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19 November 1982

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Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

Can I have a word with  
Ferdie. I think we need to

Prime Minister ①

DRAFT GREEN PAPER ON TRADE UNION DEMOCRACY

Send in detailed comments  
not

If you agree with Ferdie's

comments - and depending on

The three measures discussed in this Green Paper add up to a presentable package. We have little quarrel with the Introduction or the discussions of union elections and of the Political Levy. The problem arises with Section III - Ballots before Strikes.

colleagues'

views -

you will

Strike Ballots

probably need a

meeting of 'E' Committee

Agree?

As we know, the Department of Employment is determined to do nothing on this question. The whole tone of this passage is unmistakably negative, especially in paragraphs 64-69. MLL 19/11

Any future Minister who wanted to bring in strike ballots would have this Green Paper quoted against him in extenso.

Besides, the arguments used here against strike ballots are daily refuted by experience. It is simply not true that "if ballots were automatic or mandatory, they might well introduce much greater inflexibility into negotiations. They might tend to limit the room for manoeuvre of both employers and trade union leaders and harden attitudes". (Paragraph 67)

After all, strike ballots are mandatory in a number of unions. Why aren't those unions listed in an Annex, as are the unions which elect their officials by secret ballots? Unions which have strike ballots do resolve, if not without argument, the difficulties of definition about the wording of the question and who would be entitled to vote, so heavily underlined in paragraphs 64 and 66. The reality is that no trade union which already holds strike ballots would dream of going back to a show of hands; and the rank-and-file in those unions which do not have such a right would be delighted if they did.

If we are serious about union democracy, this is the crux. And we should not load the argument against strike ballots in a way which is liable to queer the pitch for subsequent Conservative Governments.

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This section must be redrafted in a much more even-handed way. That would still not prevent us from saying that "strike ballots are too complex a subject for this particular Bill, but they nonetheless remain on the agenda".

The Green Paper Conclusions (Section V)

Paragraphs 122 and 123 repeat much of what is said in the Introduction but in a less helpful way.

I doubt very much whether "the broad areas covered are those where changes are most urgently needed", and whether the public will believe this.

Still less can we be confident that these measures would "ensure that union power is exercised responsibly" - particularly if strike ballots are, in the event, to be excluded.

Surely the correct way to present this is as another valuable specific step in our programme of trade union reform. But we should beware of claiming too much for it.

We suggest that this concluding section should be shortened to concentrate on the intrinsic merits of fostering democratic practice in trade unions.

fm

FERDINAND MOUNT

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