

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

MR. M. McGAHEY (Vice-President): Fellow delegates, guests and visitors, it is my privilege and pleasure to call upon Mr. Joe Gormley to present his Presidential Address to this, our 35th Annual Conference.

Mr. Joe Gormley.

CHAIRMAN: Fellow members, the difficulty these days of writing a Presidential Address becomes more and more apparent because things are changing so rapidly in the world scene and particularly the world scene on energy, and as I said at a dinner the other night it is my opinion that this is the third important Conference taking place within a short time. We had the one which had a lot of publicity when the O.P.E.C. countries decided to up the price of oil. We had the meeting in Tokio of the heads of state, and one of the main items on the Agenda there was the world supply of energy, although I had to remind Maggie there was a coal industry in Britain that needed attention as well as any other forms of energy that she was talking about, so I will try not to stray too far away from this speech for the sake of the press lads, but it gets more difficult, I must admit.

Over the last few months, the Labour Movement has lost a political battle, which could affect the lives of many of the people we represent. For some reason, a lot of people, who must have included a lot of trade unionists, decided that a Conservative Government could do better for Britain, could do better for the people of Britain and do better for British Industry than a Labour Government. As I have just said, we lost the battle and when we examine some of the results we must ask ourselves "Why?" When you consider these results you see that in Scotland, the North East, the North West and in Yorkshire, the Labour Vote was able to be held. In fact, the Labour vote at this election was slightly up on the last election, but nevertheless we lost to such a degree that the Conservative Party have a

majority over the Labour Party of 71 seats, with a total overall majority of perhaps about 53. No amount of huffing and puffing by trade unions or anyone else can alter that fact. The democratic vote has decided the issue, and whilst we must as a trade union movement, fight against measures being introduced, which are abhorrent to the trade unions, i.e. reform of the trade unions, monetary policies, such as the budget, which will inevitably increase the cost of living, will increase the rate of inflation and unemployment to unbearable levels, we must be really careful that we as a trade union movement, do not try to give the impression that we will forget democracy if the people elect a government we do not like, and would use our industrial muscle for political reasons. That is the start of the slippery slope, which will not lead to Socialism, but would inevitably bring about a right-wing backlash to Fascism. No, we will keep our muscle to fight our industrial problems, and in the meantime try to show the British Electorate what a ghastly mistake they have made in changing governments.

Now, when we start to have an examination as to why these things happened, one can only presume it was a repeat of 1969, when many of us in the trade union movement, at that time warned the government about the legislation they were seeking to introduce, that is that infamous document namely "In Place of Strife". After a terrific battle in '69, that proposed legislation was ungraciously withdrawn, but the election was held too soon after that for the scars to be healed — and so Labour lost. It seems that lessons have not been learned by our political colleagues. We warned them at the back end of last year, i.e. last October, that they ought to start trusting the trade union movement to negotiate in a responsible way. After three years of Government interference, it was felt by most of us that the time had come when the trade union movement should be allowed to do its job. We asked them to trust us, but unfortunately they saw fit not to do so and kept trying to impose false levels of income on the people of Britain. They were trying to do this without legislation on this occasion. This voluntary approach still meant the same, because employers were able to slide from under their own responsibilities in negotiations and say that because of the Government policy, they were not able to meet the just demands of many groups of workers. So immediately we had confrontation with government and not employers. As a result, we had what has become known as the "winter of discontent", when the local authority workers, public services, teachers, etc., were forced to take industrial action. This, as I say, in my opinion, was one of the prime factors in our losing the election because these workers are in close contact with the public and we can only say to our political colleagues "if you wish to keep the support of the trade union movement, then you have got to start listening to us more, when we tell you how things are going in the country, because we are in touch with the people of the country a damn sight more than most politicians". However, the Tory Government are there now with a sufficient majority to ensure that it is practically impossible to move them democratically for five years.

But, some way we have got to try to find the solution to this problem of the public service workers' pay. We must through the trade union movement, try to get a formula accepted which would guarantee that these people did not fall behind the pattern of wage levels, which emerges from the production industries. The trade unions in production industries can negotiate because they have something to sell besides their members' labour. They are producing something and the sale of those products helps them to be in a negotiating position, just as we, the N.U.M., are in a negotiating position — and we used our position successfully even during the years of

wage restraint by the Government. We have been successful in getting a formula on wages now, which should guarantee that the British miner does never again fall down the ladder of industrial wages. At the moment, with the basic rate and the bonus scheme payments, the miners are at the top of the industrial ladder and this is where they must remain. We will never again allow them to slip from that position. And we can do it. We can do it successfully by negotiation if we are willing to be patient in our negotiations and not try to keep threatening everybody before we even enter into any negotiations. Negotiation is the spirit of compromise and will always remain that way. The only people who have ever made progress have been the people who are willing to compromise and I am, as your leader, saying that the miners must always show themselves willing to sit down and negotiate seriously without threatening every year that we will have a confrontation on this and that and the other. With this in mind, I just thought I would start my address, because we have so many statements being made and resolutions put on the agenda ending with the phraseology "failing a satisfactory reply, we will consult the members with a view to industrial action". We should not need resolutions saying that, because it is a natural way of life for miners that if we are dissatisfied with the reply to our claims on any issue at all, we usually seek the guidance of our members by means of a ballot vote. I think that is right and we must stick to that. We must never give the people of Britain the impression that although we are in a growth industry, we are still acting as if we were under attack from every side. We are only frightening our possible customers, whom we rely on to buy our coal. We must never forget that we are only in business to produce coal and sell it.

Energy Policy

When I say that we are in a growth industry, I mean exactly that. We are in a strong position because of the fact that we are an energy industry and the world has an energy crisis. We are in the position to demand that the country should have a coherent energy policy, basing its energy needs on the ability to maximise the indigenous productions of the energies we already have. That means maximising the coal industry, maximising all other forms of energy, except the oil and gas, which we know have a finite life. But we are concerned primarily with the coal industry and we had with the last government a plan accepted, the "Plan for Coal", which the Union accepted, along with the other Unions, the Coal Board and the Government, a plan for necessary expansion of the Coal Industry, which we said as a Union, could be managed. It is a plan having an ever-increasing production target within it. It was estimated that we would need a hundred and twenty million tons of deep-mined production by 1985, with fifteen million tons of open-cast, making a total of one hundred and thirty-five millions. This was accepted as not being the maximum, not being the ceiling. It was said that the more coal we could produce over these figures, the better the position for Britain in the energy scene and on this basis, the industry went forward. I am glad to say that this year, 1979-80 we have a guaranteed market for a hundred and twenty-five million tons of coal. To meet this market fully, we would have to produce one hundred and eleven million tons deep mine production, which means a two or three per cent increase on last year's figures, but unfortunately up to now the signs are not enough in the right direction. It is true that since the introduction of the production bonus scheme, over-all production has gone up by about two per cent, with face production up by eight per

cent. But that is not enough to help us to meet the target which we set ourselves, as a consequence of which we are having to live from stock. In fact, the C.E.G.B. are complaining at the moment that they are lifting about five million tons from stock. They have, for example, five million tons less stock than they say they ought to have. The overall stocking position is that we have three million tons less than we had last year and although we have a temporary problem with coking coal, these margins of safety for energy production are not good for the British Industries and the Electricity Authorities particularly. This is why we are having pressure from outside sources such as the C.E.G.B. for them to be allowed to import four or five million tons of coal per annum and their only excuse is that they cannot be guaranteed that the coal will be there when they need it. If you have twenty odd million tons of coal in stock and you are lifting three or four million tons a year, it will not be long before you are scratching around. No big Industry, be it the Electricity Industry or any other Industry, can live without the guarantee that their energy supply is not going to be interrupted. We must fight against imports of coal by meeting the markets from our own production.

Therefore, I can only say to you and to all the members of the Union that we have a responsibility in trying to fulfil those plans for the Coal Industry, which we fought for. We fought for an ever-expanding Coal Industry and we must insist that we do have the results to make that possible. It can be possible by involving fully everyone at each and every colliery. It is necessary to make everyone feel that it is their pit, and the success or failure of the pit should become a personal thing.

But equally, of course, we have got to tell this new government that they also have responsibilities to ensure that there is no short-term interruption with the smooth flowing of the investment necessary to make that plan a success. The plan envisaged an investment running around five hundred million pounds per year for the next few years in order to provide new coal mining areas, which would produce an extra four million tons of new production per year; that is four million tons from new pits, plus long-term extensions to already existing pits. Nothing must be allowed to interrupt the progress of that plan. If the Government do this for short-term gains, the long-term consequences could be catastrophic for Britain, not only for the Coal Industry and the men in it, but for Britain as such. We will find ourselves with the inability of this industry to meet its commitments, which will in itself make it impossible to fill the energy gap, which will exist in the 1990s, when the supply of oil and gas in the world will have diminished to a perilous degree. Therefore, the Unions and the Coal Board and the Government must act together to try to ensure that the "Plan for Coal" is a success and that we are continuing to be regarded as an expanding industry, even though industries around us have a very difficult situation. We are an industry, which has a programme for recruiting people this year to the tune of between 25-30,000 people. This will mean a regeneration of our training schedules. It also means that we have to look after those of our members, whose jobs are threatened by projected closures. Every suggested closure must be examined as a separate issue. We must not make it easy for the N.C.B. to close pits, but at the same time, we have to be realistic and accept that the very nature of the industry means that pits will inevitably close. With all the recruitment this year, I very often ask myself, "Are we doing justice to our members in sometimes arguing for a pit to be kept open for a possible year or two when long-term jobs are available at other pits nearby?" I do not want a situation to arise, where because of our unwillingness to

accept the inevitable, we have to fill these vacancies, many times from the ranks of those men who left our industry before, when things did not look too good. I want these jobs for our members, who did not run away.

This Industry is an old Industry with the average age of the pits in the region of 70 years. What we need to achieve our objects are more and more new pits in all areas, employing the most up-to-date techniques, and men working in far better conditions. We must never forget that in this situation we are very fortunate. We have an industry, which has been made for us as a result of geology. But industries such as the Steel Industry and the Ship-Building Industry are man made and are meeting competition from many of the new emerging nations, who think that it is right that they should help their economy by building a Steel Industry, or an Airport or a Ship-Building Industry of their own, if they are near the sea. So these other industries have different competition to us and we should appreciate that and help them all we can.

Safety

But in all this talk about increasing production and productivity, we must never forget the safety factors. We must never allow anybody to get the impression that in the rush for coal, we are willing to neglect safety matters. There have been many comments made as to the reason for the increase in fatalities this year. In fact, some people have said that the increase in fatalities can be attributed to an increase in production. It is fascinating because there is no proof of this, two big incidents occurred. One accident at Bentley colliery happened at the end of the shift when the men were returning to the pit bottom. The second accident at Golborne happened on a Sunday shift, a normal Sunday maintenance shift. Therefore, in no way could that be due to increased production. But whatever the causes of the fatalities, whatever the cause of a single fatality, we must examine the causes and try to remedy them. I do not like anybody trying to make political capital or to score another point by saying that we have only had these fatalities since we tried to increase production. If we give the people of the country the impression that we cannot increase production without having an increase in fatalities, they will say that the sooner you close your industry down the better and we would not have a leg to stand on. We must never give people that impression and I deplore anybody trying to use an argument like that. We have got to tackle the cause of accidents, tackle the causes of fatalities and try to make sure that these accidents do not happen, although I have to admit that as a miner, a pitman is subject to human error, which often plays a big part; human error in not ensuring that the regulations are carried out fully. There are many accidents, which should be avoided and it is our duty as a union to instruct and educate our lads to make sure that they in themselves are safety engineers automatically, that they are watching for neglect and they are watching for breakdowns in regulations. As I have said on so many occasions, we may think that it is the manager's responsibility and statutorily that is so, but we have a responsibility to ourselves, each man looking after the other man. Every colliery manager has only one pair of eyes and we have a lot more members, who have two eyes as well and can spot difficulties when they arise. We must educate them that they must report and remedy any of the practices, which are at the moment perhaps bringing about accidents, which ought never to happen. We cannot shelve this responsibility either.

Welfare

But then we have another responsibility if accidents do happen. I know people will say it is inevitable that accidents will happen and whilst not accepting that, we have to realise that they do happen. Then, as a result of the accident, there are either widows or wives and dependants to be helped. That is why I pay the greatest of tribute to the Coal Industry Benevolent Trust. This scheme was set up as a result of a resolution, which was carried at one of the annual conferences, saying that we should set up a central fund to ensure that all widows were treated alike, because what had been happening up to then was that when there was a disaster such as the two I mentioned earlier, there would be a lot of local emotion emerging. The local Mayor, for example, may set up an Appeal Fund. Clubs and other organisations in all the areas surrounding that, where the disaster took place, would get schemes going to raise funds. Now this had happened over the years with the consequence that those widows who were involved in the multiple accidents have been better treated than others because they received not only compensation from the industry, but also received money from these funds created locally. As a consequence, we have had different treatment for different widows. We have always taken the point of view that a single widow involved as a result of a fatality in the coal mines should be treated in an exactly similar way to the widow of a miner who dies in a multiple accident. The only way to do that was to create a central fund into which all these appeal funds could be channelled along with our own funds and contributions from our members, which were being made to what we called the Fatal Accident Fund. I am pleased to say that now we have the co-operation of all the people and what we wanted has actually happened, as a result of which we are treating all widows alike in the scheme. Widows are looked after for six years, and their children until after they leave school, which can be for quite a period these days. So we are trying to do what a good union should do, i.e. to look after the widows, because we have also been successful in the last few months in bringing into the scheme the widows of miners who die from pneumoconiosis. We hope eventually to bring in all widows of miners who die in service. When we have achieved this, we will be able honestly to say that we are carrying out one of our functions as socialists in looking after those who are least able to look after themselves. This is part of our scheme of things, in looking after miners and their families from the cradle to the grave. I hope the members will give acclamation to the work done on behalf of this fund by the chief executive of C.I.S.W.O., Jack McKenning and his staff and our own staff under Danny O'Connor, because we decided that it would be far better for the Scheme to be administered as a joint scheme through the channels of C.I.S.W.O. I can't thank them enough for their unstinting efforts in getting this scheme off the ground and for the way in which they deal promptly with the problems of widows and the expeditious way in which they make finance available to the widows whenever a fatality occurs. This is one side of life that we are very proud of because it does help us to help the widows of the unfortunates I have mentioned.

But we should never be satisfied whilst there is a need for the fund. We should never be satisfied whilst fatalities still occur and we should never be satisfied about pneumoconiosis. We should make every attempt we can to eradicate the accident level and eliminate the fatalities in our pits just as we eradicated nystagmus. We must deal exactly the same way with the problems of dust which cause pneumoconiosis and continue to press for

bronchitis and emphysema to be accepted as industrial diseases. We should insist on new and better regulations new standards, which would make it impossible for pneumoconiosis to be regarded as an inevitable disease. It is not and we should ensure that it is not inevitable.

International

Now that is why we are working so hard in the international field with other unions and organisations throughout the world in trying to solve the problems of miners. We are proud of our level of international work. We have a record in the world second to none. In every country in the world the British Mineworkers are known for their activities in bringing together miners and miners' organisations. We firmly believe that the problems of miners do not exist differently on either side of political boundaries as separate issues. There are exactly the same problems on each of the political boundaries and we should not hesitate in talking together with other miners' unions whatever the political identity of the country in which they happen to be working. They have the same problems and we deal with the problems jointly. This is important and we have as a result of our international office, which has been in London for so many years and run by one of our colleagues, Dennis Edwards, will continue to be run in London as a full-time occupation, now that Dennis has retired. We were successful in selecting one of our own people, Peter Tait, from Yorkshire, who I am damn sure will make a good job of it. He will follow in the footsteps of such stalwarts as Dennis Edwards and others in trying to bring to our attention the problems of miners in areas of the world like South America, Africa, the Far East, etc. It is our ability to help these people abroad, in these other countries, which are emerging into the industrialised world, which will finally depict us as a union which is helping in the brotherhood of man. Our record in this fight for the brotherhood of man must be a shining example to the rest of the trade union movement. I hope you are as proud of the work we do as much for ourselves and for our families and dependants as for miners everywhere. We want for miners in the rest of the world exactly what we want for ourselves. That is one reason why miners' trade unions throughout the world should be in the forefront in putting pressure on the politicians of the world with a view to getting international agreements on armaments, both conventional and nuclear which would guarantee world peace. Without peace all our trade union activities are to no avail. Whilst we should applaud the willingness of leaders of East and West to get together recently to sign a non-proliferation treaty, we should regard this as only a tentative first step. The whole trade union movement should condemn the need for nuclear weapons and should realise there are still many hawks around the world of all political identities, who indicate the problems of the world can only be solved by military methods, using all kinds of armaments. Together, we must condemn all warmongers, whichever country they come from and whatever reason they give the world for their activities.

We should tell everyone that the brotherhood of man can live together in peace and that by doing so, could rid the world in a very short time of the haves and have nots.

Together in peace we can eradicate poverty, squalor, disease and suffering. We must never rest until every man, woman and child is well shod, well fed, decently housed and entitled and able to get the benefit of things we take for granted — good education, health services, etc.

We trade unionists can achieve many of these things nationally, and inter-

nationally can help our brothers and sisters in other countries. We, as true democrats must also fight for true democracy throughout the world. The brotherhood of man, together can do immense things. Disunited we dissipate our energies. Let us be determined as representatives of the British Miners, that the message to go out from this Conference to all Trade Unionists, both in Britain and throughout the world is that unity creates strength disunity creates weakness. Let us ensure that unity is our catchword.