme for the University of London in 75, and it's now, you know, a very big scheme indeed.

**Yes, I imagine it would have been.**

Maternity leave was the best in the public sector for about ten, 15 years. The pro rata agreement for part-timers has never been bettered. That's simply because women were saying for the first time, what they wanted, and I think that helped to influence we set up in NALGO itself then an Equal Rights Working Party across all of the services, and that reported and showed up a lot of the services that had taken pride up till then in being extremely advanced as trade unions, and what they were was extremely advanced for the men.

**Really?**

And so this was quite a breakthrough, this Equal Rights Working Party, and the report it produced at the end was pretty revolutionary, it established a national women's committee, which was very controversial, it's difficult to think about that now. And we actually co-opted a couple of people from outside, and one was Patricia Hewitt, who was the General Secretary of what was called the NCCL then, and she's now Minister in the new Labour government, and Ruth I'm trying to remember her name she's now professor of Social Policy, but she was leader of the Child Poverty Action Group. Ruth Lister. They were co-opted onto the committee, brought some very, very invaluable experience in. Because they were scraping around to get women on the Equal Rights working party, and two or three of us were from the University Committee, because there were so few active elsewhere, so we really dominated it, even though we were the tiniest service.

**It sounds as though it's been a kind of leader for a lot of the movements come afterwards?**

It was a lot of path-finding. When I first went to NALGO annual conference, a woman would stand up on the rostrum, it didn't matter how old she was, and she would be wolf-whistled. I mean it is difficult to think about how women were regarded, it wasn't that long before, that if you got married you were automatically dismissed from your job in certain professions, the teaching profession and some

parts of the civil service; it wasn't all that long before we started to get active. But again, it's quite difficult to remember these things.

**Things have come very fast, haven't they, really?**

No, not very fast, in my view, no. No, not fast at all.

**Not fast enough?**

No, very, very slowly.

**So where are we today with all that?**

We have the policies in place, the lip service is very eloquent. Some of the structures are getting there. I think we've now got a difficulty of a lot of bright young women have been coming through the movement and it's great for me, towards the end of my time, if you like, to watch that, but they are now getting frustrated about getting to a certain level, and then finding that there's a huge block. I think it's probably to do with the age range, if you like, of the senior full-time officials, and the contraction has meant there's very little opportunity for promotion, and a lot of women are just not prepared to put up with waiting another 20 years to get somewhere and they're now leaving and they're going off to different jobs. Obviously they're doing very well for themselves, but the objective is to get them to stay and to push themselves up so they become General Secretaries, not just of small unions but of the large unions as well, that's got to be the objective, because role models are vital, you know, it's not good enough for a 54 year old man in a stripy suit to stand up and say how important equal opportunities are, it just doesn't wash. It's good that they hopefully believe it, but it doesn't work, it needs to have women who know a little bit about what it's like to run three things: a family, a job and a trade union.

**Are there any women General Secretaries?**

There are fewer now than there were even four years ago. I think Helen McGrath from the from KFAT, some General Secretaries of tiny unions like the radiographers and the physiotherapists, very, very small professional unions, where they you know, they open up more and they're more flexible as small organisations, but not really of the big ones, no. No.

**And what about on a local level? Officials and so on, is there still prejudice against women?**

When you say 'officials', do you mean full-time officials, or ?

**Well, both, really.**

I think that different unions will be behaving differently on this. I think certainly in UNISON, which is the union that I'm now in, there was a concerted effort to promote women, because 70 odd per cent of our membership are women, and everything else in the union is proportional, it's written into the rulebook, it's written

in, because if you sit and wait for it to happen, it takes fifty years, so to push it, you had to make it proportional.

### **When did that happen?**

That happened at the foundation of the Union, which was 95, and no it wasn't, it was 93, sorry that happened at the establishment of the Union in 93, written into the rulebook that if you had two-thirds women then you had to have two-thirds on the National Executive Council, by whatever device you did that, and proportionality had to be achieved at branch level by the year 2000; that means that branch officers and activist stewards, have to be two-thirds women. And what we can't do at the moment is insist that that happens in the full-time staff because as an employer of full-time staff you have to adopt slightly different criteria unless you had a massive compulsory redundancy programme which as a trade union would not necessarily go down too well, you have to make it more gradual and it's extremely frustrating because we have all the right policies, we've got the right structures on the lay side, but all the time, you know, the sixties, senior people in the union, the vast majority of them are men, still. That will change, but it is taking a long time.

**Now, I can't even ask you whether you approve of that, of course you approve of it and of course you worked for it and so on, but would it apply for instance to black members? I mean, you couldn't legislate that because, what, ten per cent of your members were black you've got to have ten per cent officials, or ten per cent representatives are black, and yet the representation of black people is very much lower than it should be. What do you do about that?**

Well, first of all, there's evidence to show that black workers join trade unions proportionally more than white workers, so I think they see the advantages of joining a union. What we try to do in UNISON is to say: we might not be able to get proportionality for ethnic minority members, but we will get an absolute right of representation. So we set up what we call self-organised groups; there are four of them: one is for women, one is for lesbian and gay members, one is for black members, one for disability. And each of them have their own National Conference, where they have a right to attend and be represented and to the policy has to fit in with the overall policy of the Union, they can't be breakaways, but they are given their own channels of representation. The only one we can't do, and that's because of legislation and not because of any lack of willpower we can't give them automatic seats on the National Executive. But everything else they do, we have automatic right at the TUC Delegation, of at least 11 black members, so we have the biggest single attendance of black workers; similarly with lesbian and gay representation and disabled, they are all automatically represented on the TUC Delegation, and they have their own National Conferences, they have their own National Committees, they have their own newsletters and their own literature. So we are trying our best it's never enough, it's never enough, and they are the ones that we refer to for all of the legislation that affects them, equal rights, immigration anything to do with them they would automatically go to that committee for first, you know, for first comment.

**Just remind me what UNISON merged ?**

UNISON was a formation of NALGO, which was mainly white-collar, in eight services, local government, water, electricity, New Towns, universities, health. COHSE, which was a specialist health union, and NUPE, which again represented health, local government, water, not so much electricity those three, all of them large unions in their own right with their own traditions and history, and totally different cultures, all of us saw the importance of combining together, because we were basically public service unions. And public services were under attack, I mean, Thatcher's objective was to abolish public services. So we had to combine together, in my view, it was the right thing to do, the ethos was the same, the aims and values were similar, so whatever the cultural problems, the overall objective was that we were all heading in the same direction, and instead of wasting time on inter-union disputes and all of that which puts off non-members like nothing else on earth, we thought this was the way to go, and it was traumatic, but we've got there, five years in, we've got there.

**And you've got a fairly progressive union, from the sound of it?**

Yes. Yes.

**And are more unions following what you're doing, for instance, with minorities and women, or how does the, if you regard the whole movement, is it coming along in these directions?**

It's developing very slowly, I have to say, that might sound as if I'm showing off on behalf of my own union. As I see it, women are still a minority in membership terms in the TUC, and a lot of unions are doing their best to implement equal opportunities policies, but in some it's a very slow process and I think women, because they'll talk to me, they feel very isolated, very often, within their own union, and they don't feel that the structures are helpful to their activities and their involvement. We've got a long way to go.

**So what do you have, conferences to encourage it, or what do you do?**

There's the TUC has an annual conference for women members and incidentally for black members and now lesbian and gay and disabled workers have got their own annual conference, so again the TUC is responding to the demands of the disadvantaged groups. The women's conference has taken place for years, I mean, since the sixties, and that takes place in March every year. And that again, I think is a good forum for people who want to gain experience, and some have never been to another conference before apart from their own union activity, so very, very good experience for them. And I think that it's been innovative, because a lot of things that have developed from the women's conference have been adopted by the main General Council, different ways of working, new ways of working, instead of the good old, you know, debate, with all the General Secretaries queuing up to make seven-minute speeches. Trying to find new ways of working. The TUC this year, I don't know if you saw it, but they had a youth, a Youth Congress, and then they invited some of the representatives of the young people onto the platform of the main Congress and asked it was Tony Robinson, Baldrick, who did the interviewing, and he was asking them what he felt about the delegates and how, you know, how they all were, and they all said: well, the speeches were really long and boring. And

one was asked, you know: what do you think about people who come to the conferences? 'Well, I think they're a bunch of saddos.' You know, we've got to be really sensitive to how people respond to us as an organisation, people are acting as consumers now, and they will treat us in the same way as they treat everything else, insurance companies and and that's important, that we respond to what they want.

**And to get back to you, how did your rise take place, to become President, have there been many women Presidents?**

In the TUC?

**Yes.**

It's strictly Buggins, it depends how long you sit round that table, you arrive at the General Council, which is was it September 87? and you sit opposite the President, and then you gradually, gracefully move either to the left or to the right, and you end up moving round the table until you end up, if you last that long, in the Presidential chair, so it's strictly Buggins' turn next. And there have been six women Presidents of the TUC, Marie Paterson actually chaired two Congresses, because one General Secretary died during his term of office, so she chaired two, so if you count her as two, then then that's I'll be the eighth, but if you count her as one, then I'll be the seventh woman in a hundred odd years, so ! It'll get better, hopefully.

**Are there more on the way?**

Yes. Yes, a lot more.

**Moving around this table?**

There were only two women on the General Council at one stage, and then again they decided that for larger unions they would change the constitution so that the larger unions *had* to nominate a woman as one of their delegates. Some unions would never have done that, I suspect, if it hadn't been for that change.

**And black people?**

Yes, there are three, that was an innovation about four years ago, I think, five years ago, there are now three black representatives who are elected in a separate constituency.

**And obviously you're looking forward to being the President?**

Mmm.

**And what 'perks' or whatever does it bring with it? Anything?**

Nothing, no. No. The privilege of attending about 15 conferences, I think, between April and July. I enjoy that, actually, I'll enjoy that very much but, no, it doesn't

seem to give you too many perks. I think you go along and chair various delegations, to see the Prime Minister and various ministers, but I'm attending these as a member of the delegation anyway now, so it wouldn't be that different for me, I don't think.

### **Because you've been President of NALGO ?**

I was President of NALGO 89/90, yes. That was rather a different role then, because NALGO Presidents were a bit like a sort of Lord Mayor, you walked around with a chain on, and you visited all the 12 regions, you spent a week in each of the regions, and you sort of you walked round meeting all the branch people, it was a fantastic experience, I would never forget it as long as I live, but you go into one branch mid-morning and then you go to another one at lunchtime, perhaps one for tea and one for dinner, and you'd have tables groaning with quiche and sausage rolls and cheese sandwiches, and at the end of the 12 months, I have to say, I would never, ever eat quiche as long as I live, I put on two stone in weight, and it was just, you know, talk about bad diet, it was incredible. But they're so welcoming, and one of the features, even though it's quite a long time ago now, one of the features that you realise about public service workers was that they have a pride in the work, if you like, they do a deal that then they know they're never going to earn brilliant salaries, but they're proud of the job and they're proud of being a public servant, and that's always underestimated by all governments, that sometimes the status and the dignity is important, money's important too, but that's neglected by all governments in my view. It woke me up quite a bit to the pride that people take in their work. I mean, you go round, you meet so many hun literally hundreds of people. So it was a great opportunity for me to go round, see what the the unions you know, how it was ticking.

### **And as the President of the TUC, do you have to do similar quiche-laden things?**

I don't think in quite the same way, there will be a few presentational things, maybe international delegations, but no, I don't think it's quite the same. The General Secretary performs very much that role in the TUC.

### **Do you have any power in the TUC, or is that all vested in the permanent staff?**

Power is a, is an odd word, influence, I think in the TUC. I don't think the General Secretaries, you can argue now don't have any power either any more, but if there's any power, it's vested in the General Secretaries of the bigger unions, and the TUC has a virtually impossible job, actually, of working towards a policy and keeping on board a very diverse group of people. And trying their best to get a united front. It's a very, very difficult role indeed, it's not quite the same as an individual union's role where they'll have an annual conference and a National Executive that tell people, you know, this is what you're going to do. The TUC has to have, it survives on consensus, if there's a vote at Congress, the unions are not necessarily bound to follow the policy, the TUC can say: this is our policy, but the individual unions, their own constitutions will be uppermost, so the General Secretary has an incredibly difficult role to play in keeping, keeping everybody on board and making sure everybody feels comfortable with policies and things.

**Which is done rather well, I think, isn't it?**

Oh, it's very, very well done. Extremely well done. I think we're very lucky, actually.

**You must have met a lot of famous people in your time: who most impressed you?**

I think that's a difficult one, actually, I'm not, I'm impressed by aspects of people, sometimes if they're a good orator, or sometimes if I think they're good on TV, or sometimes I think they've got a particular ability to make individuals feel at home. I'm not one for saying that I admire an individual, perhaps that's certainly my own General Secretary, I think we're very lucky to have Rodney Bickerstaffe, I think we're very lucky to have him, I think he's extra-special, I think we're lucky to have John Monks as General Secretary to the TUC, I admire what he does and the difficult role that he plays. I think if he said half of what he thought, I think we'd have a very different political climate, but he knows exactly what role he has to play, which I think is a very, very difficult one. I've seen a lot of orators over the years that I've been impressed by, but I always get scared about it too, I've done my own bit of oratory in my time, I used to be a Methodist lay preacher, incidentally

**Oh, did you?**

I gave that up a long time ago, but there are terrible dangers about oratory, and I mistrust it.

**If you hear a good speaker, you're almost put off?**

I wouldn't say put off, but I'll admire it as a performance, I'm a great admirer of actors, I go to the theatre at least once a fortnight, try to get once a month if I can once a week, if I can, so I love watching people acting, and to me, that's about the level that the speakers

**Oratory is acting, really?**

Yes.

**Who's the best orator you've ever seen? Can you pinpoint any?**

In the Union movement?

Yes.

I'd say Derek Jacobi or Ian McKellen, but I mean Rodney, Rodney on a good day I think one of the best speeches I've ever heard on education was Paddy Ashdown, in the Central Hall, Westminster, many years ago, passionate speech about education, very, very impressed by it. There's a couple of people at international level, the guy who was the Chilean ambassador, who's now taken over as General Secretary to the ILO, whose name I've almost completely forgotten, but very, very impressed by him; the guy who used to be Prime Minister in Jamaica? I'm no good on names, you see, I always forget these people's names. Nelson

Mandela, of course, he's had a I've never met him, I was in the same hall as he was on several occasions, never got round to meeting him, but he has a charisma that you just don't forget. So but no, I mistrust the role of great characters. When I first joined I first went to the TUC Congress in 74, and there were all these giants on the stage, the mine workers, Mick McGaghey and you know, I thought, all these people Jack Jones, Hugh Scanlon, absolute giants in their own right, and you'd worship them from afar and if you travel in the lift, in the same lift, you'd go off and tell everybody else that you travelled in the same lift as X, Y and Z oh, wow, wonderful. But I'm not sure that this is such a good idea now. A lot of people say: oh, we don't have the characters any more, we don't have the great personalities, who have you ever heard of on the General Council, you've only ever heard of Rodney Bickerstaffe and Jimmy Knapp. And Arthur Scargill hasn't been on the General Council for years. I'm not sure that that's a good thing

### **Why not?**

Maybe it attracts, if it attracts people in, then that's good, I think it could do just as much to deter as well.

### **But why do you distrust it?**

Oh, it's very difficult to without dropping clangers

### **Well, drop a couple of clangers!**

I think that it's very easy to manipulate an audience, because I can do it myself, I can work an audience up to a crescendo, and because I know how easy it is, I suppose I think that it's, it's not the way I think is the right way to go. It might inspire, I mean, I know people have said to me, oh, I'll never forget that speech you made in X, Y and Z, it really made me feel great and I went off and worked twice as hard and I think: hmmm. But you could do just as much damage if you did it the other way, you know. Dictators and other people use exactly the same thing.

### **Hitler was a wonderful speaker, yes.**

And evangelists. It's a very, very dangerous tool in the wrong hands, and so I suppose I tend to mistrust it.

[SECTION NOT TRANSCRIBED]

### **You're on the Low Pay Commission?**

I was appointed as an independent commissioner for the Low Pay Commission last year, and we reported in June, and we have a continuing role, we have to report again in December 99, but it was fascinating to see the extent to which Mrs Thatcher's policies have been carried through. The gap between the increase in the rich and the decrease in the poor, the level of standard of living, and the graphs, which are so stark, you know, the level of increase for the higher-paid was sort of like that and the level of decrease for the lower paid was like that. That ought to be etched on their marble gravestone in my view, and the fact that we were only able to

recommend £3.60 for the minimum wage, that's in April 99, and the fact that two million people are going to benefit from that, is not a comment on how wonderful a job we did, it's a comment on what a disgusting society we've become, I mean can you believe that 2 million people are going to have a pay rise - £3.60 an hour.

**(Camera Crew) - My daughter works on a television station where she got less than that and when she said "Macdonalds pay more", they said "Leave the television station and work at Macdonalds."**

It's called macho-management. I call it bullying, but that's the level that we've reached in this country.

What we're hoping is, now we've got the floor, if you like the Plimsoll line, and you can build on that, and you can say that we've got to have a proper education and training system in this country, more like Germany, if you like, we don't have that at the moment, we have a whole tranche of unskilled people who are going to find it more and more and more difficult to find work, and the relationship between the low-paid and the unemployed, and the informal economy was so enmeshed that it's going to take years for government to sort that out, and it's going to have to be done in a comprehensive way, it can't be just done on hourly rates, because the real poor in this country don't have paid employment.

### **What can the Union movement do about that?**

The Union movement can do several things, and it's the most exciting time if they only realised it. I think some people do. The TUC is leading the way on this. Firstly, they can recognise that 83 per cent of those who are going to benefit from the low pay are not in a union. Not in a union. So fact No. 1 is, if you're a member of a union, you're better paid. Fact. There's a whole chapter in the Low Pay Commission report which proves it. No. 2 you've got a recruiting job to do, because 83 per cent of these people who are being exploited and not in a union and should be, they're in hotels, they're in catering, they're in retail, they're in care homes, child care, all the most important aspects of our society if you're a woman, that you want your older relative looked after with dignity, you want your child looked after with safety, all of those people happen to be amongst the lowest paid in our country, and that has got to be wrong.

**It doesn't happen to be, does it, really? I mean, it is.**

It's part of the status of women in society, so if we can do something about that, that's got to be good. They've got to recruit in those areas that are non-unionised, they've got to blow their own trumpet by saying, the fact that you're in a union automatically means you're better paid, and they've got to try to move into those areas which are quite difficult to recruit, into the care homes, into retail, into these areas which are non-unionised.

### **Now, how do they do that?**

They do it by listening to what the workers are saying in those industries. Because what the traditional role of a union is may not be appropriate for them. They may be

more interested in having security in their job rather than the annual pay rise, I'm not saying that they would, they may want the money, they may want to have breaks in their work so that they can have a break during vacation time for children, or carer breaks when crises arrive, you know, dependent elderly people. They may want flexible holiday arrangements. They may want to have hours like a job-share where people can get together and say: can you do that shift in the shop because I need to do this today, you know, they may be more interested in those things than they may be in what's called the traditional bargaining areas. And they're interested in pensions. If you put it in a boring way, people say: oh, I don't understand that, but if you say, you know, do you want to be able to retire in dignity and not rely on social security, and they'll say: oh, yes, you know, but I'm not in a pension scheme, or I don't pay a National Insurance stamp, you know. Nearly three million women earn so little that they don't pay a National Insurance stamp, they don't even appear on statistics at the moment. One thing we found in the Low Pay Commission is that if you earn less than the National Insurance ceiling, which is something like 83 quid a week, you don't appear on the statistics, so the number of low-paid people isn't even known in this country, there's still even though we've tightened the figures up

### **Homeworkers, people like that?**

Homeworkers, sometimes people who work in catering on less than 16 hours a week, you know, it may not be the hourly rate that's low, it may be the fact that they only earn a small amount. But until we get the statistics more accurate, we still don't know the extent of low pay in this country. We've got the best statistics ever in the Low Pay Commission as a result of merging two lots of statistics and talking to government and Treasury, and reaching agreement about it, but there's still a margin of error of 300,000. That's huge. Huge. So we've really got to get our act together about the extent of low pay and particularly the informal economy in this country. There's a lot of it. We don't know the extent of it.

**So who should be going out there to recruit them to the unions? I mean, it's not in anybody's real interest, is it? I mean, they're so small I mean, it's so hard to get hold of them, that individual unions really haven't got the manpower or the time or anything else?**

It's a big challenge and certainly the TUC's campaign to organise and actually, it's not new, it's just trying to rejuvenate old campaigns, we've all as you know, I founded the branch here. We've all worked in non-unionised workplaces and have known how to work in a hostile atmosphere where the employer is not keen on organising there's nothing new under the sun, but it just needs a renewal of the enthusiasm, if you like, the evangelism needs to be brought back in, and that's why we've recruited organising assistants and in my union we've got eight trainees and their job has been to, well, to be actual training regional officers with an emphasis on recruitment. We did a survey recently in my union and asked regional officials how much time they spent on recruiting as opposed to casework, and it was tiny.

**I'll bet.**

It was tiny. Because the casework is, they're drowning in casework. When you've got people who are losing their jobs or are victimised

**You've got to look after them, yes.**

or they're working in unhealthy and unsafe conditions, they want a professional on the spot, they want them yesterday, and they're time-consuming, you know, case studies can be hundreds and hundreds of pages, and the individual member has become a consumer, so they don't just want a full-time regional official, they want the lawyer, the barrister, and Lord Irvine as well, and you know, you're not going to get that for three bob a week, so I think there's a big job to do to show the limitations of the union as well as the possibilities, that we're not just like an insurance company and there has to be that element of collective voluntary activity at grass roots level, that the members have got to help themselves a little bit by being active locally, they cannot rely all the time on the limited number of full-timers. But they've got to be motivated to do that, and that's the job of the organising people, to motivate the people who will become the future activists, the future stewards, the future branch secretaries, branch newsletter writers, they're the ones that have got to be motivated, not just having more and more full-time officials; it'll never work, never work.

**Is that the biggest job facing the unions at the moment?**

Yes, it is, it's by far the biggest job. We can't afford, like the French, to have a union movement with only about nine per cent membership, or like the Americans the Americans are very good at the razzmatazz, they've got all the recruitment style and everything, but at the end of the day, they're only six to nine per cent unionised, in a very, very hostile climate

**What per cent?**

Something like six to nine per cent.

**Six to nine per cent, so it's like less than ten per cent? Less than ten per cent of Americans are unionised? And what percentage is it in this country?**

In this country now it's about a third, about 33 per cent. It's gone down.

**And in Europe?**

Difficult to say. As I say, the traditions are different. The French have got a built-in constitutional right of representation, so even though people are not necessarily fully paid-up members of the union, they will vote for union candidates in the statutory recognised bodies for negotiating, and so union candidates invariably get elected and have an influence far beyond their paid-up membership, and the French don't think it's that important to actually pay membership fees, they've got all the recognition rights and they've got all the statutory negotiating rights that they need, so the membership issue isn't vital, but in terms of the coverage, they're very strong. The German system again, it's a co-determination system which they feel is under threat at the moment because of the all the new wave flexibility of

employment which the British have been exporting to other European countries, they're selling flexibility and job insecurity as a new way of working. So the unions are feeling threatened at European level. I wouldn't know what the actual percentages was, obviously it's very high in Scandinavia, because they're almost an arm of the State when it comes to the social security and pension side of things, so very high, 80s and 90 per cents in Scandinavia. Still we can't afford to get below the figure that we're in now.

**What you're saying seems to me we think of a united Europe, and we think of Europe getting more and more into like a single country, but when it comes to the trade unions, they're very diverse?**

Very diverse, very, very diverse.

**And do you think over the next century there will be a that diversity will get greater or less?**

I think it will get less. The European TUC, of which I'm a member of the Executive, I've seen it change even in the last eight years from being not a very effective body to being a very influential one indeed, where it's actually helped to change the European agenda, the jobs dimension which is now being talked about all the time, was something which the ETUC started, there had to be a jobs dimension within the European debate.

**What does that mean, jobs dimension?**

At that time, the only discussion was about the single market, it was about trade, it was about business, it was about having a Central European Bank, it was about money, it wasn't about people. And so our role in the European TUC, and of course the TUC was to say there must be a social Europe, not just on the social wage, as it's called, that's all the underpinning of any society for the unemployed, the disabled and those who are ill, but the jobs dimension which is that there must be an economic policy which encourages job creation which does not encourage job loss. Which is what Thatcher of course did. You know, you get a better economy, the more people you sack, you get a more healthy economy, the leaner the economy, the better the economy. And that is beginning to be a little bit exported into the European scene now, where we've got rid of it, or trying to get rid of it over here, it's becoming fashionable. So the ETUC was pretty influential in getting that jobs dimension onto the European summits, whenever the heads of government were meeting, they would be meeting beforehand as traditionally a meeting of the European trade unionists before the heads of government, getting that jobs dimension on, and now it's been quite a feature that job creation, especially if seven million unemployed in France and Germany alone, you know, they've got 40 per cent of the unemployed, so that is becoming a political issue now, whereas I never thought I'd see the day when you could have millions of people on the dole in this country and a government would still get re-elected. I mean, that's one thing Thatcher did for all of us, made you realise that although I would say no government will ever get re-elected on an unemployment platform, she did. So it's not an issue that on its own

## **You think people realised that that was the true platform?**

I think people were sort of saying: oh, well, we're in a belt-tightening mood. You can't get many people who will support that now, of course. You could never find people who voted for Thatcher even when she was re-elected, but people would never admit that unemployment was a good thing, but I think people in the early eighties were in the sort of well, you've got to tighten your belts or, you know, bloated public services and you know, winter of discontent and all this, gotta change, gotta improve, gotta get rid of all these bad practices in the workplace, restrictive practices and stuff like that, I think, you know, people would perhaps never say it, but I think there was that mood of, you know, let's get on with it, become an efficient nation and all the rest of it.

## **On Europe, Delors' visit to the TUC appears to be crucial.**

It was.

## **Can you just explain, how that became, why that was so important?**

The trade union movement was losing was losing ground on every facet from 1979. It was losing membership in droves, and that was for two reasons, one because the traditional industries were being slaughtered wholesale, and that's where we were at our strongest, in the traditional manufacturing industries. The miners, the steelworkers, and so that was one reason. The other reason was of course that Thatcher made sure that it was she tried to have a wholesale law against the trade unions which she didn't manage to get, so she decided it was going to be death by a thousand bits of legislation. And she passed about 15 bits of legislation, incrementally reducing the power and the ability of a trade union to run on its own constitution, basically, forcing us to change our rules, even on the thing I mentioned earlier about elections to national executive council. And that was all to get a couple of General Secretaries who got up her nose to say that the principal officers of a union had to be elected, and that was just to get at Arthur Scargill. It shows how ignorant they were, about the union movement. In my union, NALGO, we didn't elect our General Secretary. There was never any wish to elect the General Secretary apart from a few, you know, on the real left. The General Secretary of NALGO was regarded as a bit of a town clerk, the chief executive of an organisation, very much based on local authority model. And we didn't want them going off spouting off on their own, it was the lay members that ran the union, sort of thing. So we didn't want this kind of interference in the union, but we had to knuckle under and change our rules and do that. That's just one tiny, tiny example of the changes that she forced upon us, and all the laws relating to picketing and secondary action and things. And the fact that it's virtually impossible to have a legal ballot for industrial action now. Virtually impossible. And that was as a result of her and the last and probably most notorious was what's called the Ullswater Amendment, I like to call him Bilgewater he, this Lord, passed this amendment which said that you could actually buy out somebody from a trade union by paying them a higher wage. I don't know if you've ever heard of the *Wilson and Palmer* case, but *Wilson and Palmer* was very well known, one was from the Railway Workers and one was a journalist, and what happened was, everybody was told, if you leave the union, we'll pay you £2,000 more, and they refused to leave and they actually had £2,000 less in

salary and they took this case on grounds of discrimination or whatever, and they won it, and the government overnight changed the law to make it legitimate, and Ullswater was the guy that it's still on the statute book. It is still legitimate now to pay somebody more for leaving their union. So it's that kind of thing that she did to weaken the trade union movement, we were losing everywhere, we were losing influence, everybody was obsessed by the 'Winter of Discontent' and I'll never understand why, because it was the poorest in our society saying: enough is enough. But that's of course not how it was presented in the newspapers. And so we were losing influence, we no longer had access to the corridors of power, all the tripartite bodies were being gradually abolished so that people weren't even invited to meetings any more, and I have to say there was a little bit of me that said, well, you know, that's not a bad thing, we've got to learn to survive on our own and not just have a few people trooping off to No. 10 all the time. But of course, their role was changing, the General Secretaries all of a sudden, were cut off from whole areas of influence and consultation, and they missed it. So we weren't getting anywhere with this government, and they kept getting re-elected, and they kept getting re-elected, and the Labour Party was going through the traumas of reorganisation, militant tendency and Michael Foot, and the longest suicide note in history, as it was called, so, you know, we were going nowhere, and all of a sudden, you started to look at the European thing and say, well, you know, they've got quite a bit here, we've got an input when members of the European TUC, we can go to these platforms and we can meet the leading lights in Europe, we can go to the Commission, we've got direct rights of access to the Commission, we can influence legislation, and we can be part of this scene, even though this government had opted out of the Social Chapter. We were still effectively part of it, as part of the trade union movement. We were influencing that Social Chapter. And I think that the TUC were inspired in inviting Delors, not least because it was guaranteed to enrage Mrs Thatcher. But there they were, you know, these Europeans on a TUC platform, saying how marvellous Europe was, when she thought she'd cut off all access. And we were going over there, having an influence in directives, and everybody over here, you know, the CBI and the government, were trying to pretend it wasn't happening, and yet it was, it was happening, and all of a sudden I think the government started to realise that we were making gains and undermining what was happening over here, by reaching agreement at European level on things like maternity leave, works councils, part-time directives, and over here even though some people might be a little bit hostile to Europe, if you present it in terms of: well, you've now got a legal right to have paid leave, which we've never had in this country. We've never had a right to paid leave in this country until the Working Time Directive, all the other countries introduced it in 93, we've only just introduced it, you know, five years later. And people started to think, well, okay, I don't like all that Europe about the straight bananas and the cheese, but this sounds okay, this sounds good stuff, you know, let's have a bit of that. So there's a different layer in the trade union movement of people who say, well, there's an awful lot of good that's come out of Europe.

**So do you think perhaps part of the Tory press hostility to Europe is really hostility towards workers?**

It's not hostility towards workers, there's too many of them buy the papers, it's hostility to what they call high labour costs. They prefer to put the dignity of labour,

good pensions, and decent working conditions, they prefer to call it the high cost of labour, and they'll produce charts now to show how high the cost of labour is in France, Germany. If you put that the other way round and say, these are the kind of old people's homes they have in Sweden, this is how your old people are treated if you live in Sweden, this is the pension you get when you've worked for x number of years in France, part-time, this is the unemployment benefit you get in Holland this is the reality of life, if we become better, and we're not that good at it at the moment, because we haven't got that many newspapers that would agree to publicise it, either. But that's the area that will get people interested in Europe, the social Europe and the jobs Europe is what they'll be interested in.

### **That's very interesting, so you see Europe as a way round the Thatcher years of exploitation?**

No doubt whatsoever about it, in fact, I suspect it was probably one of the few reasons why some trade unions went along with it, who might traditionally have been hostile to the European idea, because they saw it as a way of showing the Thatcher government up, that other countries could survive with a high social protection factor, whereas over here, you know, it was privatisation, deregulation at all costs, and not only that, but of course Thatcher was bright enough to know she had to export it, and she succeeded in exporting it to Chile, I was actually over in Chile when there was one of these huge conferences where one of her government ministers came to speak, to sell the privatisation and deregulation, and Chilean trade unionists who've been on the run for years, you know, and who've been tortured and put in prison said to us: well, how did you let it happen? How did you let Thatcher happen? And I said: well, how long have you got? You know, it's a pretty poor set of excuses, actually, when you think about it, you know. Nobody, everybody underestimated the extent to which she set out to take away the power and influence of the trade union movement. Everybody underestimated that, nobody realised the extent to which she would go in using all the arms of the State to defeat big strikes and stuff like that, nobody reckoned on that. I don't believe anybody did. Nobody can be that wise.

### **Now the critical question is: what does the present government feel about all this, and what is the present government doing to change that? Is it in the trade union pocket? Or is it still caught in this whole net of Thatcherism?**

I think that this is the first Labour government that has got a distinctly different relationship with the trade union movement, and one that it set out to create a distinctly different relationship.

### **And what is that relationship?**

It is that they are no longer an arm of the trade union movement, in that's what it was, of course, that's what it was established to be, that they will listen to the trade union movement as a social partner, just as they will listen to employers as a social partner. And that's very much along the European model, and I for one applaud that.

### **You do?**

I do. But this is the big but that is I think what their concept is, the reality is, I think that they still regard us as part of the Labour Party, even though half of the movement is not affiliated to the Labour Party, so I think although they've got the strategy right, that we are social partners, I don't believe yet that we are being treated as full social partners. I think the CBI is, but I don't yet believe that we are. I think that it'll take a bit of getting used to, because a lot of the trade union General Secretaries are very closely part of the Party machine as well, so I think there's an education job to be done on both sides, but I don't see any harm at all in having this. That's not to say that there needs to be a break between those trade unions that want the affiliation and the Labour Party, there's no need at all for that, if that's what they want, that's great. It would be a positive relationship, not a negative one, if people keep opting into it and saying: that's what we want, rather than it being taken for granted that it's part of the same family. Then I think you've got the difficulty of how do you unravel the whole lot? You don't, because they're not going to go back on all the privatisations, there's no doubt whatsoever about that, even the railway one, which was the most logical and easy one that you'd have thought they could have done something about, and would have had marvellous popular support if they'd done it, I think they were powerful enough to be able to do that, but I think that they see themselves in the longer term, hopefully ten years, hopefully 15, so the first five years has got to be very much a constitutional bedding down, because that's where all the complicated stuff is, they've got to get that out of the way, they will concentrate on getting re-elected so they've got to keep the middle ground on board, I'm not the middle ground, but they've got to do that, I do appreciate that, I know they've got to do it, and they've got to keep, you know, the newspapers as far as they can on board. And that's where perhaps it starts to get difficult. Because all of the newspapers are anti-Europe, apart from possibly the *Guardian*, I don't know about the *Independent*, so that's going to be a huge battle in the next year or two. The battle of Europe will be a big one, I think. Battle of hearts and minds. The TUC will have a crucial role there, very crucial. It's cautiously pro single currency, TUC as a whole, in spite of the fact that some unions are still anti single currency, including my own. So that's, you know

### **But not you personally?**

Um not me personally, but obviously I have a representative role, so it's quite difficult to

### **It's difficult for you?**

Yes, to run the two horses.

### **Yes, I can see that. And so what are the lessons to be learned from earlier commitments to voluntarism and the failure to embrace legal means of achieving union collective bargaining? What can we learn from that?**

I mean, our system is unique in Britain, because of the voluntary system, and you can't re-invent the wheel and you can't just adopt the model of another country which may have all these legal underpinnings. It's impossible to start from scratch,

we are where we are, in the words of a famous politician, we are who we are, we're not going to be able to recreate that legal grounding and start all over again, I don't think any government would let that happen. What I think we've got to do is say, do we want to go down the old roads of confrontation all the time, if you've got the power you can force an employer to do something and if you haven't, you can't. Or do you really want social partnership to become a reality, which is I think the way that we've got to go.

### **You don't think industrial action now is as important as it was?**

Oh, it has its place, I think it'll always have its place, and we've had examples where hospital cleaners have worked there for 20 odd years who had, you know, a 33 per cent reduction in salary, take it or leave it, and were sacked on the spot for refusing to sign the new contracts, and they went on strike for over a year, of course legally it wasn't a strike because they'd been dismissed. Appalling, appalling, the lowest paid, the most under-privileged in society treated like animals. There'll always be a role for industrial action, but it shouldn't be like that, there should be enough legal protections to stop that kind of thing from happening.

### **Does industrial action get even more complicated when there are several unions involved?**

It does, because obviously some unions will be keener, maybe the union members will be keener than others, we've had, we've had joint action in universities, early last year, every single union came out on a one-day strike, I think it was unique, actually, every union, the AUT, MSF, UNISON, all came out on strike on the same day.

### **There's a feeling of fragmentation, though, isn't there?**

Yes, and that's we're going to need to rebuild, yes, there is a fragmentation. There's a fragmentation of the labour force, I mean a lot of the labour force now are not in the large, large factories and large workplaces, they're in very, very small workplaces, so of necessity we're going to have to have new ways of keeping in touch with them, you know, via computer and direct mailing, and new ways of working. We produce this advert in UNISON, the ants and the bears, which was lots of ants getting together to frighten the bear off, just a little cartoon, silly little cartoon, really, but it had the impact of saying, you know, you've got to get together if you want to be, you know, if you want to be together, join the union with the sort of 0800 number at the end. It was very, very popular and I think it was, it had an influence far beyond just UNISON, lots of people commented on it, said: that's the way we've got to go now, we've got to show that we can be user-friendly, and

### **But there is a tide of individualism, isn't there?**

I think it's peaked and I think it's on the way down.

### **Do you?**

Yes, I've seen it here.

## **You don't think advanced market economies is forcing us more and more towards individualists?**

The temptation is to do that, but I think there's enough social democratic governments now, and that's going to take a while, because of course what happens is, the right-wing governments get all their key people in place in all of these monetary organisations and international, and then they take a little while to get rid of, so there's always a bit of a time delay between social democratic governments coming in and exerting influence so it's, it'll be a slow process to get that but you get more and more hope when you see statements from the OECD and the IMF talking about the need for a social underpinning in societies where there's desperate poverty, and even finding a role, dare I say it, for trade unions in these countries too, and saying there is a role for trade unions at the world level, to stop the worst forms of exploitation and globalisation, so I think it's peaked, you can see it in the students here, if this is a little microcosm of the world, that you had all those years where the students were here as individualists, looking after themselves. Now you've got a little bit of a I wouldn't go so far as a sixties feeling, but it's beginning to come back, that people are seeing that collective action, you know, university students on grants and loans, teachers and what's happening in education

## **They might individually, but there's still a big slump in membership, isn't there? And you can parallel that with what happened after the General Strike does that worry you?**

I don't think it worries me so much now, because a lot of it was the shake-out of the old industries and a failure to recruit into the new service sector, which is going to be the most difficult, there's no doubt about it. It is going to be a difficult area to recruit. But you know, we've got hundreds of thousands within the public services that aren't in the union. Sitting ducks, sitting there waiting for somebody to recruit them, hundreds of thousands of them. So, you know, there are plenty of opportunities, and I think we've hit the rock bottom, I think we've gone there, we've been there, and I think we're on the way up, it's and I think that's the legislation for fairness at work is going to help, no matter how much it might have been watered down, it's going to lend confidence to people, if they think they have an automatic right of representation in a non-unionised workplace, statutory right, it will give people confidence to go and ask for help, whereas before, it was heads down, boys, you know, let's not stick your head up, you wouldn't get people coming forward as stewards, because they wanted to keep their job and if they're on a one-year contract they're not going to be a steward in the union. So job insecurity is the single biggest reason now, in my view, not anti-unionism, people are very pro-unions, when you put it to them: do you think you should be able to go to somebody for help at work, and you ask around here, and they won't necessarily know the name of the union they're in. They probably don't even know me, but if you say: who do you go to if you're in trouble, the kitchen's too hot, they'll say: oh, yeah, I go to Olive. As long as they know who to go to, that's all that matters. And people are pro union. But the single reason why they don't join is that they're not asked, and the second reason is that job insecurity lends fear.

**And what about the whole bogeyman, the Scargill, the whole fear of unions which has been built up, perhaps by the press?**

It's a bit old hat, actually, I think some of the journalists weren't born, you know, when some of this was happening and yet they're still getting stuff out of the archives, getting more and more inaccurate every time they write about it, so I think they're really having to struggle to resurrect the bogeyman now, and obviously the trade union movement is presenting itself as a bit more, you know, huggy-feely. How real that is somewhere is up to the members and non-members to decide, but I think it's I think the bogeymen are disappearing, and I think that the executive role of the General Secretaries is very much. The word 'management' used to be swearword, you know, in unions. Management was the enemy, so if you talked about management in a trade union sense, of managing a union, we have a huge organisation in UNISON, 1400 employees, that, you know, so Rodney Bickerstaffe, if it was a company, would be chief executive of a very large company, on the most pathetic pay, incidentally, although some of our own members may think it's a reasonable salary, in terms of the responsibility levels that he carries, and that of John Monks, very, very, you know, low pay compared with people of equivalent responsibility in industry.

**I suppose if they made the switch, if they could be seduced away, they would earn another nought or two noughts?**

They would, I mean, it's not really the issue, but it's just the point I'm trying to make that the level of responsibility and the concept of management is now not such a swearword, that people are now realising that you've got to manage a resource, and the people in the union are the resource, and if they're mismanaged they don't work as hard for the union and if the volunteers are fed up because of that, then they won't be as active in the union, so it's no longer a disgrace to send full-time officials off to Cranfield and business school to learn how to run the union effectively. Thank goodness, thank goodness we're carrying what I would call the positive management skills into running the unions, and I think that can only be a good thing.

**Now, is partnership a practical policy, or is it an excuse to excuse low level of membership and low level of influence?**

Oh, that's a difficult one. I think I think it's going to be needs must social partnership. We're going to have to the Low Pay Commission's a good example, actually, there are nine of us, three from industry, employers' side, three from union sides, three academics, not in a representative capacity but in an individual capacity. But delivering one of the biggest hot potatoes possibly this century, because everybody's an expert on low pay, everybody knows what low pay is, even the chief executive of a bank probably thinks they're low paid in relationship to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank you know, everybody knows what they think about it, and yet, as I said earlier, nobody really knows the extent of poverty in this country, still in this day and age they don't know the extent of it, and there was an example of social partnership at work, and it was tough, it was very, very tough indeed. I think some trade union general secretaries were quite envious when some of us were appointed onto the Commission, I think they would have liked to have had a go at it, but by the end it was a fairly traumatic route that we all went through, I think by the

end not many of them were all that envious, because I think it was a tough job to do. And I think it worked, hopefully it will continue to work, and I think it may be just a phrase and it may not mean anything, but trade unionists know how to work with employers and always have done, and 90 per cent of that work never emerges above the top of the desk, the day-to-day negotiating on individual issues and collective bargaining that takes place and has taken place throughout the Thatcher years and before that is not sexy. It doesn't get any publicity, and you talk to young people and they say: oh, it's all about strikes, isn't it? And if they know anything else, they might mention the match girls, but it is still the image that unions have because the quiet work that's done is not very good for publicity, it's the real work that's done in a union, saving people's jobs, making sure they work in healthy and safe conditions, making sure that they're not worse off than the year before, none of that gets a lot of publicity. So that's social partnership. It might be dressed up now in a new role, but that's always happened at the local level. In most employment places.

**Is the history of the trade union movement over the last century always an improvement? Has it gone up and up, or have there been great slumps in influence and policy and public recognition?**

I'm not a trade union historian, I mean, I'm

**But what's your feeling?**

My feeling is, when I see those sepia pictures of the General Council trooping into Downing Street, I feel utterly depressed by it all, so now I see myself going in there, I hope that I'm not having the same influence on younger people. I don't think that's what the trade union movement's all about, although it's part of an important role to play.

**Why does it depress you?**

It didn't seem to bear any relationship to me to what was happening in the workplace. Maybe that was because of my radical background or because I was just a grassroots activist, but they seemed to me to be trooping along to say, well, obviously we want certain parts of this bargain, whether it be social contract or whatever the relationship of the Labour government and that work of the day. And in return, you know, we would like some trade union legislation, or we want this, or we want incomes policy, or we don't want incomes policy. And it was all about the relationship between the leadership of the movement and the Labour government as opposed and I think they genuinely believed that what they were doing would help the ordinary worker, that if you had low inflation, obviously that was best. If the economy was healthy, that was best. If you didn't have to go running off to the IMF, that was best, I think probably the heart was in the right place, but how you got that message from the top to the bottom was quite difficult, and I think there were a lot of us that didn't see the relationship. We saw the relationship like the Social Contract as cosying up to the government to keep Labour in power, frankly, and how to hold the unions back, or the union membership back from a decent payrise. And that's how I saw it, and that's how I think a lot of people saw it. I saw the social contract as a bit of a betrayal, actually, whether I'd say that now, I don't know, but that's

how I saw it at the time.

**I mean, in a sense you're helping now to negotiate new forms of social contract?**

We're helping to we're trying to negotiate the best possible deal, yes. I suppose that's how I see it now, and that's maybe how they saw it then. Trying to stop bits that we thought we'd negotiated being watered down, not wanting to be unhelpful to the new Labour project, because there's a lot of exciting things going on. The trade union movement wanted Scottish devolution eons ago, and the things that are happening on that are very exciting. Local democracy is something we believe in, but in practice, of course, the centralisation of a lot of government stuff and the running down of local government, the centralising move there. The policy and the practice, there's a little bit of a divergence still and I need to be convinced that local democracy is really something that is being pursued.

**What do you hope to achieve in your year of office?**

When I'm TUC President? Well, when, but if it happens, it'll be a great year from the point of view of publicity, I suppose, because it's the millennium year, so that'll be exciting although maybe we'll all be sick to death of it by then, I don't know. But that will be good, to be a woman president in the millennium year, as I say, there's only I think I'll be the seventh in over a hundred years, and hopefully I can start to say a few things about the role of women in the movement to carry on from where Margaret Prosser and Ada Maddocks and Marie Paterson left off, but perhaps maybe doing it a bit more assertively, you know, as we go along, saying, well, you know, sometimes people have got to move aside and let others step forward. There's going to be an exciting time too in about three or four years, well beyond my time, because there's a whole phalanx of officials who are in their mid-fifties, simply because of the nature of the growth of the trade union movement. There's a huge growth in white-collar unionism in the seventies, *huge* growth, mainly thanks to Edward Heath's reorganisation of local government and health which created hundreds of thousands of extra bureaucrats. Very, very good for the recruitment to the white collar industry, and then because the union expanded, you appointed officials, they're all approaching that sort of age now, and they can't afford to take early retirement just yet, but in three or four years' time, they're all going to go, a bit like the one farmer and dog farms in Ireland are just about to go, and that will create huge changes, I suspect. It's going to be as big as the recent set of mergers of unions, that's been the biggest feature for the last five years, the merging of unions into giant unions, and that's created some dilemmas because the smaller unions can be more flexible and, you know, push the women forward and the larger unions have been held back because they've had to reduce staff, and that's been one of the downsides, but in the next few years there's going to be a release of, I suspect, of people wanting to go, feeling tired, feeling worn out, wanting to go, and then I think that's going to make way for a very exciting trend of reorganisation, I think that's going to be really, really

**What, very young officials?**

Hopefully very young, hopefully very young officials, yes.

## **And what difference do you think that will make?**

Image.

## **Image? You mean ?**

I don't want to over-state image, but it is important, it is important. And having a few more women as role models, full-time, not like me as a lay activist trying to struggle along. Full-time, being able to devote time and space to the strategies, they must be given that time and space too and not just be overloaded as we tend to do, I'm afraid, with all our officials, they've got to be given that time and space to think new ways and not be pulled down.

## **So what advice would you give to someone who, a young person coming into the Union who says: well, what's in it for me?**

There are very few opportunities to learn how democracy works in this country. We're not a participative society any more. We don't get people going to local meeting places as you used to in the sixties and seventies, it's a television era, and so participation in democracy is vital, in my view, so I think I'd probably sell it that this is your opportunity, firstly to train, what wonderful training courses in the trade union movement now, either for publicity skills, speaking skills, computer skills, representation rights, you know, learn to be a lawyer if you like, learning how a workplace works, all of those things so you can promote it from an education point of view. We can train you to be a good representative and it will also help possibly in a future career, even just confidence-building, assertion training, things like that, that you do, and these can if you're a member, I mean, these would be free of charge, except obviously the branch would pay. So that's one way. I think appealing to people's

## **Do you mean just your union, or all unions?**

All unions are beginning to do that, we're probably we've got an open college and so we're now attracting government grants to do some of these Return to Learn skills, you know, people who've left at the age of 14 and 15, if they've come in from other countries at 16, so the Return to Learn has been a marvellous opportunity for people who want the confidence to learn how to learn. We've got joint agreements with employers and some local hospitals and local authorities for that. So we've got some very exciting developments attracting government grants to help us with that, having had years of having the grants taken away from us by government, they're now starting to come back. We're having to justify them in a new way, not the old way of just trade union training, they've got to be exciting, they've got to be interesting, and I think we're really, really we've cottoned onto that. I think too that young people have got a very strong sense of justice, perhaps on single issues, maybe the green issue, or vegetarian, or animal rights, even the controversy about the Chilean dictator, you know, young people who can't possibly have known what it was like when Chile was suffering under a dictatorship, so that feeling is there, and all that's got to do is be tapped to show that the union movement can be green, can be conscious of food safety issues, can be conscious of environmental issues and

all of those. And just generally try to appeal to them by not speaking for ever and ever and ever like this. I think it's there, it just needs to be tapped.