

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE PRESIDENT: Chairman, colleagues. It now falls upon me to deliver a Presidential Address and I hope that in the course of this, one or two subjects will be at least illuminating.

Twenty years ago I delivered my first Presidential Address to Conference. A great deal has changed since that time but the basic truth about the coal industry, our economy and our society remains the same.

In that first Address I outlined the issues I believe were the priorities for our Union. I said the first priority was to stop pit closures and job losses. I warned that we must protect Britain's nationalised coal industry from the ravages of the market and the deliberate political decisions of that Government – at that time, Thatcher's Tory Government – that they were taking to destroy our collieries, miners' jobs and our communities.

I warned Conference that if we did not save pits from closure, then all our other struggles would become meaningless. A contracting industry is a negative force. As it shrinks, there are negative consequences, not just for those who work in it but for their families and communities and on local economies and on society as a whole.

Our members today know how prophetic that warning was.

I argued no pits should be closed other than on the grounds of exhaustion or safety but I warned that the Tories had a pit closure programme as well as privatisation lurking in the wings.

I was not plucking statistics from the air when I made that prediction and nor am I a clairvoyant. I based my warning on a leaked National Coal Board document which I had received from the very top of the Board's management.

I also based it on the National Coal Board's submission to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, a submission which had also been passed to me by a senior Coal Board member.

My warnings about the future were also based upon the past – in particular the attacks on our industry in the 1960s, a period when many in the Labour Party accepted an argument about 'cheap oil; from the Middle East and at a time when, tragically, the leadership of our Union acquiesced to the most savage butchery our industry had ever endured.

During that time, 500 pits were closed and half a million jobs were lost, whilst miners' wages fell from first in the wages league to 23rd place. Working conditions

became worse and the closures brought widespread demoralisation with a mass exodus from the industry and, for those who stayed, migration to other coalfields.

I made it clear then and I have not wavered since, that under no circumstances would I countenance a closure programme or accept or be a party to redundancy arrangements.

I could foresee the trouble ahead of us. I believed that there would have to be a fight and that that fight was not just industrial, it was political as well.

Within one year of my 1982 Presidential Address, 12,000 jobs had been lost in our industry. In June, 1983, the Coal Board announced plans to take 25 million tonnes of capacity out of the industry, ironically as the Selby coalfield came on-stream. The Government and the Coal Board were making clear their aim – despite denials – of closing 70 pits and axing 70,000 jobs.

The Government and the Coal Board were acting in open violation of the Plan for Coal, agreed between the Government, the Coal Board and the mining unions in 1974, reaffirmed in 1977 and reaffirmed by the Tory Government as recently as 1981.

The Tories had been persuaded to do so in 1981 because Britain's miners had taken strike action against the threat of closures – without a ballot and without even a Conference. The 1981 dispute is perhaps forgotten today, but it was a shining example of unity in action in defence of jobs and against pit closures. The result of our action was that the Tory Government pulled away – albeit on a temporary basis – from a head-on confrontation with Britain's miners; with our unity there was no doubt we could win.

I want to digress for a moment and point out that those who later attacked our Union because our great strike in 1984/85 did not start with a ballot apparently forgot the basic principles of trade unionism; that an injury to one is an injury to all. Those critics – which sadly included some trade union officials – may have genuinely fallen for the propaganda of the State.

The real reason that they condemned us for not holding a national ballot in 1984 was not about democracy. It was because they wanted an excuse not to support the NUM and to support the strike.

On the 1st November, 1983 – not 1984 – Britain's miners had begun industrial action to prevent further pit closures, job losses and at the same time, demand a substantial increase in wages with a full overtime ban. In essence, a partial strike, which saw production slump by 30 per cent. Pundits, historians and the media by and large have ignored this part – this important part – of the miners' dispute, which ran from November, 1983 to March, 1985 and involved all areas in the industrial action, including Nottingham and, more important, included them without a ballot.

In other words, the historic dispute began not in 1984 but on the 1st November, 1983 and no-one at that time argued for an individual national ballot vote.

We put the case for coal in a comprehensive, wide-ranging way and stayed true to the Union's basic aims. We called for an end to nuclear power, coal imports and opencast mining. We called for investment in liquefaction technology and all

alternative uses of the rich coal reserves – hundreds of years' worth – that lie beneath the ground in these British isles.

We were already putting the environmental case for 'clean coal', pointing out that power stations could be equipped in order to prevent pollution, basing our arguments on the expert scientific work carried out through the Coal Board's own research projects.

Our case for coal looked ahead to the future, while stressing that there were social and human needs that never changed – the needs of families and of communities. We pointed out our local economies depended upon coal and the pits to keep them alive and flourishing.

As part of our case for coal, we warned about the effect of pit closures on communities and we have been proved tragically correct.

We were forced to move from an overtime ban – which was extremely successful – into strike action four months later, in 1984. It is worth recalling in 2002 that it was the Coal Board backed by the Tory Government who suddenly announced an intention to close five pits – Cortonwood and Bulcliffe Wood in Yorkshire, Herrington in County Durham, Polmaise in Scotland and Snowdon in Kent – without one reference to the established practices in the mining industry.

That announcement was in contravention of the agreement which had allowed, for years, the Union to present a case against closure up to and including a final appeal hearing.

It was in the light of this provocation that the National Executive Committee agreed to requests from Yorkshire and Scotland for permission to take strike action on an Area basis and, the following week, the historic strike began.

It is now well documented that the Union and its leadership were taken to Court for describing the strike action as 'official'. Thousands of words have been written about those Court hearings, which led to the Union having its funds sequestered and later – because it refused to accept the decision – being placed for the first time into the hands of a Receiver.

However, virtually nothing has been written about the Scottish High Court decision which accepted that the strike on an Area basis was legal and that the Scottish Area, it ruled, was entitled to call out its members provided it had permission from the NEC.

What made these two conflicting High Court decisions even more bizarre was the ruling in the English High Court that the 80 per cent vote for strike action which had been taken in Yorkshire in 1981 was, "out of date".

Yet, the same Government who were behind the moves to put our Union into Court was elected two years earlier than the strike ballot in 1979. In other words, it was legal for a Government elected in 1979 without any mandate to rule illegal a ballot taken in 1981. You can get no better description than that of how the State can deliberately intervene.

Because we were living under a Tory Government, there was no confusion or ambiguity about the nature of the struggle that we commenced. We were fighting on basic trade union issues and one of those issues was nationalisation itself.

As the Labour Party's Energy Spokesman, Stan Orme, told our Conference in July, 1984, "This dispute is about jobs now and in the future, about saving communities from destruction and about saving a precious industry... The Government keep turning their eyes on privatisation in your industry ... don't think you are excluded."

He said, "Britain needs every tonne of coal and every miner to dig that coal. That is the aim we share."

At that time, many leading Labour Party figures were happy to come on to our platforms and to speak in support of our struggle. We will never and can never forget the incredible generosity of donations that poured in from trade unions and organisations and from working people not just here in Britain but from around the world, who gave so much to ensure that our members and their families who were out on strike and being denied welfare benefit, could eat and survive.

That generosity and support was vital and in sharp contrast to the strike-breaking organised by those both inside and outside the mining industry – those who later supported the formation of the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers, the UDM.

It was also, comrades, in sharp contrast to the actions of the pit deputies' union, NACODS, who did hold an individual ballot in the autumn of 1984, when they secured a vote of over 80 per cent for strike action.

It is right, it is proper that I relate here today that inexplicably and still unexplained to this very day, the NACODS leadership refused to implement that ballot vote and withdrew from an agreement they reached with the NUM at ACAS – an agreement that I know would have led to total victory for the miners of Britain.

The Tory Government and the Coal Board were let off the hook by that unexplained NACODS decision. As a result the course of history was profoundly affected.

However, it is not just the actions of the NACODS leadership which deserves to be criticised and, more important, demands an explanation. The role of the TUC and the leaderships of many affiliated trade unions was openly hostile and, in some cases, their leaders collaborated with the State and the employer against the National Union of Mineworkers and its members.

It is vital that 18 years later and after all that has happened, we understand the history and take to heart the lessons of the past at a time when, once again, we are facing the threat of pit closures and job losses, particularly in the Selby coalfield – the very coalfield that was being used as an excuse for closing down pits almost 20 years previously. Selby even today has enough coal reserves to last for at least another 75 years, yet it is now facing closure and, once again, as in the 1960s, the Labour Government apparently does nothing.

I believe in fighting for the future, not passively accepting the blows that the forces of opposition and oppression and capitalism decide to inflict upon us.

However, in order to equip yourselves to fight for the future – for our industry, for our Union and for our devastated communities – we must learn from and understand the lessons that our past has taught us.

The Union's three National Officials – Michael McGahey, Peter Heathfield and myself – were opposed to the decision taken by the Union Conference on March 3rd, 1985, to end the strike by returning to work without a negotiated settlement.

In a meeting we had with them just 18 months later, Mick McGahey told the South Wales NUM Executive Committee that he still felt that the decision had been a mistake and all three National Officials still believed the strike should have gone on. In the wake of the decision to return to work without an agreement, the Coal Board began the butchery of our industry.

At our Conference in 1985, I warned that the Coal Board and the Government intended reducing manpower even further, cutting the industry down to 70 pits with a manpower of 70,000. In other words, the latest tranche of their plan would mean 100 pit closures and the loss of 100,000 jobs.

By 1987 it had been made clear by the Coal Board – by that time known as British Coal – that they intended to continue the slaughter, with more closures, that would by 1992 leave our industry, our economy and our society with no more than 30 pits and 30,000 miners.

In 1992, only three months before the Tories launched their closure programme and their closure bloodbath, I warned Conference that the Government's objective was to reduce the mining industry to no more than 15 major collieries with a manpower of around 10,000 and this, indeed, is what has taken place. Many pundits have said and still say I underestimated the closure plan: today I am demonstrating that my predictions – based on facts, not assumption – were spot on.

All our Union's warnings over the past two decades have tragically come true, yet the culling of our industry, with its terrible social and economic consequences, could have been prevented. It could have been stopped – like the butchery of other vital sectors of Britain's industrial manufacturing base.

What has been done to coal and to the miners has also been done to steel, to engineering, to car manufacturing, to textiles, to fisheries and, most recently, to farming. As a consequence of deliberate 'free-market' policies pursued for nearly 20 years by the Tory Government and now still pursued just as savagely by the New Labour Government, Britain is no longer a nation that produces the goods on which society depends.

Alongside the destruction of industries has gone a ruthless privatisation programme that has wiped out even more jobs and forced workers to accept low pay and poor conditions.

It is highly significant that less than 25 years ago manufacturing industry formed 80 per cent of Britain's economy, with only 20 per cent based in service industries. Today in our country, we see only 19 per cent of its economy based in manufacturing whilst we now have 81 per cent based in the service sector. It is little wonder that pensions, social services, health care and education are all under attack.

You only need an ENRON collapse or a World.Com collapse to see the reverberations that shatter through the economy, not just of the United States but throughout the industrialised world.

By 1982 the Government was already rattling the shackles of anti-trade union legislation and it was clear the achievements of our aims and hopes depended on one extremely important factor – the ability of the trade union movement to retain freedom of action.

I warned at that time, “A trade union movement shackled by Tory legislation becomes emasculated ... a free, independent trade union is essential to protect democracy against the authoritarianism of capitalism... History is littered with examples of governments who wanted to crush civil liberties and, in order to do this, destroyed in the first instance effective trade unionism.”

I urged our members to fight not only for themselves but to support other sections of the working class and committed myself to fight to ensure that no government, no law, no Court, no Judge, would compel our Union to do otherwise. I have kept my promise. I have not accepted the Tory Government or New Labour Government trade union legislation. I am still in contempt of Court from 1984 because I refused to accept an unjust law and I have never complied with legislation governing the election of trade union officials because my Rule Book and this Conference determine the policy and not a High Court Judge.

Shortly after I took office as National President in 1982, I attended a special TUC Conference at Wembley. At this Conference, union after union pledged to defy trade union legislation introduced by the Tory Government and many, including people like Bassnet and even Frank Chappell were saying they would face jail rather than accept the legislation. The thought of sharing a cell with Frank Chappell nearly made me change my mind but in the aftermath I knew at least I would keep my word, even if he did not keep his.

We were dealing with an Act that flew in the face of the United Nations Charter and ILO Conventions.

Yet today, 20 years later, on the National Union of Mineworkers and its leadership, many in Areas, have defied unfair and unjust legislation. I am still in contempt of Court because I accepted my union Conference's decision rather than a decision of a High Court Judge. In doing that, I followed a long line of heroic figures in the miners' union stretching back almost two centuries.

I refused to comply with trade union legislation as far as the election of officials was concerned. I demonstrated that it was possible to defy an unfair law and to retain dignity and, above all, retain one's principles.

Thanks to the framework of the anti-union laws created by the Tories and now kept in place by new Labour, workers today have been robbed of trade union rights to an extent that 20 years ago the Labour movement would have thought impossible.

This in itself should not deflect you, as delegates to this Conference. It is up to you to determine our Union's policies in the period ahead. I would urge you to stand by basic principles and to remember that trade unionism itself is built and was built on principle. Without principle, there would have been no trade union movement.

Trade unionism is about far more than self-interest. Down the centuries as workers have been exploited and oppressed, it has far too often seemed easier to give in rather than to fight back against the bosses and the ruling class.

Let me say this. There is always a tendency when the forces of the State are ranged against us, to turn inward and attack each other instead of recognising that we ought to be as one body turning outward and attacking a common enemy.

Think how long it took human beings to establish trade unions in the first place, the many hardships our forebears have endured ever since, in fighting for what even the United Nations recognises as basic human rights.

There are basic principles I want to reiterate today and issues of self-interest that are also issues of great social and economic importance.

It is against this background that I urge the NUM to regenerate the fight to defend our industry against further pit closures and job losses and instead demand an expanding and developing coal industry. In Yorkshire today, even businesses and services brace themselves for what will happen to the local economy as a result of the UK Coal's senseless closure of the Prince of Wales Colliery.

This was a pit which showed a profit each year in the past five years and which should have had a secure long term future. Indeed, even the Boyd Report in 1993 described this pit as a long life colliery. I am sorry that there has not been a fight back, including industrial action, started at local level against this wanton vandalism.

Make no mistake – Britain still needs coal. The closure programme of the Tories and the pro-nuclear, pro-oil and gas strategy of New Labour, have both been based on class politics, not on anything resembling a sensible, integrated energy policy.

Nuclear power is proven to be deadly expensive and deadly dangerous. The current Government's 'dash for gas' strategy is appallingly short-sighted. Thanks to the market's use of gas and oil to produce energy, Britain's own gas reserves will effectively be gone in ten years' time. Only this week, energy companies have announced plans to import more than £8 billion-worth of gas to prevent shortages in Britain over the next couple of years.

Coal imports are horrendously expensive, costing Britain's taxpayers over £2 billion a year on our Balance of Payments. Opencast mining is an environmental nightmare yet the current Government, like the Tories before them, are set against indigenous deep mine coal. They would rather squander £10 billion a year on gas and coal imports than invest a fraction of that amount on a British publicly owned deep mine coal industry.

I hope the NUM will choose to fight against further senseless closures and fight for an integrated energy policy that brings stability, economic and social benefit to all people and communities in Britain.

I hope the Union will connect the fight against closures with the fight to restore our industry – and all others – to public ownership and fight for true public control and accountability of all industries and services.

Once again, as in the 1960s, Britain's miners have seen their wages, particularly basic pay, fall dramatically when compared with workers in other industries.

At the same time, we see the coal owners trying to increase working hours to ten hour shifts whilst other industries are seeing a shorter working day and a shorter working week.

To restore the relative value of a mineworkers' basic wage in relation to wages being paid to Deputies, Britain's miners need a basic wage for coal face workers of £500 a week – I am talking about a basic wage – elsewhere underground, £461 per week and for surface workers, £407 and £346 respectively.

These rates are not exorbitant. They are realistic and realisable provided the Union is prepared to fight for them.

At the same time, our Union should be demanding the immediate introduction of a 35 hour week for surface workers and a 30 hour week for those who work underground. These hours, which should be worked between Monday and Friday, would not only put miners on par with other workers but would fulfil the Sankey Commission recommendation promised as long ago as 1919.

Here in Britain, working people have suffered as a result of events around the world. The collapse of the former Soviet Union, the extension of global capitalism into former Socialist countries and its introduction into China has meant that privatisation has tightened its stranglehold on societies around the globe, with unemployment, poverty and injustice on the increase everywhere. I hope the NUM will truly fight for public ownership and control.

I also hope that as trade unionists you continue to abide by our Union's policy of refusing to sit down with the breakaway UDM.

Remember, the people who founded this renegade organisation deliberately sabotaged our strike in 1984 and 1985. They sold themselves to the Tories for a handful of silver as our heroic colleagues in Nottinghamshire know only too well.

I hope that the Union will keep on fighting – indeed, it must – to secure justice for our colleagues who were sacked and victimised by the Coal Board and the Government as a result of alleged actions during and arising from the 1984/85 miners' dispute.

Our Union has worked alongside the Justice for Mineworkers Campaign to secure for victimised miners the pensions they would have received had they not been sacked. In the wake of the 1972 and 1974 strikes, no mineworkers were penalised.

The 1985 Labour Party Conference adopted a resolution which no doubt New Labour's current leadership would perhaps prefer to forget but it is there on the record. This resolution gave support to our Union's fight against pit closures. It paid tribute to all those who had been involved in the 1984/85 miners' strike. It recognised that the NUM had been the 'subject of a concerted and vicious attack by the whole power of the State' and it called upon the next Labour Government to provide a complete review of all cases of miners jailed as a result of the strike and, secondly, to reinstate miners sacked for activities arising out of the strike or during the strike itself. Not some of them, not part of them but all of them.

The late John Smith, the Labour Party Leader, told the NUM leadership in 1992 that the next Labour Government would reinstate all miners sacked during or after the 1984/85 strike and it promised that all mineworkers who had been sacked would have been had it not been for their sacking.

Tony Blair, at the end of 1994 promised in writing to restore all pension benefits lost for sacked mineworkers subject only to the agreement of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme Trustees.

The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, in his speech to the 1999 Durham Miners' Gala, confirmed that all sacked miners would be paid their pensions in full.

Only last year the then Energy Minister, Peter Hain, told the NUM he would do his best to resolve this issue as quickly as possible on the basis that pensions would be restored in full for the period of loss.

Yet today as I address this Conference, we now see the shameful policy of the current Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, to dramatically curtail any measure of justice for our victimised colleagues. What he has offered is a complete insult, not just to them but to the NUM as a whole.

I hope and I believe the NUM will not let this matter rest. These men fought not just for themselves and their families – they put themselves on the line for the Union and for all of us in here today.

Other issues of vital importance will be discussed during the debates at this Conference but in presenting this, my last Presidential Address, I urge members never to forget the reason our Union and our industry came under attack as no other trade union in British history before.

The National Union of Mineworkers has been a symbol of working class resistance to age-old tyranny and oppression.

The passion against injustice that sparked the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and inspired the Diggers to argue for common ownership in 1648 in the midst of the English Civil War, runs like a thread through workers' history.

It is the same passion which three times in the past 30 years – in 1972, in 1974 and in 1984 – led our members to fight not just for themselves but for all trade unionists everywhere. I hope all our members are proud of that connection and that they will protect and continue to fight for it.

It has been a privilege to be your President. *(Applause)*