

Notes from Alfred Sherman in Brighton for the TUC Conference

(2nd September 1980)

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The existence of a Conservative Government per se is superficially a unifying factor for the Unions since it removes a divisive factor namely how far they ought loyally to support a Labour Government in defiance of their own sectional interests.

Many are congenitally happier when opposing.

But it is also divisive in two senses. It divides those for whom union matters decide, from those for whom politics command. It highlights the contradiction in other words between trade unionism and socialism. It also heightens the conflict of interest between different sections on whom Government policies impinge differentially.

So far this conflict has been focused on the Government's new Employment Act. This is no threat to the craft unions who have skills to withdraw, whose members are largely volunteers and which have highly developed consultative and electoral procedures - whether members may choose them or not, which is another question. By contrast the general unions and the state sector unions are governed for the most part by a small self-perpetuating oligarchy and depend on the closed shop, for a large part of their membership.

(Remember the union hierarchy's main concern is maximised membership)

The difference came out in discussions over the Employment Act. Attempts to impose a 1971 type prohibition of cooperation under threat of expulsion was dropped when dissenting unions rallied round the electricians and engineers (craft unions par excellence) who articulately express willingness to be expelled rather than give in on this matter. They get little out of the TUC for their contributions, and could easily form the nucleus of a rival organisation. Therefore, the proposal to impose sanctions was dropped during the long weekend meeting of the General Council when resolutions were "composited". I stress this because some journalists got it wrong.

Conversely, it is precisely the moderate unions whose members work largely in the private sector, which have been hardest hit by this Government's economic policy. As in previous neo Keynesian "stops", it is the private sector which has been squeezed causing their short time and lay offs leading to loss of union membership and union dues on which the whole union structure is based. Duffy's Engineering Union is said to have lost as many as 10% of its membership since the summer of 1979. This will cause severe headaches the more so since members would resent increased dues at a time of falling overtime.

(Karl Marx said of the 19th century Church of England that it would rather give up 38 of its 39 articles than one thirtiyninth of its income. There is relevance here to these secular churches)

By contrast the state sector and general unions are doing well in membership and dues-income. This is to the detrement of the moderates' morale.

This also raises the new question, "the politics of unemployment". Clive Jenkins is characteristically quick off the mark on this. We should be thinking about this instead of agonising.

The observer here must be appalled by the genuinely honest failure to understand elementary economics ie the workings of cause and effect which underly not only their resolutions and speeches but their actual belief and attitude. Failure to educate them and their members in the facts of life is partly responsible for their often self-destructive behaviour. Their immediate rationality is based in irrationality. But we ourselves have been partly inhibited from educating their members ie the public at large in the imperatives of cause and effect by reluctance to upset many Conservatives at all levels who were equally inhibited from tracing the workings of cause and effect even if they express this inhibition at a superficially more sophisticated level, brandishing words like "pragmatic" and quoting copiously from authors like Burke whom few have actually read and none understood.

We have been left without direct political impact in the TUC in spite of the large numbers of trade unionists who vote Conservative. The reasons why can be sensed here in Brighton. One - as I have argued - is failure to gain general understanding of the basis of economics, particularly in the period 1976 - 1979 when the old certainty was crumbling. We have also failed to analyse the role of unions. The "put salt on their tails" and "mostly decent moderates isolate the extremists by being reasonable" attitude which ignored ideas of motivation, left us without impact.

We need both mass economic education and a strategy for our total relationship with the unions, qua government and qua party. The CTU is a broken reed. If Conservatives are to seek real influence on and in the unions - and why not? - the whole thing will need reconsideration and initio. Conservative trade unionism is too important to be left to the CTU.