

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

MR. L. DALY (Secretary): Fellow delegates, it gives me very great pleasure indeed to call upon our National Vice-President to present his Chairman's Address.

CHAIRMAN: No doubt you will know that quite recently my very great friend and colleague, Sir Sidney Ford, our President, has been medically advised to take a complete rest for some months. Consequently, his duties fall upon me. It is of course a great honour to preside at this Conference, and I appreciate the responsibility, but I am quite satisfied that Delegates will extend to me the courtesy and co-operation they have afforded the Presiding Chairman in the past.

I know that I am expressing the wishes of Conference Delegates and our visitors when I say we are very sorry indeed that fate has been unkind to Sir Sidney. We all of us hope that a few months complete rest "does the trick," and that we can look forward to his return to office. Those of us who cherish his friendship know that his dear wife Sheila will take very special care of him during his convalescence.

This is the second occasion, during Sir Sidney's term of office as President, that his Vice-President has taken this Chair at Conference. In 1960, Sir Sidney Ford, then Mr. Ford, was elected President on the eve of the Conference, held at Llandudno. He did not officiate because of the decision of the National Executive Committee, taken prior to the election, that it would be unfair for a newly elected President to take the Chair immediately upon his appointment.

The Vice-President at that time was Mr. E. Jones, the Secretary of the North Wales Area, and it is rather a coincidence that I moved the vote of thanks to him as Chairman. Let me quote one paragraph from the address by Mr. E. Jones, that to my mind is just as true today as it was ten years ago. He says:— "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."

We are still too dependent on foreign sources of energy, and the gunboat diplomacy of the past will not and cannot safeguard the supply, if events over which we have no control create a situation that increases the cost of the commodity to such a degree that it would be economically suicidal for us to pay. Alternatively, owing to the unrest in that part of the world, from which we obtain our supplies, there could be a conflict, or confrontation—call it what you will. Nevertheless, the end result could be an abrupt end to our supplies for a very long time. Surely, it is common sense for any Government to safeguard itself against the real dangers to which I have referred.

One of the safeguards is to ensure that we utilise our own energy supplies to a maximum, thereby reducing the degree of dependence on imported fuels. It is most unfortunate, and very difficult for us to

understand, that as far as our Industry is concerned decisions have been taken that have resulted in a drastic contraction, at a speed which made it impossible to prevent hardship to a number of our members.

We realise that in the five years immediately prior to the Labour Government taking office some 200 collieries were closed and manpower fell by nearly 200,000 who received no Government assistance except the normal State benefits. We acknowledge and appreciate the financial assistance the Labour Government has given both to the industry; in alleviating the unfair burden it had to carry, because of unnecessary expenditure incurred by the Board, on information given by the Tory Government; and in financial assistance to most of our members who have been caught up in the pit closure programme. Nevertheless there are still quite a number of our members, below the age of 55, who are unemployed, with no prospects in the immediate future. Many of these members could have been gainfully employed, even though their colliery was uneconomic, until such times as alternative employment was made available. In all probability, the overall cost to the State would have been less, in taking over some of the collieries, rather than closing collieries and paying State Benefits to the men displaced.

Again, referring to the rapid run-down of some of our pits, there are instances where some of our members have been transferred from one colliery to another on three or four occasions, since the enactment of the 1965 Redundancy Payments Scheme. Had they not been employed in a nationalised industry, they would have qualified for benefits under the Scheme the very first time they became redundant. What justice is there for a man who started work underground at the age of 15, and after, say 35 years working underground, at the age of 50, the colliery where he works is scheduled for closure, if the Board insist that they want more service from him, even though it means an extension of his working period—owing to travelling time—a reduction in his wages, a different working environment and a number of other unfavourable factors, the workman concerned would have great difficulty in persuading the appropriate Appeal Tribunal that he wanted the same benefits as any other worker declared redundant, who did not work in a Nationalised Industry. In fact it would be hopeless.

I contend that when a colliery has closed the employees should qualify for benefits according to years of service, under the 1965 Redundancy Payments Scheme. Unless the Board can offer more attractive employment than any other employer then our redundant miners should be free and entitled to seek other employment. I know from personal experience, having addressed mass meetings on colliery closures, that our members feel very bitter that they can be transferred from colliery to colliery without any guarantee of equal wages or similar working conditions, or security of employment: they feel like second class citizens, and consequently thousands of our members have left the industry, because they are not prepared to be tossed about like a shuttlecock.

A few words now about supply and demand of our product. Last year our President, in his address, referred to a heartening feature of our industry's operation, because for the first time in six years coal

consumption in 1968 showed a slight improvement, and the improvement had continued during 1969, up to the time of the Conference. When we realise that the fall in demand of some 22,500,000 tons had taken place over the two previous years, then it was reasonable for us to be somewhat more optimistic about what the future held for us.

The figures for 1969-70 are as follows. Output from the deep mines (143.2 m. tons) was 13 million tons less than 1968, and total output, which includes opencast, licensed mines, and coal from tips, was lower by 13.6 m. tons than in 1968. Consumption of coal on the inland market fell by 3.3 m. tons, to 161.2 m. tons, but exports increased by nearly 30 per cent. from 2.7 m. tons to 3.5 m. tons. Total disposals were 9.6 m. tons higher than production, this difference was met from ground stock. Overall, therefore, the consumption of coal for 1969-70 was 2½ m. tons less than in 1968. One can see that, had supplies of certain qualities of coal been available, we could have sold more coal in 1969 than we did in 1968. The demand was there.

It can be readily seen that someone has 'boobed', and we are now in a situation where, unless everything 'clicks', there is a real possibility that we shall not be able to meet the demands made upon us, there can be no recriminations made against our men. No other section of the community has co-operated more with the Government of the day, since Nationalisation, than the mining community. The technological revolution, often referred to by politicians, has been more apparent in the Mining Industry than most of the other industries. The introduction of new machinery, necessitating changing methods of work—sometimes creating hardship to displaced workmen—has been accepted without hindrance. The Union and our members have realised that the old-fashioned methods of production could not have survived, with competition from other and new sources of energy.

Nevertheless, the changeover in my view was too drastic. All our eggs are in one basket. As I see it, unless a transformation takes place, that removes serious bottlenecks to production, then we shall be stretched to the full to maintain our present markets. We shall not be able to replenish our stocks. I may be wrong; I hope I am. It is, however, important to stress the fact that, in my view, it would be most unwise to exacerbate the position by closing any other pits in the future, apart from reasons of exhaustion of seams or of safety.

My remarks must not be misunderstood. Of course, there is a future in the Mining Industry. If it were not so then the Labour Government would not have agreed to the large capital expenditure that is being incurred at the present time. In fact, even though the Tories, during the recent election, referred to the Nationalised Industries being in a favoured position compared with private industry, nevertheless, even our most bitter political enemies have never stated that there is no future in the Mining Industry. My only anxiety is not for the future but for the future size.

Just to quote an example, according to reports from people who should know, there is going to be an expansion of steel production in many countries, and this factor will in all probability create a set of

circumstances in which the demand for coking coal far outstrips production. The irony, indeed the tragedy of the situation, in which we could well face a world shortage of coking coal in the fairly immediate future, is that not only in this country but in Europe and other parts of the world millions of tons of reserves of coking coal have been abandoned, as a result of policies dictated by events, which in the short term have led to the contraction of the productive potential of the coal mining industries of so many countries over the last decade or so.

Owing to the laws of supply and demand, it is evident that some of our coking coal pits now closed would have come into their own, as we say in Yorkshire, had it not been for the surgeon's knife. A small transfusion was all that was necessary. One can readily appreciate the disillusionment of the Area and Branch Officials, and particularly the workmen, who were the victims of the penny-wise, pound-foolish, short-term policies. The very same argument can be used regarding the supplies of smokeless fuel.

One can try to apportion blame; I have no intention of doing so, but again it is quite evident that short-term policies have reacted unfavourably against the interests of our industry and its employees. We can ill afford to lose our smokeless fuel potential market, and the shortages last winter created a great deal of embarrassment to many of our Union representatives on local authorities, who do a marvellous job of work in a number of ways. Without going into too much detail, we are informed that the short fall in supply is only a temporary feature. Let us hope that this is so.

Again, I refer to our President's address of last year, in relation to our Union's policy on wages, and here I quote him: "We have our policy as a Union for a £15 a week surface, and £16 a week underground, national minima; no one can regard this as anything but a modest claim, particularly when it is understood that such standard grade rates, because of the control which we exert under our national agreement, would in fact be the actual earnings of thousands of men working a normal week." Delegates know that our application was successful, and many are firmly of the opinion that the dispute on the Surface Hours was responsible for the application being met in full. Everyone in the coalfield is entitled to form his own opinion. I expressed my views in the Annual Report given to our Yorkshire Area Delegates in March of this year.

However, this week we shall be considering our future policy on wages and many other important features concerning the well-being of the members we represent. It is important that those of us who will be given the task of pursuing the decisions of Conference give some advice and guidance which in my view will be in the best interests of all our members. I had the privilege of moving the composite resolution on Wages at the 1967 and 1968 N.U.M. Conferences. On each occasion your Secretary, who was at that time the Secretary of the Scottish Area, seconded the resolution. It is on the record, and we meant what we said. Since that time developments have taken place, the outcome of which is resulting most unfavourably as far as the living standards, particularly of our lower paid workers, are concerned. Let me assure Delegates that the whole of the N.E.C. are conscious of this fact. We must get involved in negotiations with the Board as quickly as possible. We must not allow the minority,

who are already holding unofficial meetings, to formulate policies that undermine the whole concept of Trade Unionism. They are prepared to gamble with the future employment of thousands of our members, who are at present working and will continue to do so for very many years. I respectfully submit that to give the 'battle-cry' to our members takes less courage than the call for restraint and reflection.

It would be tragic if our members were denied the opportunity to consider for themselves whether or not the issues involved in any dispute were sufficiently serious to warrant withdrawal of labour, provided of course that as members of our Union they realise they must abide by the majority decision. I want it to be known that I do not and cannot agree under any circumstances that a Trade Union should defranchise its members from deciding whether or not to take strike action. A member must always be given the democratic right to vote on an issue of 'strike action'. If there are Unions who find this principle rather difficult to administer they should take steps to make the necessary adjustments that will ensure the fundamental rights of every member.

I cannot remember in my lifetime, as a member of the M.F.G.B., or the N.U.M., any resolution appearing on the Agenda of the Miners' Annual Conference, seeking to give the N.E.C. the power to declare a National 'Strike' for miners, before an individual ballot was taken. Of course, one realises that in certain circumstances power of this kind may persuade some employers and managements to concede to the Union's requests, but the challenge is sometimes taken up and the worker turns out to be the pawn in the game which is taken. After all, what is freedom all about? Is a worker really free if he is told that he must not work, either by his Union or his employer, without any redress? Yet, at the time that I am compiling this address, I am quite satisfied that the minorities in our Union, who are arranging unofficial meetings, printing and issuing pamphlets, ignoring the policies agreed upon at Annual Conference, have a purpose in mind to try to undermine the status of Area and National Officials of our Union, and to incite our members into taking unconstitutional action, on an issue that they will choose. They cannot afford to allow our members to decide for themselves through the ballot box.

I am indeed very sorry that in my address I have had to refer to certain activities which are taking place, but do believe me Delegates there is a real danger that, unless our Union defends itself against these adventurers, then the men whom we represent will suffer. My only concern is for the members and their families. They must not be stampeded into taking action against their wishes; be prepared.

It is so very easy to jump on the popular band wagon, and officials who hold important positions in the Trade Union field should also realise that it does not serve any useful purpose to "look back in anger" and to express misgivings of past stewardship. It must be made abundantly clear that on the question of wage negotiations involving our lower-paid workers, if the Areas have requested that an individual ballot should be taken, the request has always been acceded to, as it must by rule. Who can say that our members cast their votes in a particular way because they were afraid to vote the other way? I suggest no one. The sooner we enter

negotiations with the Board, particularly on wages, the better it will be for all of us.

It is appropriate at this stage to quote part of my speech on the Wages resolution at the 1967 N.U.M. Annual Conference: . . .“if we had exploited the circumstances that prevailed in the fifties, when the commodity that we produce had a seller’s market, we could have demanded a much better deal for our members, but the increases in the price of coal that would have been inevitable to pay for our demands would have seriously interfered with our export trade with the consequential result of increased unemployment. We did not take advantage of the private enterprise philosophy because at that time we cherished the ideals of nationalisation, as we understood them, and there was not a place for exploitation in those ideals. . . . when we could have joined the ‘rat race’ and demanded a better deal for miners, forgetting all others. We have given the fullest co-operation that could have been expected to the N.C.B. in regard to the challenge of mechanisation. No other industry has a better record than the mining industry in its willingness to accept new techniques. No other sections of workers in this country have been called upon on the same scale to leave their homes and start life anew in different pastures, unfortunately, in some instances, causing hardship.”

And my concluding remarks in that speech are just as relevant now as they were then: “We expect something more than glowing tributes from Ministers in regard to the splendid achievements of everyone concerned in the mining industry. We need the maximum additional short-term assistance that is possible, and we need it as early as possible to restore the confidence and hope of those employed and to give encouragement to our boys leaving school that there is a future in the coalmining industry.”

Of course, the Labour Government has given assistance, and it has been appreciated on numerous occasions, but the facts are perfectly clear, that unless further financial assistance is forthcoming the only alternative to ensure that our members receive their just reward is a price increase that could have a detrimental effect in certain parts of the coalfields and would not be welcomed.

Just before I put my address “to bed”, as they say in the printing world, the results of the General Election have been declared, and though we have had our trials and tribulations during the period of our Labour Government, we have always given them our support. We are conscious of the fact that the new Government may have a different approach to our industry, but at this stage I respectfully submit that no useful purpose could be served in crying “stinking fish.” We are fortunate to be citizens of a country that believes in democracy. Just as we have opposed and criticised the Labour Government, on issues that in our view interfered with the well-being of our members, similar action will be taken if the new Government attempt to bring in measures that create or cause hardship to the miners. We must wait and see what the future holds in store for us,

and we must co-operate with the Government of the day, if we are satisfied that by doing so we are acting in the best interests of our members.

At any rate it would seem to me that we shall not have to wait too long to ascertain whether or not the big stick is going to be used against us on the grounds of political philosophy. The present Government are aware that legislation was already on the stocks prior to the General Election which would have granted continuing aid to our industry up to 1974. In fact the legislation was an extension of the 1967 Act which helped to ease the burdens and hardships of pit closures. The present Government are also aware that our Union have never been satisfied with the financial structure of the industry notwithstanding the assistance we received on the occasion of the capital reconstruction whilst the Labour Government was in office. All the available evidence confirms that irrespective of the efforts and the co-operation of the workmen employed in the mining industry, at the end of the road, the financial burden it had to carry left very little as far as wage increases were concerned. The last time your National Officials met the appropriate Minister on this financial structure question we left with the opinion that further assistance might be forthcoming. We discussed a number of other problems relating to the well-being and security of employment for our members with special reference to the conversion of Power Stations using solid fuel, and again your National Officials were satisfied with the assurances given by the Minister at that time a few weeks before the General Election.

I want to assure Conference delegates that your N.E.C. will be watching very closely future events and we shall always endeavour to act and give advice in the best interest of the membership. At this stage no useful purpose could be served in giving the 'battle cry.' I repeat, let us wait and see what the future holds in store for us.

I must now conclude. Owing to the fact that my duties as General Secretary of the Yorkshire Area have kept me very busy, my address has had to be rather brief. In the hope that Delegates will accept this explanation, may I take this opportunity to thank you for giving me your attention—between us we can make this as good a Conference as we have had in the past.