

TUC INTERVIEWS **HUGH SCANLON**

Hugh Scanlon was one of the most prominent Trade Unionists of the 1970s and 80s. He now lives in Broadstairs on the Kent coast and we went to his house there to talk to him.

Well I went into factory on my fourteenth birthday and then you had a little boy of 14 in a vast building which terrified me, 50 ton cranes overhead and thousands of work people and that's not an exaggeration. All under one large roof. And it truly was awe inspiring to a young boy but life developed and as you got used to factory life it became more interesting. In those days your first two years were spent in running errands and brewing tea and you started your apprenticeship, if you got good reports from those two years.

What was the factory, what kind - what did it make, what was it -

Literally everything from heavy engineering to delicate instruments.

And where was this?

This was at Metropolitan Vickers in Trafford Park Manchester.

Yes

And they were light years ahead in their training programme. In general apprenticeship could become a means of cheap labour to get other work done by paying less wages but Metrovicks had a training scheme with instructors with half days off each week to learn the theory of your apprenticeship as well as a the practical. But not only that they went into social activities. From somebody who 'd spent his early boyhood delivering newspapers and delivering bread it opened up a new field of activity, cycling, swimming, gymnasium and all in all the apprenticeship was quite an adventure.

And were you able to go in the Union then?

I think that the thing that made me become interested - remember we 're talking about the first twelve months after the general strike. Now men were still afraid of victimisation if you joined a union but the economic situation was such that men even if they were allowed to work could only work two weeks out of three and in those days if you were out of work you starved, there was very little state assistance.

Literally starved?

Literally starved. The alternative was to go before the means test which of itself was quite a gruelling experience and so when the third week came round you 'd see men break down and cry, grown men, and to a youngster you had the impression there must be a better way of doing things than this and although one lived through the slump and the world disaster of 1929 it wasn 't long after that before the re-armament took place for the preparation for the first world war -

Second world war -

I'm sorry, second world war.

Yes.

So that it was the bitter experience of seeing these things happen that made me become interested in Trade Unions. But there was also the need to not only condemn what was happening but to find an alternative, a constructive alternative. And so myself and my pal who's still my pal after 70 years' association, we joined the National Council of Labour Colleges and we used to walk from Stretford which is a suburb of Manchester to Flixton which is another suburb which is about five or six miles, we used to walk to Flixton to attend courses of the National Council of Labour Colleges. These things seem quite unorthodox today but in those days people were looking for alternatives, some went to the extreme right, some went to the extreme left, others tried to find a middle course. For myself I took the left route and don't regret it at all.

You joined the Communist party?

I joined the Communist party much later - I was out of my time when I joined the Communist party. Really what made me join it was that it seemed to be the only body that was prepared to fight against Franco and whilst the Labour party made gestures, it really was coming to terms with not a civil war but a war of intervention and initially the Labour party had a battalion named after Attlee, Clement Attlee, but when he became rather lukewarm as the battle became more serious I felt that something must be done to try and bring about the defeat of Franco. Now there were different alternatives. The Communist party wanted some to go to Spain and fight and it wanted others to prepare the means for fighting and for me it took the form of repairing and modifying motorbikes with sidecars to be used as ambulances in Spain. It was not as high-powered as joining - going to Spain, but at least I convinced myself it was something worthwhile.

Now you - talk about you and your pal, who was that?

He's David Whitehead who was about six months older than I but was equally serving his time as an instrument maker.

And you worked together at Vickers did you?

We worked together in what was known as meter department which did all types of instruments, we were both apprenticed to the Trade of Instrument Maker. His father was a foreman so he had a much smoother life than I had with part-time work of delivering papers and bread. I say that because it became more hard for him to change his lifestyle and join the Communist party than it did for me. If you like the very hardships of early life was a breeding ground for the Communist party but in the case of Dave he'd had a relatively prosperous time as a boy but he did join with me at the same time and he left with me when the time came.

Well before we get to that, the idea of grown men crying on the third week is a very vivid - that actually happened? I mean men would stand there with tears running down their face?

In sheer desperation, they would try and cloak it but it was there for everybody to see.

And the Union couldn't do anything to help them?

The Union was still suffering from the aftermath of the general strike which however much people try and portray it as a compromise was an astounding defeat for the Trade Union movement. And so the Trade Unions, whilst they were relatively important factors, could do little in replenishing the economy, very little could they do. That only came about when the re-armament started for the second world war.

And this was the AEU was it? At that time? That you were a member of?

Yes. It had many names, the ASE was the original body, the AEU was the name afterwards. Then when we amalgamated with the foundry workers it became the AEF and then other unions joined us and the latest one of course was the ETU in which we now become know as the EEPTU.

And you were local official and a branch official and worked your way up that ladder did you?

No, it became not a local official, well not a local full-time official, I became a shop steward at the age of 21 which was the time that you finish your time. And I became a member of the District Committee which involved attending the meetings of the district and reporting to the branches of the activities of the district. So there was plenty of experience but not as a full-time official, it wasn't until 1947 that I contested and successfully contested the - not the vacancy, the termination of the period of office for that particular job.

And you became then what?

Divisional organiser, which is the highest grade of the local officials.

And that was a full time job was it?

That was a full time job.

So it meant you leaving Vickers and -

After twenty years.

After twenty years -

And they didn't even say goodbye.

You didn't get a gold watch?

No gold watch, no pension, nothing.

Were they hostile then to you for being a union official or they just didn't care?

I'd like to think they were glad they were getting rid of me but it's churlish of me to complain about no recognition when you left because they'd given me many happy years of my apprenticeship with all that I've previously described. So whilst it was delightful in one sense that I'd achieved the status of full time official it was also tinged with a little regret at leaving all the activities that I've described.

And this was what year? '47 did you say?

This was 1947 yes.

Yes. And of course we'd had the war in that intervening period. What had you done in that?

Well during the war period or more particularly during the war period after the invasion by Hitler of the Soviet Union, I think we broke more strikes than we made because everything was secondary to the defeat of Hitler and so we became involved in production committees, in committees dealing lateness, people that were permanently or continuously being late or absent and working hours that were quite outrageous. The working hours would be 7.30 in the morning until 9 o'clock at night.

Good gracious!

And you would have one weekend off in a month.

They really worked you didn't they?

Well it became counter-productive, people were going down with illness, genuine illness because of their low state of health brought about by the long hours that we were working and anxious to work because it was all part of the battle to defeat Hitler.

Yes. But you only became enthusiastic about the war after the Soviet Union was involved?

That's right.

Up to that point you presumably felt it was a capitalist war and were against it?

Yes that's - I always thought that Harry Pollit's approach to the question was the correct one, which was a war on two fronts, one to beat the capitalist system at home and the other to defeat Hitler abroad. But it didn't prevail, it was completely opposed one time and then as soon as the invasion took place, the invasion of the

Soviet Union, a complete switch to not just support but enthusiastic massive support for the defeat of Hitler and any steps that could bring that about would be justifiable.

You must have been acting on the second front movement as well.

Very much so.

And so after the war, what was your break with the Communist party, what made you break with them?

It was the developments in Korea.

Why did that make you go?

Well I felt that every day that we could prevent war breaking out was a strengthening of the peace forces and for the North Koreans to declare war under the pretext that they were likely to be invaded seemed to be to be putting things completely on their head. I tried to argue but the line was there and so we 'd no alternative, well not if you were trying to get an honest assessment of the position, you 'd two alternatives. One to accept the line even though you had reservations or to come out of the party and I chose the latter.

It must have been a very difficult decision, to come away from the party after being committed for so long.

It was indeed and what was even more difficult was the party had helped me so much to become a full time official and -

Yes - there must have been great talk of betrayal.

Very much so, not so much - well yes betrayal is probably as good a word as any. Certainly suspicion of utilisation but I think that as I didn 't do what many did subsequently, that is turn against the Communist party, I still saw much to their credit in the activities that they undertook and the general philosophy.

So you remained a Marxist you felt?

I did indeed.

And you still do?

I still have the basic belief in Marxism yes.

But it freed you to have a wider constituency I imagine in your union work once you were out of the party, the people who weren 't in the party must have regarded you as more approachable. Did that happen? Did you find that it helped your union activity not to be in the party? Or did it work against you?

In those days I think it worked - it worked for you, by that I mean the general philosophy was there is a basis within the capitalist system which says there is a

fundamental difference between capital and labour. That difference is fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable. You notice I say capital and labour and not management and worker.

Yes -

So you could carry on your negotiations to the best of your ability and try and get the best settlement possible but it did not preclude the fundamental believe that there is this irreconcilable conflict. Now I hope that doesn't sound too tortuous but that's the general approach that was made by myself in those days and which I think justified not only my leaving the party but the attitude that I adopted having left.

No the fight to become the President of the AEU, that must have been an enormous battle.

It was preceded by a battle for the Executive.

Yes, just to get on to the Executive?

Just to get on to the Executive. Because in the AEU it was a full time Executive, it wasn't a lay Executive -

I see

And it had the whole power ingrained in the Executive, in other words there couldn't be any strike, not officially, there couldn't be any investments, there couldn't be any activity whatsoever without the approval of the Executive.

Yes so they were all important.

Yes and it was practically unknown that anybody could become the President without being a member of the Executive.

Yes so first you had to get on to the Executive.

Executive. And -

That was a real battle was it?

That was a real battle. That was a battle in which having twice won the election, by that I mean securing more votes than the opponent, I was told that I'd used undue influence, whatever that might be, in securing the victory and therefore it was cancelled. I tried to find alternative ways of resisting such a decision, gave consideration to going to what we called our Final Appeal Court but because of the time lag I felt it was necessary to challenge the matter in the courts. I didn't realise then just how difficult that was going to be. And I sought the advice of colleagues, some of whom were not in favour of going to the courts, and I also took advice from legal people. It culminated in a barrister saying that he'd gone through the papers and I couldn't lose. The day before the hearing came up he told me I couldn't win. And these are the vagaries of the law.

So did you win or did you lose in the end?

I lost. And the - I had received legal advice, or legal assistance and it's very rare that damages are awarded against anybody who's got legal assistance, mainly because they've got - there's no money in any case, which I hadn't. But so vicious was the opposition to myself by the Executive and in the main by the then President that I had deducted out of my salary I think it was £2 a week to repay the costs, it couldn't start to repay the costs, but it was a means of using that to give me further punishment. But -

And yet you managed quite soon afterwards to get elected didn't you?

Every time the Executive took steps to either disqualify me or punish me it resulted in greater votes for myself in the election when it took place.

Well who was voting for you - not the Communists and not the right wingers, but there were a large enough number of people who were progressive about being Communist to rally round you were there?

We're still talking about the election to the Executive -

Yes.

In the area, the North West which was the area covered by the Executive seat, I think you're right. When it came to contesting the Presidency there was a different scenario. But you're correct in that there were sufficient people who were progressive enough and disillusioned enough with the current Executive that they voted for me and successfully voted for me.

And the day you walked into the Executive they must have - you must have got some pretty strong frowns from all the other members.

I walked into an empty office, I couldn't tell you how isolated you felt and all in all life was once again rather difficult but the knowledge that I'd got a good base back in the North West was sufficient to see me through.

They just ostracised you did they? Inside the -

Yes but it's a clever way, there was no question of interfering with my duties but there was no social relationship or anything.

You must have felt very isolated.

Yes but as time went on different seats fell to either Communist party members or progressives and gradually the hostility of the right was reduced as the strength of the left increased.

And that increased enough for you to eventually become President.

Yes. This again was one of the contradictions that one meets in life. Joe Scott who was a Communist member of the Executive had unsuccessfully challenged for the General Secretaryship when Ben Gardiner was - died at a relatively young age. And they'd always had their own nomination. Now the one person who was a Communist member on the Executive was Roger Birch. But he was quite a controversial figure even within the Communist party and as perhaps you know he eventually set up his own party based on Chinese lines. He was the expected nominee of the Communist party but his behaviour was such that in the end they decided not to support him and to support me and whilst it wasn't the major factor, it was a very important factor in getting me elected as President.

So you became President and that started a period of militancy from the Trade Union movement that up to then hadn't been as militant I imagine as you and Jack Jones made it become. Is that a fair assessment?

There'd always been a voted majority for right wing policies, both on the TUC General Council and on the Executive of the Engineers. To some extent the process started with Frank Cousins being elected as General Secretary of the T&G. It followed when - it continued when Jack Jones followed Frank Cousins and when I was elected the President of the AEU.

And you and Jack Jones were demonised by the press as the terrible twins I remember.

Yes I don't know where these carefully rehearsed impromptus come from but the media has the knack of doing it. Perhaps the contradiction of that is Harold Wilson's famous remark about get your tanks off my lawn Hughie.

Yes

But they serve a purpose. And one gets the publicity that one wouldn't get otherwise.

What was the origin of that remark? What was the story about those so-called tanks of yours?

We were at Chequers seeking to find solutions to the whole matter which eventually resulted in place of strife and all the aftermath of that, the defeat of that. And Harold's remarks were how to express the need for a solution as against the attitude that we were adopting in opposition to any such deal. So Harold had a knack of making these throwaway lines, a week is a long time in politics is a typical example. So I think it was born as a result of that knack that Harold had.

And how did it leak out to the press as it were, that he said it?

How does anything leak out to the press? Some are contrived, some are genuine. Who said what, all I can say is it wasn't me that said it to the press.

No. But it became very famous and helped to demonise you and at one point I believe you had to have police protection is that right?

I had it on any journeys away from home for a considerable time. But not only that my family suffered, my wife or daughter would be answering the phone only to hear heavy breathing or threats which is not a very nice thing when you're spending most of your time away from home.

And did it affect you?

I think the home aspect of it did but there's something a bit grandiose about being escorted by the police.

You quite liked it really did you?

I wouldn't say I liked it but I certainly tolerated it.

It must be very strange to find that you're a demon king when you open up a newspaper, when you know that all you're doing is trying to get the best deal for the people who've sent you to an Executive.

Of all the disputes that one's been involved in, I've never known one when the press has come out straightforwardly and said the unions have got a justifiable case. We would always be underdog that was determined to wreck the country etc. etc. And you got to learn to live with that.

And yet there was great respect for the unions as well, I think they earned their respect don't you?

Well a new phenomena arose in the relationship of the trade unions with the general public. Previously if a dispute arose at Fords or Rover or General Engineering, the only people that suffered were the families of the people on strike and for the rest of the country it made a headline in the paper but it didn't have any effect upon them other than that. But when the strikes started developing, like air strikes when people couldn't get away on holidays or bus strikes and train strikes when they couldn't get to work, or even when they couldn't get their bins emptied, and some even to the extent of not being able to or allegedly not being able to bury their dead, then the public was actually involved and part of that dispute because they were suffering the effects of it and this became a much greater platform for attacking the trade unions than on the parochial disputes of the engineering industry.

But did you deliberately like to find issues which involved the public in order to bring home to them the necessity for better conditions and wages for the workers?

No only because the issue of whether there's a strike by those workers that affect the public is a matter for those unions, we were not involved as a union, we got part of the stick but we were not, and I was not actually involved in those things. If I was involved in anything it was in the discussions as to whether or not Jim Callahan

should go for an early election or a later election and I always felt that some of those disputes which gave Maggie her platform and was the basis of her eventual success, that they could have held their hands until after the election because Maggie, astute as she was, I should call her Lady Thatcher but er -

Maggie will do -

So long as people know which Maggie it is and not Maggie May. She won the election on the basis of saying she would not eliminate the Trade Unions which she proceeded to do.

I beg your pardon?

Which she proceeded to do. A combination of unemployment, because she very quickly realised that the only people really determined to do anything about the unemployed are the unemployed. She had the unemployed weapon, she had a vicious anti-trade union legislation and she had the determination to switch from taxing for social benefits or saving those social benefits in order to give income tax cuts to the very rich. So all in all everything was in favour of her by an early election and provided the basis for her eventual victory.

Now before we get to her we really should talk about in place of strife which you were always opposed to.

Yes but it was more a question of general philosophy than being particular about in place of strife.

Well set up the scene for that, in place of strife. Tell us how it came about and what the philosophy was that you were opposed to.

Well dealing with it in the reverse order, the general attitude of the trade union movement has always been keep the law out of collective bargaining and industrial relations. It's too complex a world, it's too involved. It can be affected by a man having a row with his wife before he comes out to work. It's so tenuous. So it was not just in place of strife it was the whole idea that the government should be involved in the relationship between employer and trade union. Of course that was portrayed as arrogance on our part. But it was not, it was a philosophy that we believe was the correct alternative to the involvement of government.

But Callahan, Wilson - well perhaps not so much Callahan but Wilson and Barbara Castle felt that the government had to be involved did they?

Yes, and not only that they actually believed that they were giving us some advantages. They thought that for instance that there would be some recognition, official recognition of the trade unions because in all this - now I may be straying again a little, but in all this trade unions are only recognised by employers when they're strong enough to compel that recognition. So she was not giving us anything, she was in fact to some extent hindering. If employers had a legal framework into which they could go, it could only prolong and delay disputes

whereas a properly negotiated procedure between employers and trade unions is not only highly desirable, it's highly effective.

And the fight became very bitter between you, between Barbara Castle and yourself?

Yes I think it was bitter but I don't - one's always wondering whether, looking back in retrospect, you're conditioned by the knowledge that Barbara wasn't a tenth as objectionable as Maggie was over the 18 years. And you look back and you say well maybe she did have something, Barbara I mean when we know what has gone on subsequent to Barbara.

That's interesting that today you can see her rather more kindly than you did at the time.

Well I suppose a combination of circumstances and age gives you a recognition that there might be grey areas.

Yes. And the social contract at the time, was that something which you felt you had to attack for similar reasons?

On the contrary, I think I received more criticism and condemnation for my support for the social contract than I did when I accepted a peerage and that's saying something. So we agreed with the government that there was some alternative to in place of strife and there would be what became known as solemn and binding promises. Now two of the more ridiculous strikes on the demarcation issues in which nobody gained, whether it's a welder or a fitter that does a given operation, it still means that the employer's only paying the same amount of money and the only thing is the one that doesn't get the demarcation victory is the one that doesn't get the work. So there was a demarcation dispute and there was the organising rights of a given trade union, for instance the miners had the sole negotiating rights in the mines. And we gave assurances that demarcation disputes or organisational rights would be put before - that unions were obliged to put any such disputes not only before the TUC Disputes Committee but to abide by its decision and everybody said we were talking nonsense but from the day we gave that assurance there was not one demarcation or union organising dispute that was not referred to the TUC Disputes Committee and accepted by the unions concerned. And those type of strikes, not the run of the mill strikes, but those type of strikes were honoured to the letter and fulfilled to the letter by the trade union movement.

And still are -

And still are.

The case of women, that must be a big revolution in the union movement hasn't it?

It's unbelievable that until 1943 we wouldn't even admit women into membership.

This is the AEU?

This is the AEU.

Yes. That's extraordinary, 1943, that's very late isn't it?

It was late even in the war, up to - we had so many things that retarded our recruitment never mind enlarged it. If I'm straying again -

No no please, I'm interested.

If you wanted to join the union you had to fill out a form, you had to go to an appropriate branch nearest to where you live, not where you work, the nearest where you live. You'd be asked whether you were blind, lame because we had a superannuation section and the medical people wanted to know these things and you said through an initiatory address. It was more like joining the Klu Klux Klan than joining a trade union. And just the same we had an apartheid of semi-skilled and skilled and never the twain shall meet and even when we had what was called a dilution agreement which was unskilled people doing skilled work, we even had divisions of those things. One was supplementary labour, one was alternative labour. I'm getting into deep mechanical clichés now but I give it you only to say how complex, instead of saying yes there's an entrance fee of two and sixpence and you're in, we went through all this paraphernalia. And we were even, even in '42 there was objection to women coming in and the left generally were responsible for the victory to admit them.

What was the objection, I mean why did people - today it seems incredible. What arguments did they use against women?

You've got to go back to the first world war believe it or not. The Munitions Act as it was called allowed women to do men's work and then assurance was given that at the end of the war they would be taken off and the jobs reverted to the men. But this promise was never kept and the continued objection was from people who had a long memory for these things.

And they were afraid for the jobs which belonged to men were they?

Yes but what they couldn't see is the best assurance that they would return to men would be the same rate.

Sure -

Because if it was a lower rate the employer would tend to employ the woman.

Of course. Particularly as they could do the job just as well.

And some of them could.

Yes certainly. There was the American film, Rosie the Riveter, about women going into second world war work while the men were away and then being

thrown out of their jobs when the men came back. That must have happened in England as well, that when the men came back from the war the women were thrown out of work.

I'm not sure that it happened, I think the reverse really. That women were kept on.

What sort of people were against women joining, I mean did it cut right through the political spectrum or -

There was a degree of male chauvinism in it. The belief also that man was there by right, it was a man's job and again one's got to recognise, if you talk about women's rights, we don't want to go back to the days when women went down mines for instance.

No that's true.

There's bound to be some physical jobs, not that women can't do but that women shouldn't do.

Well a militant woman would say there wasn't any kind of job which women shouldn't do.

Well if we want to go back to the days when women went down the mine and put the harness on and towed the trucks -

Well nobody does that now, men neither.

No but if we're going back to the days when women did go down the mines, those were the circumstances.

Yes that's true. And what about black and generally coloured workers. Was there -

Again I think you - we were not unaffected but we were less affected than other trade unions. The transport union, the bus people, the municipal refuse carriers and things like that, these were the jobs which the people coming in from the Caribbean and elsewhere could undertake without any period of training and were needed much more than they were in engineering because the degree of training that was needed would be a barrier to a person wanting that job. By that I mean a coloured person.

Sure or being qualified to do it -

Yes being qualified or even getting the qualification.

But was there, I mean to be an apprentice you could be any - you could start, whether you were white or black or whatever, but was there a feeling of keeping it white?

If there was it was hidden. I wouldn't like to say that we're any different than other people but it never surfaced as such.

It didn't.

Whether it would have done if there had been a wholesale demand for them or not I don't know but I've no knowledge of any such organisation.

Now you mentioned before that when you accepted a peerage there was a great fuss and it does seem, I can imagine the young Hugh Scanlon saying, being very scathing about trade union leaders that accepted peerages and yet when it came to it you did, now why?

I've asked myself that question many, many times. And I'm reminded of a saying of one of my maiden aunts who when asked why she was a maiden said it's easier to defend a castle that's never attacked. And I'd say that to anybody. You say no and no and no until it's offered. But there was another nagging feeling with me, we'd done all the battling that we've discussed this morning against in place of strife, against industrial relations act, on the more positive side for the admittance of women and so on and so forth. And because we accepted the solemn and binding promises and because I defended the social contract, I repeat I lost friends, friends of a lifetime in some instances and I can't answer myself honestly apart from the question of not believing it until it's offered. I'm wondering whether there was a degree of pique in myself in saying I'll show them. I've asked myself this question many times and I think there's a degree of truth in it.

What's the psychology of that? How does it work?

I think I've already said it, it works on the basis of I'll show you.

So you said to yourself you think that I'd never accept a peerage, but I'll jolly well show you and I will accept it?

I'm not saying that that was so, I'm saying it's a possibility. And I've examined it many many times and it is distressing when you've had a degree of popularity, I say that in a minuscule way I hope -

Well I'm sure you were extremely popular among your supporters yes.

But to lose them is very difficult indeed, very difficult. And what's even more, to lose them over something which is perfectly justifiable, it wasn't as though there was a sell out on anything, even though they might think it was so.

And have you regretted it or are you pleased that you took the peerage?

I'm pleased in one sense, it's provided things for me to do in retirement. It's made me listen to debates that are in general done by people who have a first hand knowledge of the subject under discussion and it's allowed me to meet people that otherwise I might not have done.

And now at the end of the twentieth century, there's a big debate as to whether the House of Lords should even continue to exist. What is your feeling about that?

I'm in favour of the abolition of the House of Lords as such. That's not to say I don't want a Second Chamber, I'd like a Second Chamber but it should not be either based on the hereditary peerage process or on privilege.

What should it be based on?

It should be nominated from interested bodies, like the TUC, like the CBI, like the churches and let's have interest in a wider scope, the general public - parents and people like that as well as the people who have specialised knowledge. But it should be not one based on patronage whether it be the government or the Prime Minister but one in which it does away with both patronage and hereditary but is done by a nominated and I still think it should not be a legislative council, it should be a revising council, chamber, and it's that type of approach that I would like rather than even just the abolition of the hereditary peer.

I see. Now looking back what's your proudest achievement?

I can't say that I have any proud achievement as an individual. I'm proudest of the fact that with the support of so many people I won the Presidency of the Union. But that's not saying I won it, I won it with the unstinted support of so many people.

And what's your greatest disappointment?

I think living in the aftermath of the acceptance of the peerage.

Really?

Yes, I think if I could look at the position anew, I might come to a different decision than I did.

Now if a young trade unionist came to you and said what should I be working for? How should I go about things? What would you tell him?

Well the first thing I'd tell him is to recognise the rather bleak economic situation he's faced with. We're faced with the fact that in 18 years the continuance of the Tory government has destroyed the manufacturing base of Britain. And I would tell him that if you want to form a society that looks after the aged and the sick which looks after old aged people, you can only have those things on the basis that you produce the goods to pay for them. And I would go further and say and added to that your difficulties is the fact that technology is destroying more jobs than any expansion of the economy can regenerate and therefore you have to recognise that because of the advancement also of medical science we're all living longer and so a combination of job diminution together with increased longevity, these are difficulties that they've got to face. That doesn't mean to say there isn't a solution. For

instance they've got to decide whether in the case of destroying jobs quicker than the economy can create new ones they have to say they can be accommodated either by increasing the unemployed or sharing the hours that is presently worked. That doesn't mean just a shorter working week, it can be longer holidays, it can be more shift work, it can be variable starting times, spreading the load. These things are open to solution but they're not going to have an easy time. In fact I think that they're going to have a much more difficult time than we had with the simple one of unemployment.

And do you think that capital and labour are irrevocably opposed or do you think that partnership is genuinely possible?

I think capital and labour are permanently contradictory, and we've already said not management and workers but it is a director's job to look after the interests of the investor, the shareholder. It's the trade union's job to look after the members. Now that is a permanent state of conflict but it doesn't mean to say that we've always to be on strike or that we're always in a form of aggression against each other. There can be agreements that are workable and should be agreements that are workable but that doesn't destroy the main thing of the conflict between capital and labour.

The big cry now is partnership, do you think partnership is a practical aim?

I'm not too sure. I know you're absolutely correct in saying this is the buzzword at the moment but I think it's management's job to manage and I think it's trade unions' job to look after the interests of their members. Now they don't always conflict, there can be times, probably more times when they're agreeable for agreement than the reverse. But partnership as we know it, which it spells out some degree of equality, I don't think so.

The other big buzzword is Europe. Now what difference is Europe going to make to - and the integration of Britain into Europe - going to make to the workers of Britain?

I think my reply to that perhaps for the first time in this interview is I don't know. Perhaps it's a simplistic approach but when one goes abroad in Europe you can lose up to 50% of your travel costs in exchanging to the various currencies of the member states. Now that's only a small item compared with the real basis of investment and who does what and where and where will the multinationals fit in in all this. I know it's a small part but to the average person it's perhaps an important factor in his assessment.

So you'd like a common currency?

If the basis exists - this is a Tony Blair answer - if the basis exists within our own economy and the economy of the member states yes. But to go into it which means that our currency produces less and less Euro, the answer's no.

Now his name's come up in the conversation, what's your view of Tony Blair?

A much more tolerant view than would have been the case had we not had Maggie. At least he's prepared to say that social requirements shall have precedence over concessions on income tax, that more should be done to those social aspects than would be the case had the Conservatives continued. At least he's prepared to say the trade unions shall have a voice but not a dominating voice.

And you accept that do you?

I do. I do because of the alternative that would face us. I still think there is a degree of, I won't say hostility, but intolerance of trade unions by the public at large and it's got to be overcome, it's got to be recognised that the trade unions have a role to play and to some extent Blair is prepared to concede this as well. On these issues I think that he should receive support but if one takes the view that I don't care how long I'm in the wilderness, I want pure socialism, if you take that view then you would oppose Blair and all that he stands for.

Do you think pure socialism is ever going to be possible? Do you think we should retain it as the aim?

It's looking into the crystal ball again. And I can well imagine that the youngsters of the next century, faced with the problems that we've been discussing today, will have sufficient on their plate to occupy them till well into that second century but I'd hate to give up hope. I'd like to think that in addition to the ordinary survival kit, in addition to the means of looking after the poor and the ill, that we'd find time for the wider scope of saying what's wrong with society, we will have - I only wish I'd had the benefit of a wider education to understand music and art and literature and I don't believe that a really wide acceptance of these or tutelage of these would be possible in a system that's based solely on the wealth that you can accumulate. Now whether you call that pure socialism or not is a matter of description. But I would hope that they could go for a wider issue than just the broad economic facts we've been talking about.

To someone who has been a member of the Communist party and who says he's still a Marxist as you say, the collapse of the Soviet Union must have been a very tragic experience.

It was not only a tragic experience, it was an unbelievable one. That something that had been in existence 70 years, who had its ramifications throughout Europe, could go under without a flutter is just unbelievable. Now I don't claim to the hope that what is happening in the Soviet Union is now so horrible with the Mafia in control etc. that this will ensure the return, I don't believe that. What would ensure the return is the conviction that there is an alternative. Now we always said, and Marxism still says, that you can't wait until everybody is convinced of the correctness of your theory, it's the intelligent minority that will lead and I believe that that intelligent minority is still there within the Soviet Union and within the Eastern states. Whether they will have the opportunity or the courage or the combination of both to fight to restore is as we said at the beginning looking in the crystal ball. I certainly hope they will.

Now for the union movement, how can the unions use the lessons of the past that you've experienced in your lifetime to ensure a better future? What would you say to the unions they should be doing

I think I would say there are certain things that are even within the present legislation that Maggie introduced, certain things that are paramount in determining the future of the trade unions. One is that the officials should be elected and accountable to a governing body that is equally elected. And secondly that there should be no strikes without a voluntary vote securing a majority of the workers that want to strike. Now given those two fundamentals, and given the fact that we might continue with a, even a centre road government, I don't think the trade union movement has much to fear. But whatever happens you will not be able to judge the success or otherwise of that plan because it's going to be based solely on the number of people that join the trade union because there's going to be much less people in work than previously was the case because of technology. So you can judge it not just on the number of people but base it on the ability of the trade unions to operate those principles.

What do you think their role will be, what do you think the unions role will be? Surely not the same as in the last century?

Well it may become more involved in discussions before there is redundancy, it may be involved in safety at work, it may be involved in relationships with management. These are all roles that it plays but quite frankly I don't see any sort of major principle that should be encompassed but isn't. I can't see that.

What do you think, conflict or cooperation will be the main actions of the unions in the next century?

I think there's going to be a mixture of both. I think there'll be a much more cautious approach to disputes because of the very nature of production itself with the technology. I think there's going to be much more difficulty because of the type of industries that are growing up, information technology etc. All these things mean that people can work from home, not be brought together en masse which is good for recruitment, so I think the trade union movement of the future is going to have difficulties, serious difficulties, but I believe the main ones are a combination of what you've said. Cooperation at times, confrontation at times.

And what do you think are the implications of a European unity for the trade unions?

It's well ahead. We can't get unity within the trade union movement at home. Within the biggest trade union movement. It still remains a fact that unions which are affiliated to the TUC are in a federation rather than a body. The right of decision as to whether or not a TUC policy will be accepted or not, lies not within the General Council but within the Executives of the various unions. So if this is true of Britain, how much more difficult it is going to be to get unity within the international sphere. We have bodies set up like the IMF, not the monetary fund but the International Metalworkers Federation. We have bodies like them which are seeking an

international treaty but the possibility of them doing it in the foreseeable future is very difficult indeed I think.

I think the visit of Jacques Delors to Congress was an important milestone -

I'm sorry I'm -

When Jacques Delors came to the Congress and I think it made the British trade union movement realise that the future was in Europe and I wondered whether you felt that too now that we have to look to Europe?

Well just let us consider some other aspects which present difficulties. I don't deny the effect to Delors, the influence that he has effected, I don't deny that for a moment. But if you look at the history of the British trade union movement it wasn't the political parties that gave birth to the trade union movement, it was the trade union movement that gave birth to the political parties. If you like the Tories establishing themselves because of the conflict between the landed aristocracy and the rising industrial class. In the case of the trade union movement they formed a Labour party because they found that victories that they were winning on the industrial front were being negated by political action, by legislation. In addition to all that you have the British trade union movement not divided on political or religious grounds but based on left and right within a given trade union. Now on the Continent you have your Catholic trade unions, you have the over there, you have the industrial trade unions. So you've these internal factors to resolve before you can even start talking about how you would integrate internationally on the economic front.

It's a big haul isn't it?

It is indeed. It's one that the future generation is going to have to face but how long it will be before it can find a solution I don't know. Certainly I haven't got a solution in today's set up.

But that is the agenda I think for the 21st century don't you?

It is indeed. And I would think that it would be in two stages. From what we are now to what happens - I say when we join Europe, and I think it's inevitable that we will join, what we do with Europe before we join, what do we do internationally? And the former is as big a challenge as the youth of tomorrow will have to face, never mind dealing with the international one.

And are you optimistic or pessimistic, looking to the future?

I wish I could say I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic that I think that we'll not be short of people that are willing to have a go at resolving these problems. Whether they'll be able to do it or if they do how long it will take for them to do I don't know. A lot will depend upon the political set up. If heaven forbid, faced with serious economic difficulties there's a swing to the right, it will be much more difficult for the future. If on the other hand it is in status quo, then things will be much easier, much easier. Up to now faced with crisis and leaving aside the Soviet Union, but faced with crisis,

there's generally been a swing to the right rather than a swing to the left. And I'm repeating myself, but if that does occur, life's going to be very difficult for the future trade unionist.

And technology, which is changing so quickly, is going to make another huge difference I think don't you?

Technology is going to be the staff of life or Achilles heel. It's frightening in some sense, the extent to which we can see today what future technology is going to be. What the future will be after five, ten, fifteen, twenty years from now, is of itself unpredictable and so you're absolutely correct, technology is in many respects the key to what is going to happen in the wider movement.

Well thank you. Anybody else got any questions they would like to - that I've left out?

Yes you talked about the new challenges like technology, do you wish you were the young trade unionist starting over with it all ahead of you? Or are you pleased that you've done your fighting and you'll leave it to somebody else? Is there a kind of envy - I wish I was forty, fifty years younger, so I could take it all on again?

Well when you consider what's happened even within my lifetime, the motor car was hardly invented, the aeroplane was just about coming into its own, technology as we now know it to be was unheard of and so I think it isn't a question of would I prefer to remain here or face the challenge of the future, every epoch, every era has its own challenge which in their way is equally difficult and I can remember the development on the centre lathe, from the crude method of the ordinary operator to numerically controlling machines that can give an accuracy ten times as great as the operator doing it. So the youth of the future have a difficult job to keep up with the changing technology and presumably also the changing political scene, but they'll face up to it, they'll face up to it in the same way as we tried to face up to it in the present circumstances. And the other question is will they succeed better than us? One thing we've forgotten in all this is are they going to make the same stupid mistakes that we made and tolerate war as a means of resolving problems, because if there is another war, all our talk, all our grand plans will count for nothing. We said this of the last war but even in the last war we didn't have the atomic bomb except right at the end in Japan. What there'll be in the future if they have another war I don't know.

Anyone else?

Do you think you under-estimated Maggie Thatcher?

Oh I've said it quite distinctly. The thing that was wrong with Margaret Thatcher was her policies, it wasn't her. I wish we'd had her on our side to fight for the principles of our beliefs, as she's done for hers. She's a most remarkable woman. But that doesn't mean to say you've got to agree with her.

But when she arrived on the scene, I think she was under-estimated by the left was she not?

I'm not at all sure it was the left, I think it was within her own party -

Within her own party yes -

And she was a very lucky woman as well as being a very capable woman. The Argentinean affair was a most remarkable, it almost looked as though the Argentineans had laid down in order to ensure that she was victorious at home! I don't think anybody thought that the Argentine war would have been - it's terrible to say this in view of the men that have died and been injured - but such a walkover compared with what we thought, that it made her overnight almost.

Do you blame her single-handedly for the loss in numbers of the trade union members?

I think she was absolutely ruthless in what she did, she utilised unemployment, she utilised new technology, she utilised the war and she utilised the antagonism of the people of Britain at the time because of all the disruption that the trade union movement had caused.

And cleverly marshalled all those to destroy the trade union movement.

Absolutely. Well once the trade union movement starts using industrial strength for political victory it's facing defeat and if anybody snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, I think the miners did. They had a wonderful case, they could have had a wonderful settlement, not in political terms but in monetary terms and they chose to say that they would not have a partial settlement, it had to be all or nothing. And that was after the trade union movement had given its assurance that whatever settlement was given to the miners, it would not be used as a form of leapfrogging for their particular industry. Now all these things were apparent to the inside but to the general public I think the miners had support unsurpassed, everyone said to themselves well I wouldn't go down the mine whatever they paid me and settle up with them. But once you started saying well there's not only the settlement but Maggie must go, which was not achieving the widest publicity but was there for anybody that wanted to look. And I often wonder what Maggie's future would have been like if the miners had got a reasonable settlement for their dispute.

Do you blame Arthur Scargill for this?

Well everybody that accepts leadership can say I didn't know, incidentally Mr Hague had a good chance at doing that but I think Arthur must take some responsibility, he may have a different view entirely, he certainly would have to my, that I've expressed. But you see he wouldn't officially call the TUC in, he said we're doing this, give us your support but we'll do the negotiations. Well if you're asking support and you're asking people to do these things you can't say but you have no influence on the settlement. So all these things have to be considered. What the finality would have been had the TUC become involved and some not total but

substantial settlement had been made, I don't know. I think we'd be in a far different position than we are at the moment.

Probably better because we wouldn't have had - Maggie wouldn't have become so powerful would she?

Very true, very true. And not only that, I don't think she'd have dared to go on to the banning for instance of the headquarters -

At Cheltenham -

At Cheltenham yes, I forget the title now but -

GHCQ -

That's it. So many things - would Wapping have taken place -

I think Wapping is a clear case of the technology forcing its way into reality because speaking as a journalist it was just ridiculous that the printing trade held such power when it was - they'd already had their day.

There is a criticism against the trade union movement including our own. We've always said new technology has got to come but we've always resisted it when it affected us and I think I agree with you completely. The Wapping dispute would have taken an entirely different turn had we been prepared to - or had the unions concerned been prepared to accept the technology and tried to minimise its effect rather than rejection outright.