

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

PRESIDENT: Chair, colleagues, May 1997, May Day, saw the end of 18 years of Tory misrule: a period in which the worst Government in living memory inflicted attack after attack on the British working class – with no group attacked more savagely than Britain's mineworkers.

The Tories have left an ugly legacy of mass unemployment, widespread poverty and social unrest. Our health, education, housing and social services have been systematically dismantled as the Tories ruthlessly pursued their objective of imposing the 'free market' concept throughout every section of our society.

We have lived through a massive privatisation programme, which has resulted in water, gas, electricity, telecommunications, steel, rail and – of course – coal being effectively 'stolen' from the British people by a Government that plundered the nation's assets to achieve their short-term objectives.

Vital services such as health and education have been slaughtered by the Tories who at the same time kept up a massively military expenditure programme, supplying arms on a world-wide basis, and continuing to build nuclear weapons such as Trident – which not only costs £30 billion but is as useless as a piece of scrap metal in a world that already possesses enough nuclear weapons to destroy the planet ten times over.

Throughout Britain, our fellow-citizens have been reduced to levels of poverty not known since before the Second World War, and in every major city and town in Britain the sight of people sleeping in shop doorways, in cardboard boxes and in makeshift shelters on the very edge of one of the richest societies in the world has become commonplace.

Under the Tories we also witnessed the introduction of vicious anti-trade union legislation, which has not only rendered trade unions virtually ineffective, but made official strikes almost impossible.

The twin deterrent of mass unemployment and anti-union laws was the Tories' main weapon in controlling the working class and in particular trade unions if they dared to challenge attacks on their jobs, wages, conditions, living standards, or safety and health.

There was – without doubt – a feeling of great hope that on May 1st, after nearly two decades of Tory misrule, Britain could now enter the 21st Century with a completely different approach and – more important – a programme which would benefit working people; a programme that would end the unemployment, poverty and hopelessness built up over the last 18 years.

Britain's miners, in particular, hoped that the election of a 'New Labour' Government would not only begin to put things right economically and politically, but more specifically, see fulfilment of the promises made by the Labour Party during and after the 1984/85 miners' strike. In other words, many miners believed they would see from a Labour Government the same commitment to our members and to our class that Thatcher and Major gave to *their* class throughout the last 18 terrible years.

The 1985 Labour Party Conference gave a commitment that when a Labour Government was elected, every miner sacked during the 1984/85 dispute would be reinstated, with adequate compensation and the restoration of their pension rights.

That pledge on pension rights was, in fact, reaffirmed by Tony Blair as recently as 1994.

The 1985 Labour Conference also pledged to 'reimburse the National Union of Mineworkers with all monies confiscated as a result of fines, sequestration and receivership'.

The late John Smith – as a Labour Party Leader – promised me and the NUM's leadership that when a Labour Government was returned to power it would not only reverse the privatisation that was then pending for coal – it would do more.

It would secure bilateral trade union recognition and trade union rights: a conciliation scheme, collective bargaining, safety and health arrangements in our industry – and the restoration of the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation Limited Company which was dismantled by the Tories at an enormous cost to Britain's miners, retired members, widows and beneficiaries.

'NEW LABOUR'

Even when 'New Labour' ditched Clause IV, abandoned any pretence of a commitment to Socialism and openly embraced the 'free market' and capitalism, many still hoped and believed that when 'New Labour' was returned to government it would keep the promises that it had made to the miners and to the trade union movement as a whole.

But 'New Labour' ditched any commitment to public ownership well before the General Election and it made clear **it would not take back into public ownership** industries and services that had been privatised by the Tories.

It has now gone ever further, and made clear that it is in favour of *further* privatisation together with joint private/public investment in various public services such as the London Underground, which is desperately in need of substantial renovation as we approach the 21st Century.

Top Government advisers appointed by 'New Labour' since the General Election include a number of 'Captains of Industry', many of whom refuse to recognise trade unions in their own industries and services.

In response to the need and demand for a decent, statutory, national minimum wage, the new Government has established a commission to study this matter, and appointed a man who earns £62 an hour as its chairman!

How on earth does someone on that sort of pay begin to understand what it is like to live on poverty wages? As trade unionists, we must ask the question: why has the Government thought it necessary to appoint a 'commission' when it is fully aware of the trade union movement's policy (which in my view doesn't go far enough) on what constitutes a fair and decent minimum wage?

'New Labour's' commitment to protecting capitalism was seen in the Budget introduced earlier this week. It can only be described as a rich person's Budget, designed to help a capitalist system continue on its present course.

The cut in corporation tax and the attack on the young unemployed with the introduction of the American workfare scheme are but two examples of how 'New Labour' is attempting to run capitalism more efficiently than the Tories.

During the General Election campaign, education was said to be a priority for 'New Labour' – yet scarcely any money is being made available for an education system which is now – in every sense – amongst the most impoverished in Europe.

Even to match other European nations would require an extra £3 billion per year – but the only way to properly resolve the crisis in our education system is to ban private education and invest an extra £4 billion into the state system, thus giving the same chances to all young people, irrespective of where they live.

If it is right for the leaders of our nation to secure the highest quality education for their kids, then it must be right for all parents and all children to have the same opportunity.

Our National Health Service has become a national disgrace, and yet, far from dealing with the root cause, the 'New Labour' Government has failed to tackle the fundamental problem of trust hospitals, fund-holding GP practices, and the funding of private health treatment directly and indirectly subsidised by British taxpayers.

The only way to bring our NHS into the 21st Century is to ensure that it embodies the same principles applied when it was first established by Aneurin Bevan – a miners' leader – in the 1945-51 Labour Government.

A *real* National Health Service requires massive investment – of at least an extra £9 billion per year – together with an end to private medicine and a commitment that no-one will have to wait for a hospital appointment or an operation.

A *real* National Health Service must be available to all, free of charge at the time of need and upon demand. The abandonment of this concept by 'New Labour' is not only an insult to the British people but to the memory of an outstanding Socialist – and miner – like Aneurin Bevan.

Britain's housing crisis can only be resolved by building or refurbishing one million homes per year over the next five years. This would not only employ three quarters of a million unemployed building workers, but would ensure that the obscenity of homelessness was banished from our society forever.

It would cost £15 billion per year, a sum which is readily available out of the £20 billion-plus profits of the industries and services privatised by the Tories.

A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

Britain's problems cannot be tackled, let alone solved, by a Budget – or a Government – committed to policies that seek to make capitalism work more efficiently than it did for the Tories. Instead, the British people need a fundamental change, in economic and political terms, of all aspects of our work and our lives.

The aim should be not merely to reduce unemployment by 250,000 but to wipe it out altogether. No civilised society should tolerate any level of unemployment.

Not having a job damages individuals and families, and destroys entire communities – as mineworkers and their families know better than anybody else.

Last year, a study by the Rowntree Foundation Trust revealed the truth about the level of unemployment: that more than 7 million British people of employable age have no job!

That figure did not include another 6 million who are either in part-time work or on short-term contracts; again, something that mineworkers and their families know all about, struggling on low pay, poor conditions and with no sense of security about the future.

These are problems that go a long way towards explaining the unrest and unhappiness, including drug use and violence, now rife in working class communities throughout Britain.

This is a situation that could be transformed in a very short space of time – by wiping out unemployment.

We do not want gimmicks, or U.S.-style workfare schemes. We need permanent full-time jobs paying decent wages. All that's required are three straightforward policies: a four-day working week; a ban on all non-essential overtime; retirement on a voluntary basis with full pay at age 55.

The Tories' economic and political strategy effectively forced miners to take redundancy on a substantial lump sum and up to 90 percent of their wages, indexed for 15 years. That was a means of 'buying off' resistance against pit closures and jobs losses – yet it demonstrated that *it is possible* for people to retire on full pay.

As well as unemployment, the British people have felt the savage effects of the Tories' ruthless privatisation programme, which robbed us of resources, industries and services that should be held in public ownership.

For trade unionists, there is no way any Government can justify the private 'ownership' of energy, water, transport or telecommunications – any more than it can justify private health care or education.

How can we tolerate a situation where two-thirds of the UK's privatised electricity industry is now owned by United States energy conglomerates?

How long can we put up with knowing that over the last two years, the executive directors of National Power have shared profits of more than £2.6 million amongst themselves?

In a situation of such corruption and greed, the new Government's one-off windfall tax will only act like a sticking plaster on a deeply infected wound. We don't need a wind – we need a gale to put right the damage done over the past 18 years.

Every single industry and service sold off by the Tories must be bought into public/social ownership, managed properly by and on behalf of the British people, and we should demand that all private industry is brought into public/social ownership. We should have the same determination to achieve this objective that the Tories did with their privatisation plan.

For our energy industries – electricity, oil, gas and above all, coal – proper management means an integrated energy policy and an end to the savage butchery of Britain's coal industry.

The 'dash for gas' has meant that Britain's relatively short-term gas reserves are being wasted in generating electricity, while our low-cost, top-quality coal reserves of over 1,000 years are being sealed off at a massive cost to the taxpayer.

Viable long-life pits have been destroyed while Britain continues to support nuclear power, with all its attendant costs and all its dangers, too great to be calculated.

All of us will have been disappointed – but many of us, I suspect, not surprised – that there was no mention of our industry in the new Government's first Queen's Speech. Our Union has written to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Margaret Beckett, and the Energy Minister, John Battle, requesting a meeting so that we can remind the 'New Labour' Government, in the event it needs reminding of the Plan for Coal, signed by the Labour Government in 1974 and 1978, and of the undertakings given during the last 18 years.

At such a meeting we can learn first-hand what sort of energy policy this Government has in mind.

ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Concern for both the economy and the environment must involve a regeneration of Britain's deep-mine coal industry, with the proper use of clean-coal technology, together with development of other technologies such as coal liquefaction and fluidised bed combustion, which were ditched for political reasons by a Tory Government prepared to throw common sense to the winds in its war against the NUM.

Any Government that cares for the environment and the economy must be opposed to opencast mining, which despoils and scars our countryside, polluting and destroying nature's support systems for all forms of bird, animal and plant life.

Any Government that cares for the future of our planet must be opposed to nuclear power. Even the Tories, who depended so much on nuclear power in their war against the NUM, were in the end nervous about the nuclear legacy.

They pulled the plug on a £2 billion plan to build an underground dump for nuclear waste at Sellafield, leaving their successors with the growing problem of what to do with this enormous, dangerous inheritance. They also accepted the need to phase out the annual £1.3 billion nuclear subsidy.

It is worth noting that I represented our Union in 1977 at the Windscale Public Inquiry, where the NUM warned of the economic, political stupidity of the entire nuclear programme, and the dangers of nuclear power contamination!

In France, the newly-elected government has at least acknowledged years of public concern and ordered the shut-down of an experimental fast-breeder nuclear power station, ending 20 years of experiments that involved Germany and Italy as well.

The Super Phoenix absorbed at least £5 billion in building and operating costs, but was consistently opposed by environmentalists who argued it was potentially more dangerous even than Chernobyl. Now, at last, it is to be closed.

The NUM will continue to call for the complete shut-down of the nuclear industry, here and throughout the world. We cannot understand how any government, especially one as rich in energy resources as Britain, can allow the continued use of nuclear power and all the hazards that entails.

Britain needs an energy policy that is environmentally and economically sound – and forward-looking. We argue that alongside the regeneration and proper use of deep-mined coal, proper research and development must be devoted immediately to establishing the renewable energy resources and conservation planning on which future generations will depend.

We need wind, wave, tide, geothermal, barrage and solar energy combined with clean-coal technology!

THE FUTURE FOR OUR UNION

The attacks on our industry have not, unfortunately, ended with the unlamented passing of the Tories. Pits – like Bilsthorpe, Point of Ayr and Monktonhall – are still being senselessly closed.

The profiteers who bought up our butchered industry in 1994 refuse to recognise our Union – or any other – for conciliation and collective bargaining purposes, and safety standards continue to fall.

None of this should surprise us; we have to face the fact that unless we fight for our rights we will not win them back, and, during the course of this Conference, I hope we will address these most vital issues in an honest and open fashion.

The private coal owners – like British Coal before them – have continued to use anti-trade union legislation against our members and the Union.

WAGES BALLOT

In 1995, the High Court and Court of Appeal ruled that the NUM's 83.4 percent ballot victory for 24-hour selective strike action was unlawful on the grounds that the Union intended to commence its action one split second after the date proscribed by law.

In December, 1996, the Union's membership again voted, by a majority of 54 percent, to take selective 24-hour strike action – an on this occasion R J B Mining took the Union to court on New Year's Eve, arguing that the NUM's membership records were 'out of date'.

If the Union had been able to ballot its members in accordance with our Rules, only employees who were in Union membership on the date of the ballot could have voted. Yet under postal ballot arrangements, introduced by the Tories, the NUM, in common with other unions, is constantly operating on the basis of 'out of date' records and a point-blank refusal by employers to supply details of membership contribution deductions.

Our Union will continue to campaign for the complete repeal of all anti-trade union laws which are not only a violation of the United Nations Charter, but an affront to democracy itself.

WAGES

The British coal mining industry is the most technically advanced in the world – due entirely to the massive investment programme inside the industry during the period of nationalisation, from 1947 to 1994.

Miners are achieving higher productivity targets than ever before, and yet in real terms their wages have decreased, particularly basic pay.

There is no justification for employers continuing to refuse a sensible wages structure – without any incentive or bonus payments – that would give miners in every part of the British coalfield the same wages.

I believe that a miner working on a coal face, particularly in a heading, is entitled to an annual *salary* of £50,000; a miner working elsewhere underground, to a *salary* of £35,000 per year, and a surface worker, a *salary* of £25,000 per year.

I have no doubt that there will be those who regard these figures as ridiculous, unobtainable and, in some cases, sensational ‘pie in the sky’ claims.

This is exactly what was said years ago when I first made a claim for miners to be paid £100 per week minimum on the coal face – a claim which was conceded following a tremendous struggle in the early 1970s.

CONCILIATION/COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The Union can only negotiate wages and conditions provided the employer is willing or forced to talk. That means we must have a Conciliation Scheme between the employer and the NUM.

There can be no place in a civilised society for an employer which refuses to talk to the elected representatives of its employees, and sooner or later, our members will have to recognise that if they want their Union leadership to represent their interests, they will have to take whatever action is necessary – including industrial action – to achieve this eminently sensible objective.

MINeworkERS’ PENSION SCHEME/INDUSTRY-WIDE SCHEME

The Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme has been effectively taken over by the Government and, like the Coal Board before, the Government is plundering the actuarial surpluses, which this year totalled £1.42 billion.

It cannot be right for either an employer or a government to ‘take’ 50 percent of mineworkers’ monies which, after all, represent ‘deferred pay’.

Pension fund monies should be used for one purpose and one purpose only – to benefit pensioners, widows and beneficiaries. And they must be payable to all who have earned them.

This Conference must demand that all miners sacked in the 1984/85 strike have their pension rights restored in full. Those promises made by the late John Smith and Tony Blair must be kept.

COAL INDUSTRY SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANISATION (CISWO)

The Tories made clear that one of their aims in privatising the mining industry was to change the character of the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation – CISWO.

It should be remembered that CISWO was established by agreement between the NUM, NCB and the Labour Government of 1945-51. At its heart was the principle that this Limited Company must be owned equally by the NUM and the NCB.

This principle was applied at all levels, and Area Welfare Trust/Schemes – and even Local Welfare Schemes – were operated on the same basis. Indeed, in many cases, Area and Local Schemes had operated as charities on the basis of the owners and the NUM each having a right to 50 percent representation.

In 1987, the Thatcher Government had already ‘imposed’ rule amendments which had given representation to the breakaway UDM, and effectively taken away the 50 percent guaranteed share ownership of CISWO, the Limited Company.

The new CISWO (Charity) established by the Tory Government provides for the NUM to have only 8 percent of the votes, compared with 50 percent as under the original scheme.

One of the central features insisted upon by the Department of Trade and Industry was that monies held in Area Welfare Trusts/Schemes must now be used to pay for up to 50 percent of any project which had previously been paid for by CISWO in full.

The recent Charity Commissioners’ decision to suspend me as a Trustee and Chairman of the Yorkshire Miners’ Welfare Trust Fund and Yorkshire Miners’ Welfare Convalescent Homes was taken because the Trustees in the Yorkshire Miners’ Welfare Trust Fund exercised their collective right as Trustees to make a grant to the Convalescent Homes’ Fund – thereby guaranteeing that the Yorkshire Convalescent Homes would be maintained and kept safe in perpetuity.

This Conference has every right to demand that the undertaking given in recent years by the Labour Party leadership to restore CISWO to its rightful state should be honoured.

PIT CLOSURES/MANPOWER LEVELS

Britain needs an expanding, developing coal industry, producing coal for use with the clean-coal technology that now exists. At least 50 percent of Britain’s energy needs could and should be met within a relatively short time by British deep-mined coal.

Such a programme would require the production of at least 150 million tonnes of coal per year, a target that is entirely feasible – provided there is the economic good sense and the will to do it.

There should be an immediate stop to further pit closures or job losses in our industry. Coalfields which have been destroyed must be reopened. There are millions of tonnes of valuable coal in Durham, Northumberland, Cumbria, South Wales, Scotland, Somerset, Kent, Lancashire and – of course, in the Midlands and Yorkshire.

These massive reserves – well over 1,000 years' worth – must be properly used on the basis of deep mining techniques, with no opencasting or coal imports allowed.

One thing we must bear in mind, however, is that the demands of international capitalism have little time for us or any other workers. Our rights are of no concern to multi-national millionaires. Private profit, taken as quickly as possible, is what counts with them.

Nor has international capitalism any environmental concerns. The shambles at the reconvened Earth Summit a couple of weeks ago proved that.

If elected politicians cannot take responsibility for fighting unemployment, injustice and global pollution, then, increasingly, trade unionists must be drawn into struggle side by side with ecological campaigners in Britain and throughout the world, to fight not only for a sane and just society, but for the future of the planet itself.

It is a responsibility we must be willing to take on, whilst campaigning for governments to share that responsibility with us, the people.

CONCLUSION

This is my 25th year as a full-time Official of the National Union of Mineworkers, and I believe it is timely that I conclude my Presidential address by reminding members of the objectives which are the centrepiece of our Rule Book.

Our Union is committed by its Constitution:

'To seek and secure the establishment of common ownership and control by the workers of their industries and of the means of production, distribution and exchange generally, with a view to the complete abolition of capitalism'

All our Officials, mining MPs, local Councillors and members should remember that this central demand was inserted in our Rule Book by our forebears because they recognised that no matter what demands were made or achieved, the only solution to the injustice and inequality in our society was the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by Socialism.

That solution, that goal, is today more imperative than ever, not only for miners but for all trade unionists, here in Britain and throughout the world. *(Applause)*