

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

MR. F. COLLINDRIDGE (Vice-President): Fellow delegates, it is my privilege at this juncture to call on the President of the Union, Mr. Sidney Ford, to deliver his Annual Address to the Annual Conference, and might I say, more significantly, his own inaugural address.

I know that it is not usual at this stage of the Conference to talk too much, but I would just mention that there are two items perhaps of special significance to him this morning. I have never at any conference before had such a good reception and such an enlivenment of the proceedings as delivered by the Pipe Band this morning, and I take it, Sidney, that to some extent, whilst a provision from the Scottish Area, it is perhaps to honour your presence here this morning.

Further to that, I am sure that apart from some of the very weather-beaten old-timers assembled, perhaps, on the courseways or pavements of this conference hall, there are very few people associated with this gathering this morning who have had the very, very long connections, either in staff or or official capacity, as the sitting President for the Conference. From anyone with so long an association with this great Union of ours, one can only guess at the importance and value that his address will contain, and along with the Secretary and myself I am sure you are all waiting with eager interest its delivery at this Conference.

I have much pleasure, therefore, in calling upon Mr. Ford to deliver his Annual Address to the Conference.

CHAIRMAN: Fellow Members. At the completion of my first 12 months in office as your President, I am privileged to preside over this, the 17th Annual Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers.

May I, at the outset, perhaps rather belatedly but none the less sincerely, thank the membership through you, for their confidence, and take this opportunity to express the hope that during my term of office we shall be able to improve on this Union's already grand record of achievement on behalf of the members.

The activities of your National Officials and members of the National Executive Committee over the past 12 months have been directed towards, first, the development of a strong and efficient coalmining industry which would be expected to continue to meet the major proportion of the total fuel requirements of this country, and secondly, the further advancement of the interests of the members, particularly in respect of wages and conditions of employment.

The development of a strong and efficient coalmining industry is important

not only to all employees of the National Coal Board and their families—indeed, to the hundreds of mining communities throughout Great Britain—but to the Nation. Whilst the situation in the industry during the past 12 months has shown some improvement compared with that of the years 1957-58-59, the circumstances of the industry today still give rise to concern.

Over the years it has been our plea as a union, that the fullest use should be made of this country's indigenous resources. We believe this plea to be justified, not necessarily on the narrower grounds of the vested interests of the coalmining industry and those employed in it, but we believe it is desirable, indeed essential, in the broader national interest. We take the view that coal, a national asset, should be assured its proper and fair share—an economic share—of the inland fuel market.

If, as is generally forecast by the experts, coal will continue to provide the major proportion of the world's fuel and energy requirements for many years to come, surely there is a very strong case for ensuring that the reserves of coal that we have available in this country should be exploited to the greatest possible advantage in the interests of the Nation.

This country just cannot afford not to utilise this precious natural asset to the full.

We are not unmindful of the changing pattern of fuel consumption, not just in this country but throughout the world, but we believe it would be extremely unwise to allow the economy of this country to become reliant on imported fuel, be it in the form of oil or gas. One only has to look at the events in Kuwait today to realise just how serious a burden—just how costly—the maintenance of foreign oil supplies can be so far as this country is concerned. Imported fuel should not be regarded as a substitute for indigenous coal, but rather as a complementary source of energy and power.

It would be against the national interest to allow the share of coal within the overall inland fuel consumption to fall appreciably below the present level, but let us in the coalmining industry be under no illusions, if we are going to maintain the present level, that is a share of the total inland fuel consumption of the order of 70-75 per cent, we shall need to strive for greater efficiency within the industry.

The need for greater efficiency has been recognised by the Union for many years; it was accepted by the Labour Movement, indeed by the Labour Government, that one of the main objects of nationalisation was to secure the efficient development of the coalmining industry. But the changes that had to be made in order to give effect to the ideas that the Movement had advanced over the years, could not be made overnight. There will be those who criticise on the grounds that progress has been too slow; I do not object to constructive criticism but I do resent most strongly the quite unprincipled sniping against the coalmining industry as indulged in by certain people whose sole aim is to discredit nationalisation at any cost.

When we think and talk in terms of greater efficiency in the coalmining industry, when we come to measure the progress that has been made under nationalisation since January, 1947, it is necessary to understand and appreciate just how serious had become the position of the coalmining industry

under private enterprise, and the shocking state of inefficiency into which it had been allowed to drift.

There is no need for me to recapitulate the details of the shocking record of the coalmining industry during the 25 years before nationalisation, suffice it for me to remind you that it was acknowledged by many of the most influential colliery owners and mining engineers that the British coalmining industry under private enterprise was a good deal less efficient than those of the other major coal producing countries in the world; these same experts also acknowledged that the industry needed drastic reorganisation, and that its structure and methods would have to be replanned.

The task facing the National Coal Board when they took over control of the industry in 1947 was therefore a colossal one, for not only was the Board faced with the need to re-establish the industry along modern technical lines, but it was from the very beginning under constant pressure for more and more production to meet the almost insatiable demand for coal during the first decade of its control.

In spite of all the difficulties of the immediate postwar years—shortages of manpower, shortages of mechanical equipment, materials and stores, the dearth of mining technicians trained in modern mining and engineering procedures, the inevitable conflict between the need for reorganisation work and the constant pressure for greater production—we have a coalmining industry today that is more efficient than ever before.

The yard-stick of “efficiency” in the coalmining industry is the output per manshift worked. The output per manshift in 1927 was 20·62 cwt.; nine years later this had increased by 14 per cent to 23·54 cwt., but during the same period the increase in the Ruhr coalfield and in Holland had been 81 per cent and 118 per cent respectively. By 1946, however (the last year of private enterprise in the British coalmining industry), the output per manshift had declined to 20·60 cwt., less than it had been 20 years earlier. Today, the output per manshift is a little more than 29 cwt., an increase of more than 40 per cent over 1946.

Just what does this measure of improvement in efficiency mean in terms of overall production? In the first 24 weeks of this year, with 120,000 less men employed in the industry, we produced three-and-a-half million tons more than in the corresponding period of 1946. Compared with 12 months ago there are 32,000 less men employed in the industry, but in spite of this we are producing approximately the same tonnage as we were at this time last year.

Satisfactory and encouraging as is the great progress that has been made in relation to the more efficient production of coal, we must never lose sight of the fact that if we are to realise all our aspirations and plans for the future, we must sell the coal—either in its raw state or in some treated form—that we are producing.

This brings me to the question of prices, because, whether we like it or not, the greatest single factor which influences the potential customer in deciding whether to purchase coal or some alternative, is price. This consideration is no less important to the domestic consumer than to the industrial consumer.

Short of some financial assistance by way of a subsidy, the Board's revenue

must be sufficient to cover the day-to-day costs of production and to make provision for depreciation and for the financing of capital investment.

Within the overall costs of production, provision must be made for fair and reasonable rewards to those engaged in the industry, in the form of decent wages and conditions of employment, and it is imperative that prices are maintained at such a level as will reflect this essential aspect of expenditure. But it is in the field of costs other than those concerned with the day-to-day production of coal that the Board have had to carry such an intolerably heavy financial burden, and this has perforce been reflected in part in the price of coal, and to the extent that this has not been done, in the aggregate deficit shown in the National Coal Board's accounts.

There is, for example, the cost of imported foreign coal; by decision of the Government, the Board was forced to import coal at world prices and sell it to inland consumers at the artificially depressed home prices, resulting in an overall loss to the National Coal Board of more than £74 million.

In the absence of any major re-development of the coalmining industry under private enterprise, the nationalised coalmining industry has had to carry a shockingly heavy financial burden in connection with rebuilding and reshaping the industry. During the first 14 years of nationalisation, capital expenditure involved in the sinking of new collieries, reconstruction schemes and routine replacement of plant, etc., amounted to no less than £962 million. The current cost to the Board of the interest payments on the advances made by the Minister of Power in this connection is more than £41 million a year, equal to 4s. 6d. per ton of saleable coal.

Again, industrial consumers particularly should not lose sight of the fact that had the Board enjoyed the same "freedom of choice" as they claim for themselves in their own commercial transactions, large tonnages of coal could have been exported over a period of some years, at prices far in excess of the prevailing prices in this country, and as a consequence of this, the Board would have made very substantial profits.

Of course, had the Board adopted such a policy, there would have been less British coal to share among British consumers and many industrial concerns would have had to import coal and pay the extra cost themselves. This was, in fact, what happened in the case of steel. When British users of steel could not obtain sufficient supplies of British steel they had to purchase foreign steel in order to meet their requirements, and pay the higher foreign prices.

I emphasise these points because certain industrial consumers and steel firms appear to have such very short memories. Following the increase in the price of coal last autumn the Industrial Coal Consumers' Council complained to the Minister when they suggested that the National Coal Board had shown a lack of regard for the public interest since the price increases would, they stated, be harmful not only to the consumers themselves, but to the British economy generally.

The Minister of Power in reply to this complaint pointed out that there is no statutory requirement on the Board to consult the Coal Consumers' Council in advance about prices, but he agreed that such consultation ought to take place.

The National Coal Board, unlike its competitors and unlike other nationalised power industries, is expected to seek the Minister's approval before there can be any increase in the price of coal, and it is generally acknowledged that the result of this has been that at times the Board have not been in a position to raise prices to cover the costs as they might otherwise have done. Had the Board been permitted to operate under ordinary "commercial" conditions, there would have been occasions over the years since 1947 when the price of coal would have been increased to a point which would have allowed the Board to liquidate the accumulated deficiency, and thereby avoid the burden of carrying a huge deficit, on which the industry has to pay very large sums of interest.

Because of the coal price policy imposed on the industry by successive Ministers, coal prices were kept below the level which would normally have operated in the circumstances of a "sellers' market," and this means that the coalmining industry was subsidising private industry; it is significant that there were no complaints by the Industrial Coal Consumers' Council in these circumstances, or by the several bodies which represent the interests of private enterprise industry.

If, as apparently the Minister is prepared to concede, the Industrial Coal Consumers' Council is entitled to be consulted in respect of the proposed increases in the price of coal—and in this connection the Council clearly rely on the terms of the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act to justify their claim—then we, the employees in the industry, have certainly a no less valid claim to the fullest consultation on this aspect of the Board's operations.

The industry is not unmindful of its responsibilities to supply the coal required by the nation at such prices as may seem to the Board best calculated to further the public interest in all respects. It is my submission that the industry has loyally accepted its obligations in this connection. It is a great pity that the same cannot be said for certain industrial consumers who, having reaped very considerable advantages as a consequence of the Government's policy of depressing inland coal prices during the first decade of nationalisation, are now apparently willing to turn their backs on British coal in order that they might increase their already substantial profit-making potential through what would inevitably be a very temporary and limited advantage over their competitors.

What of the future? Concurrently with our recognition of the need for greater efficiency, it must be our constant aim to maintain price levels which will enable the industry to retain the major share of the inland fuel market, and at the same time, provide for a steadily improving standard of living for those engaged in the industry.

If we are to realise this objective—and I confidently believe this to be possible—what we need more than anything during the next year or so is, stability. We must seek to remove the uncertainties of the past. Those who are willing to invest their future in the industry are entitled to expect security; potential customers, too, are entitled to expect security in the form of adequate supplies of the qualities of solid fuel which their business or home requirements demand.

Given stability, confidence can be restored and the industry will reassert itself to the benefit not only of those employed in it, but the nation as a whole.

Our preoccupation with economic and industrial issues must never be allowed to divert our attention from the need for improved standards of safety and health.

We have long since recognised that in our search for greater efficiency, we must rely in the main on increased and improved forms of mechanisation, and, as you will know, the National Executive Committee joined with the National Coal Board recently in appealing for the fullest co-operation in connection with the Board's plans for increased mechanisation. Both the National Coal Board and your National Executive Committee recognised that in implementing this programme, special care must be taken to ensure the best safety and health conditions. It should not be too much to expect that in this age of scientific achievements the introduction of more efficient methods of mining coal should be accompanied by improved standards of safety and health.

New machines introduce new hazards; new methods of mining create new problems. Whilst I recognise and pay tribute to the work of those who labour conscientiously and tirelessly in the search for greater safety and improved health amongst mineworkers, there are still many problems which have to be solved.

In the interests of safety as well as efficiency, it is absolutely essential that there should be adequate schemes of maintenance of mechanical and electrical equipment, the schedules of which will require to be strictly observed by a highly competent staff of engineers and technicians. The shortage of engineering manpower has given rise to difficulties and it cannot be pretended that there is always satisfactory compliance with the schemes. It is to be hoped that this undesirable and extremely dangerous situation will not persist. With the growth of power-loading, managements should keep their schemes and staffing complements under continual review in order that weaknesses which become apparent can be remedied without delay.

Adequate training schemes are indispensable. Whenever new techniques are introduced, both workmen and officials should receive instruction and training beforehand, not only in the method of production, but also in the related aspects of safety and health.

The wave of the dreadful disease pneumoconiosis was complementary to the phase of mechanised mining, and its proportions developed so alarmingly that "dust approved" conditions were adopted in an endeavour to reduce its incidence. These engineering standards were formulated on a purely arbitrary basis, there being no scientific or medical evidence to substantiate their degree of effectiveness as a precautionary measure; suffice it to say that they should be regarded as the maximum permissible limits to which men should be exposed.

Records as at June of last year showed that the overall total length of power-loaded faces had increased from 150,775 yards in 1959 to 170,143 yards in 1960, whilst the length of "approved" power-loaded faces increased from 87 per cent to 89 per cent. But, conditions had deteriorated in some Divisions,

there being a percentage decrease in the length of "approved" power-loaded faces.

This latter situation is alarming; dust prevention and suppression must be intensified. A full-scale assault must be so aimed as to reduce airborne dust concentrations to levels very much less than the present limits for approval. It is essential that we sustain an all-out effort, at least until such time as reliable evidence as to safe conditions is available. In this connection, there must be the most active co-operation between scientists, H.M. Inspectorate, mining machinery manufacturers, mining engineers, workmen and the medical fraternity.

Never before has the industry demanded the close and continued attention of inspection services more than at present, and at no time in the past has the quality of inspections been required to be higher than now. Under Section 123 of the Mines and Quarries Act, 1954, the Union has a specific responsibility in respect of safety and health inspections. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of the work and the responsibilities of workmen's inspectors in the present situation, and would express the hope that those members who undertake this work will take advantage of any courses of instruction to equip themselves, in order that they might carry out their often onerous duties for the general benefit of other workmen in the pits.

One matter about which I am deeply concerned is the continued tendency of some members to resort, on the least pretext, to unofficial action. Even if we concede that unofficial stoppages are not peculiar to the coalmining industry, and if we concede as I believe we must, that human nature being what it is, it is extremely unlikely that we shall ever devise machinery and procedures which will lead to the total elimination of unofficial stoppages, the record over the past 12 months—a loss of production of $2\frac{1}{4}$ million tons—is very disturbing and warrants, I submit, the serious consideration of and heart-searching by every member of the Union. Such stoppages of work inevitably create quite unnecessary hardship amongst the members directly involved as well as their families; they create uncertainty not only in the minds of many men within the industry—with the inevitable result that a number of them turn their backs on the industry and take up other employment—but the resultant interference with supplies often gives rise to doubts on the part of potential customers as to the ability of the industry to meet their requirements.

Men involved in very localised stoppages so often do not realise the serious nature of the cumulative effect of these stoppages. Since nationalisation, approximately 20 million tons of coal have been lost through unofficial action; over the same period the National Coal Board had to import $26\frac{1}{2}$ million tons of coal. Had the 20 million tons of extra coal lost through unofficial action been available to the industry, the National Coal Board could have avoided a very substantial part of the loss of £74 million on imported coal, to which I have previously referred. Had these extra 20 million tons been available at the right time, the immediate saving to the industry would have been something in the region of £50 million; but if account is taken of the extra proceeds which would have been obtained by the Board from the sale of this extra tonnage of home-produced coal, the total saving to the industry would

approximate the total deficit of £78 million. Alternatively, there would have been available some extra millions of tons of coal which would have meant, particularly in the early '50s, that the industry could have met the demands of so many more consumers who, because of our inability to supply the coal they required, eventually turned to oil.

I have no wish to dramatise this problem; let no one forget that for every day's work lost through unofficial action, there are thousands of days being worked in the coalmining industry under very difficult conditions, with outstanding and commendable results. But this industry and those engaged in it whose livelihood depends on its success, just cannot afford to carry the cost of such action. If there are shortcomings or weaknesses in the present conciliation procedure, or if difficulties arise because of the unsatisfactory handling of differences and disputes by management, we must take steps to remedy such weaknesses.

We have our rights within the industry, but we, too, have our obligations and responsibilities. The best interests of the members are not served by unofficial action which is taken in defiance of, and without regard for, decisions democratically reached within the Union and the operative agreements and arrangements which the Union has freely entered into with the National Coal Board on behalf of its members.

I would appeal to both members and management throughout the industry, realising that there will be differences over the coming months, let us show the world that we within this nationalised coalmining industry can resolve our differences in a civilised way and without recourse to war.

I want, in concluding my address, to refer to the controversy which has done so much to divide and weaken the Labour Party in recent months; done so much to impair the effectiveness of its appeal in the eyes of the British public. The fact that there have been differences of opinion on an issue so fundamental as peace and defence, is not surprising and certainly need not worry us. What is so distressing about this controversy is that certain people have sought to take advantage of these differences, to mount a campaign—at times akin to a personal vendetta—against the elected leadership of the Labour Party. This campaign is all the more repugnant because a number of people actively associated with it owe an allegiance to another political party.

We cannot, I submit, dispose of this issue without regard for the record of some at least of those who have supported and continue to support the "Ban-the-Bomb" campaign.

In the years 1936-39, in spite of the steadily worsening international situation as a consequence of the policies then being pursued by Hitler and his associates, these same people who today are campaigning for unilateral disarmament, ranged themselves against the rearming of this country; they campaigned in those days under the banner of the "United Front" and "Peace Alliance." Had we listened to them, this country would have been denuded of any war potential, be it for defence or attack; I leave you to imagine what would have happened in 1939 and the following years had we followed their advice.

But by 1941 the whole pattern had changed. Russia had been attacked and

was involved in the war; the very people who, up to this point had been so active in their opposition to British rearmament and so critical of this country's participation in the war, developed, over-night, a fanatical desire to resort to modern military weapons and tactics and all that this involved. Indeed, had they had their way, they would have plunged this country's military forces into a "second front" without regard for the consequences of any precipitate and untimely action in this connection.

I venture to suggest, were this country to find itself over-night allied alongside Russia against America and the rest of the Western World, history would repeat itself; many of those now so vociferous in the campaign against this country participating in defensive alliances involving a military strategy based on nuclear weapons, would suddenly find themselves—as they did twenty years ago—capable of justifying a complete reversal of the policy for which they are now seeking support.

The trade union movement of this country has been, and still is, under pressure to support a demand that we in Great Britain should unilaterally dispense with nuclear weapons and any military strategy based thereon. The people of Soviet Russia are, I am sure, no less anxious for peace than we are, but there is no evidence that the Russian trade union movement is prepared to call on their Government to take unilateral action of the kind that this country is being urged to take.

The unilateral banning of nuclear weapons by this country, and the consequent break with those countries with whom we are in defensive alliance, would not in my view strengthen the chances of world peace; indeed, all the evidence is available to convince us that any sign of weakness might well encourage precipitate action by a country with aggressive designs. Neutrality, having regard to the widespread effect of these weapons and the strategic importance of this country, would not save the British people.

The possibility that by some miscalculation nuclear weapons might unintentionally be used, is most unlikely, but is one of the grave risks inherent in maintaining a war potential. We had to take very great risks during the last war in the defence of democracy and to ensure that aggression did not succeed; it is just as necessary to take them today to ensure that aggression shall not begin.

We in this country want peace. I welcome the recent decision of the N.A.T.O. Ministerial Meeting to "dedicate themselves anew to building a world free from the false doctrine of continuing and inevitable conflict." In my view the policy outlined in the recent statement on Labour's "Policy for Peace," based as it is on : (i) insistence that the West must never be the first to use the H-Bomb; (ii) the banning of all nuclear weapons everywhere; and (iii) multilateral and comprehensive disarmament, is the only hope for this and future generations.

We must, every one of us, constantly strive for peace, security and greater happiness throughout the world.

(Loud and long applause)