

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

MR. W. PAYNTER (Secretary): I now invite members of Conference to listen to the Address of the Chairman of Conference. To have the opportunity of presenting such an Address at this Conference is I am sure a real and well-earned tribute to Ted Jones following his very long record of service in the cause of the miners generally and of this organisation in particular. This is his last Annual Conference, and in all the circumstances that have brought this situation about—I refer to the unfortunate and untimely death of Alwyn Machen—I am sure this opportunity for Mr. Jones to preside over our proceedings this week is something he will greatly appreciate.

The Conference Chairman will deliver his Address.

MR. E. JONES (Vice-President): Fellow members, the duty which devolves upon me today is one in which the honour is great and the responsibility heavy. There will, I am sure, be unanimity at this Conference about one thing: we all very much regret the coincidental events of a few months ago which imposes upon me this onerous obligation. I refer to the retirement of our Past President, Mr. W. E. Jones, whom we are all happy to see amongst us today; and to the unexpected tragic death of our late friend and colleague Alwyn Machen, who subsequent events revealed would have succeeded Mr. Jones in that highly important post as President of this Union. Circumstances of this kind are without parallel in the long history of our Miners' Movement.

Our 1960 Conference is being held in an atmosphere of great uncertainty. Against the background of recent experience it would be presumptuous indeed to enter the field of prophecy in an effort to predict future trends. About one thing, however, there can be little doubt: there is no let-up in the character or intensity of ill-informed political criticism coupled to hostile oil interest opposition towards the British Coal Mining Industry. At the risk

of repetition it is necessary to re-state our faith in Nationalisation of the mines and once again to remind the British Nation of the enormous contribution the coal mining industry has made and is still making to its industrial progress and economic prosperity.

For many years there has been a general sustained effort, made for political and other reasons, to discredit the nationalised coal mining industry.

Whilst not seeking to deny any individual's democratic right to criticise whatever they dislike, we are entitled to look at some of these criticisms, which are well known, and by the same principle ask: "Are these criticisms fair?" "Are they honest?" "Are they justified?" "Can they be sustained by any reasonable or factual argument?" On a fair assessment, I say most of the criticisms are deliberately distorted, indecently biased, and naturally take no account of the credit side, for reasons that must be obvious. So for a few minutes I propose to look at our industry in retrospect; to pin-point its achievements and prove that without Nationalisation most of Britain's coal mining industry would have become decadent, and as a consequence this nation would have been in a much more precarious and insecure position. Its rehabilitation and ability to enter the world markets with reasonably cheap good quality goods and indeed the whole of Britain's economic recovery following the cessation of hostilities in 1945 right up to 1957, were almost exclusively dependent on coal.

First of all, let me refer to the Reid Report, which was strictly technical and non-political. After making a thorough analysis of the industry what did it say?

"Much of the industry was out of date. Methods of coal getting and haulage had to be modernised. There was acute shortage of technical ability and an acute shortage of finance. The industry required re-organisation into larger units which would enjoy the benefits of large scale productions."

This report also stated: "We are satisfied . . . that throughout the industry drastic technical re-organisation is not only practicable, but vitally necessary. The employers as a body have been prepared neither to accept the principle of the survival of the fittest nor fully to abandon their traditional individualism . . . British mining engineers have often been handicapped by this short-term view." The report proceeded: "Nothing less than the rebuilding of the industry on the most modern lines would do; and that a great pioneering task awaited the mining engineer."

Would our critics contend this was a strong argument in support of perpetuating private ownership of this nation's greatest natural asset? The language used is too strong to leave us in any doubt about their intentions.

Do our critics believe the reforms demanded could or would have been provided out of funds obtained through normal investment channels?

Do our critics seriously suggest that 850 separate colliery companies were really capable of initiating and carrying out the vast major re-organisation schemes necessary to bring productive efficiency into line with modern concepts?

So convinced were members of this Committee of the urgent need for drastic changes in its control and direction that two of its number—eminent mining engineers—who had previously spent the whole of their working lives in coal mining, accepted membership of the first National Coal Board, a little over 13 years ago.

Almost concurrently with the introduction of Nationalisation of the mines, an eminent business man stated:

“The contention as to whether Nationalisation would or would not succeed was dependent not so much on organisation but on the will of those employed in the industry, because there was a large margin between the results obtained to those possible.”

If this test is applied to coal, Nationalisation has been amply and fully justified.

Let me now turn to:

1. *Coal Production*

Deep-mined coal output was increased (at a time when the country was desperate for more coal) from 181 million tons in 1946 (the last year of private enterprise) to 210 million tons in 1957—an increase of 29 million tons or 16 per cent. Side by side with this achievement an old, antiquated and neglected industry was being revitalised and given new life.

2. *Productivity*

This higher output was achieved with virtually the same labour force, in other words it was due to higher productivity which means a greater combined effort. Since 1947 to date, the output per man per shift has increased by 30 per cent, or putting it in another way, whereas in 1947 it required 920 manshifts to produce 1,000 tons of coal, in 1959 it required only 751, a reduction of 169 manshifts.

3. *Finances*

Our critics have made much of the financial losses of the National Coal Board. These have amounted to some £52 million over a period of 13 years, and may be compared with an N.C.B. turnover of some £10,000 million. Moreover, the financial burdens of the N.C.B. must be remembered, particularly the £70 million spent on subsidising imported coal and the costs of compensation and interest payments. Over the years of Nationalisation, the Board has made an operating surplus of well over £200 million and this has only been turned into a deficit by the payment to the Minister of some £258 million in interest charges. Let me add one further word. Throughout most of the period of Nationalisation the Board could have charged far higher prices than it did, and it could have exported millions of tons more coal at premium prices, if it had not put the national interest first.

Finally, let us recall that productivity in the nationalised British coal mining industry throughout most of the post-war period has been the highest in Europe, and during this same period British coal prices have been the cheapest in Europe. The record of the nationalised coal mining industry is one to be proud of and it will bear comparison with any other industry in this country, and most certainly with the coal industry as it was under private

enterprise. In the light of these tremendous achievements critics of our industry, and indeed the nation, should realise, before it is too late, the country's dependence upon the industry and upon coal as a means of supplying its fuel and power needs.

This evil and ill-informed criticism is a serious challenge to us all. Therefore, what should be our attitude in this situation?

We must be prepared to defend with every means at our command, the principles which animated that long line of brave industrial fighters who sacrificed their stainless lives in waging a ceaseless war against poverty, insanitary housing, ignorance, disease and many other disabilities, including private ownership of the mines. May I, therefore, appeal to your feelings of legitimate self interest in this matter to ensure we make it known in unmistakable terms to those who think otherwise, that we have passed the point of no return, and will strenuously resist all efforts to revert to former policies.

We have heard so much during recent weeks, of an alleged intention, on the part of the Conservative Government, to decentralise the coal industry, that it is necessary for me to say a few words on this subject.

The problem of large-scale administration, which is typical of our age—not only in nationalised industry but equally in private industry, local government, central government, trade unions, and so forth—is not solved by any single slogan like centralisation or decentralisation. Any living thing, like our coal industry, must have both: a good deal of central control and a good deal of local freedom. Some functions can be properly discharged only by a national headquarters; other functions belong utterly to the individual pit or perhaps even to a particular face within the pit.

As a Union, we are certainly not in favour of a degree of centralisation which means lifeless, bureaucratic control from Hobart House—or from the Ministry of Power; nor are we in favour of a degree of decentralisation that spells anarchy and sets each coalfield or each Area against all the others. In other words, it is all a matter of degree; it is all a matter of honest thinking, and careful, practical evolution. Nothing good can come from the patent medicines peddled by certain notorious Tory backbenchers who seem to be more interested in smashing Nationalisation than in ensuring the smooth working of a great national industry.

Much valuable work has been done during the years since Vesting Day. The industry has been changed beyond recognition. We can all be proud of it now, which could not possibly be said for the time before Nationalisation. These great changes could be accomplished only by powerful central control. The difficult last three years presented problems which could be solved—without irreparable harm to the industry—only through the kind of determined leadership at the centre which has been given by Sir James Bowman, and his colleagues on the National Board. Only ignorance or ill-will could overlook these obvious facts.

But this does not mean that there is no further room for organisational development. On the contrary, there is plenty such room. We would

welcome minor adjustments so that certain problems affecting our members could be dealt with much more quickly and more realistically. Wherever possible, we want local problems to be settled locally, by fully responsible negotiators. But we know perfectly well that this is not always possible, and that there are over-riding policy questions for which we need a powerful, highly organised, central administration that can stand up and speak and act for the industry as a whole.

I say therefore with all seriousness that this question of centralisation and decentralisation is not a subject for legislation. The existing structure of the coal industry is perfectly all right, as Sir Alexander Fleck himself admitted. Within the existing structure there is every opportunity to evolve the correct degree of centralisation or decentralisation suitable for each particular function; it is about any new form of organisation that this Union claims it ought to be consulted because the well-being of its members is affected. I say to the Tory gentlemen whose eagerness to mess about with the coal industry is in direct proportion to their ignorance of the subject matter, "Leave us our tools and we shall get on with the job."

What our industry really wants is a breathing space to continue its work of providing the nation's coal, free from the hostility, acrimony, bitterness and interference to which it has in recent years been subjected by its critics, many of whom are somewhat rude garden party back bench Tory politicians, qualified to criticise either (1) because they had a public school education, or (2) an illustrious grandfather associated with coal in 1894. They are quite unable to appreciate the complexity or magnitude of the industry's problems. They must be resisted not so much because of the nonsense they disseminate, but because they appear to be willing, in the interest of a slender political advantage, to sabotage our industrial development and impair this nation's economic and social well-being.

Again I repeat, there is a challenge in this situation and it is one which we should take up. It is my conviction we can win through because we are less dominated by theory and dogma than our critics and are more practical and open minded in our approach to current problems; that is not to say we are free from prejudices.

We will have to revise some of our out-moded practices and demonstrate that we can preserve inviolate the fundamental principles upon which our powerful Union is built, and prove at the same time we are capable of moving forward to meet the demands of a new age and conditions in a rapidly changing world.

This is not going to be an easy task, there is bound to be strong divergent views about the way any future reforms should be tackled. Here let me say on the basis of my long experience, I am fully aware how much the ordinary man dislikes change, and yet almost daily we see around us at our pits, modern development demanding changes in equipment, methods of work and organisation. We are also constantly being told, and I think we all accept it, that the future of the industry lies in fewer but more highly efficient producing units, as it is only in this way, in the absence of a proper planned national fuel policy, that we can hold our own in competition with oil. Indeed, even

with a national fuel policy, it will be essential for the coal industry to reach maximum efficiency.

What then is the first pre-requisite? We must continue our efforts to improve the atmosphere and rid it of suspicion and mistrust which has for so long bedevilled our human relations. This can best be done by workpeople and management cultivating a better understanding of the nature and purpose of our industry. To argue, as many people do, that there is a Conciliation Scheme by which we can resolve our problems, is not enough—what we need above all else in this field is a much more serious effort to remove the causes of irritation and grievance which so frequently lead to wholesale frustration and unrest.

It may be true that our pits are too large to enable management to give to each individual employee his due consideration or full opportunity for the development of any special qualities or ability.

It may also be true that our members are too readily disposed to respond to reckless and irresponsible appeals, believing grievances can be settled by recourse to unofficial stoppages which to say the least are unprofitable to all concerned.

It may be true that there are far too many specially trained people in service with the National Coal Board dealing with industrial relations, in what they call a scientific way. No doubt some function of labour management can be performed in a scientific manner, e.g., compiling statistics, etc., but to imagine that you can plan or control human beings in an industry like coal mining where new and extremely difficult problems arise from day to day by precise and exact methods is courting disappointment. Science may design the pit. Science may organise the office. Science may improve productive processes. Science will never secure human goodwill on which ultimately maximum efficiency depends.

The next few years will be very critical, and peace in our industry is an urgent necessity. That peace will not be guaranteed unless there is a substantial change in the present method—which seems traditional—of dealing with human problems at the point of production, i.e., the pit.

Our nationalised coal industry must adapt itself to the mental and moral make-up of the workmen of today, many of whom have no knowledge of the hardship and poverty of former days. It will have to satisfy the men required to operate our pits, that they will have a reasonable hope of satisfying their own needs and aspirations to lead a fuller life than their predecessors.

This too is a challenge. If we in this great and important coal mining industry—both management and workers—fail to adjust our thinking to meet modern problems or shirk what can be for all concerned an unpalatable obligation, we can say goodbye to peace at our pits . . . so essential in present conditions—for a long time to come.

The trends of our industry are resulting in increasing economic advantages to the nation. The nation and the industry must not, therefore, neglect its responsibility to the men themselves.

There are many tasks facing this Union. We must always strive to maintain

and improve the standards of living of our members and their working conditions. There is one particular problem I must especially mention. Whatever we have been able to accomplish for our old retired miners, we have a feeling of great frustration and grim disappointment in relation to a few thousand ex-miners, who after giving all their years of industrial service to the mining industry, are denied either the mineworkers' pension of 20s. or the ex-gratia payment of 10s. 6d. per week.

This injustice arises because a colliery accident or some grave sickness has incapacitated them so that either they were never fit for work between the commencement of the Pension Scheme and reaching the age of retirement, or were unable, due to their incapacity, to continue work at the age of 64 years or over. Such of our ex-members who are in this position rightly regard themselves as victims of the most unjust treatment, and it is on their behalf that I call upon every section capable of removing this injustice, to take steps to do so. The Board, this Union or C.I.S.W.O. can find the means of remedying this position and they must do so.

I cannot conclude without some reference to the present position, and the need for a national fuel policy.

The future of the coal industry in this country depends on the adoption by the Government of a coherent and co-ordinated fuel policy. There is need for much serious thought on this subject. Fuel and power are the basis of any modern community and increasing demands for energy are inevitable if standards of living in this country and in the rest of the world are to rise. Coal is still by far our most important source of energy, supplying as it does three-quarters of the country's total needs. Despite vast improvements in fuel efficiency the inland requirements of coal are today as great as they were in 1913, when coal output was at its peak.

Coal is our only major natural resource in this country and to recklessly run it down in favour of an imported product, which causes a great strain on our balance of payments and which is so strategically unreliable, is economic lunacy.

If this completely unjustifiable policy is rigorously pursued, as appears to be the case today, it must inevitably place this nation's security, stability and economic welfare in jeopardy.