TUC INTERVIEWS

NORMAN WILLIS

Norman Willis, General Secretary of the TUC from 1984 to 1993, returned to Congress House to talk to us.

My earliest memory is buying a teddy bear. I wanted a teddy bear which is probably why I really wanted to be head of the TUC, but I wanted a teddy bear and I remember my aunt taking me to a big store in London where there was the biggest array of teddy bears you've ever seen and they took one off a long pole off the rack and that was mine, until it was unfortunately given away by one of my family to a distant relative who didn't need it or deserve it.

So you lament your lost teddy bear to this day.

It's the clear explanation of all subsequent actions was the yearning for a lost teddy bear, and I never found it, I never found a substitute for that teddy bear.

And what's your earliest memory connected with political or Union activities?

My earliest memory that can be connected was seeing the Conservative Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain. It must have been when I was something like five and a half because it would have been before 1939 and I was in St James's Park with my mother when Mr Chamberlain came by, and a lady I remember alongside us stood up and curtseyed and I said to my mother "why is she curtseying to that man? " and my mother said "I don't know. He's only a Tory Prime Minister". But I can still see him, and that was I suppose my earliest memory. My earliest political question was probably "Is Mr Churchill Labour, Mum?" in about 1945, and then asking my father "Would Mr Ernest Bevan make a good Foreign Secretary?", and he just sort of collapsed in a chuckle, he was, after all he was the General Secretary of my Dad's Union. So that was about it, but my earliest Trade Union experience was going on the plinth in Trafalgar Square with my Dad at the Mayday Rally, he having been to the first official Mayday Rally and I went on the platform with him. And then my first Trade Union experience was going along with my parents to their Trade Union Branch at the NUR Rooms actually at Dalton, it was then a big marshalling yard, and we used to meet in a room at the Railway Tavern which was over the stables, and my distinct memory was, and there were horses ... that in the summer the meetings used to take a lot less time because, when the horses got hot, the smell got stronger, so in the winter meetings were longer but the smell of horse manure actually used to speed the meetings up, and I enjoyed that very much, and in fact I became a member of that Branch before I was entitled to.

What had horses to do with the railway?

They had dozens and dozens of horses pulling, I don't know whether they pulled trains in the yards, or I think they took coal or whatever it was around, so they always had lovely horses.

You joined before you were really allowed to.

Before the rules said because I was not actually at that time employed, but they signed me up and I used to pay the subs - disgracefully I can't remember how much they were. And then when I went to work for the Union I was compulsorily transferred to the 1/128 Branch because that was the Head Office Branch.

And this was the Transport & General Workers Union?

It was indeed.

And which Branch was that then?

It was the Branch that covered Transport House, a few people in Central London, the House of Commons and things like that, but it was in a sense the staff Branch so that's what I went in to.

And what did your father actually do, what was his job?

Well, he was a barber's assistant some of the time, and most of the time he was sacked because he was a member of the old Shop Workers' Union and had a belief, not an ambition, but a belief that he could recruit people into the Union and since he mostly worked in big London hotels, he would hand out a form and then get sacked, and this is what he did mostly for many years. And I once actually spoke in a big hotel in Central London and said it was nice to be at a hotel that my Dad hadn't been sacked from, and the Manager was standing at the back and afterwards he said to me "well I'm glad your father enjoyed his time with us", and I said "no, no, he never worked here, that's why he didn't get sacked", but mostly he got sacked. But one he didn't sacked from for Trade Union activity, I think now they would, us members of the Employment Appeal Tribunal might hold he was constructively dismissed because he worked at what I think is now called the Hotel Russell but then was the Russell Hotel, and Leary Constantine was refused permission to stay there

Because he was black

Because he was black. And my Dad walked out, so whether that was sacking or constructive dismissal I would argue. So I think that just about sewed it up. He then went, he found employment quite in the late 30s ideal for him in a - with a barber who was a member of the ILP. I don't think they cut much hair but they did have a lot of discussions and then he would have stayed there very happily I think but about the first bomb in West London fell on that shop. So he was then sent in to the Feltham Ordinance Depot and, having had a lifetime of training cutting hair, although he was quite good on women's issues, and he'd never done much cooking, they made him a cook. That was his contribution, and he was - and he then became a Union representative and that was the Transport & General and a good representative he was too.

So you had a good grounding in Union activity.

From the womb, from the womb.

From the womb.

Yes.

And your mother, was she involved too?

Oh yes, she, I mean she, they were, it was difficult, I mean I was only 6 when the war started and they were, I mean not sort of Union militants during the war, I mean they, I think that they would have rated Ernie Bevan's contribution to the war about equal with Churchill, and much she did too. So it was that sort of long period, but my mother was a working class suffragette, she had been fined at one time, but I think just didn't have, I'm not I don't want to be - reject anything - but almost the leisure to go to gaol, but she, my Dad was a suffragette supporter, and I was raised by her. She wasn't - she was a very bright lady, not I mean ... well she was

a mainstream Labour activist with a sharp edge to her, but she believed in women's rights. And I had had the chance to go to University, but a chance in quotes, because not only could they not afford to send me but they needed the money. But she was as good as that, but she was quite an influence, but she wasn't a sort of obvious politico, just raised a lot of children and helped a lot of people.

How many children were there?

There were five of us, and she also raised my cousin.

And where do you fit in to those five?

I was the youngest and the three top were -

Spoiled?

No, no, no. I - it was, that didn't happen in the family. The three eldest were girls, so I did, when I went out into the world and got a sense about women not being equal it was a big surprise to me I have to say. It was a good education. No I wasn't spoilt. I don't think I was planned, but I don't think I was spoilt.

When you say working class suffragette were they mostly then ladies of leisure - suffragettes?

No, I don't think they were, but they, I mean, they were people who became, and I'm certainly not knocking them, I think they were people who became, all their efforts were engaged in that area. And I think my mother was like a lot of women trade unionists now. You make an enormous contribution but wouldn't necessarily regard themselves as being engrossed in the women's movement, but that doesn't stop them making a big contribution for equal rights. So I know enough about the history of the fight for equal rights for women to know that there was a very strong upper and middle class contribution, and thank them very much for that. But my mother wasn't one of those who in a sense didn't do other things. She had to. My Dad was on low pay. But she did work. I mean, increasingly as the war came along she worked. And she had the great distinction at the time when the two lowest paid occupations in Britain were in laundries and canteens, she worked in the canteen and a laundry, so you know. She once said to me that the world was divided between people who had money over at the end of the week, and people who had week over at the end of the money. Our family was certainly one of those. I mean my Dad was a Government labourer which was steady, but, not a millionaire from that and she worked at other things and then later on became a brilliant home help.

And perhaps this is a good moment to ask how you see the development of women in the trade union movement. Has it changed?

Oh massively. I - the problem with saying massively, it sounds as if you're almost there. It has changed massively but that still leaves a very long way to go. But I think we had in a sense some, in my period as General Secretary, a mixture of some commitment and a bit of luck. I mean when I came to Congress House, I think it was ... there were 42 on the General Council, two of them were women and they were reserved seats for women. When I left, the structure has changed greatly now, but when I left I think it was 52 members and 16 for women. It was almost the proportion then of women in total membership. And that did not come about because always, as a sort of we are now going to do this thing. It came about, as does sometimes happen at the TUC, in a rather sort of wary and scruffy sort of way. There were arguments about how the General Council should be elected, and although I'd been, I'd not wanted to disturb it because I was nervous about disturbing it in case we went back in other directions, the opportunity came. And I mean, we laid down the principle of

special representation for women. We required large unions to make a proportion of their members women, we provided other seats and special elections. And it reflected a big change. When I first used to go to Congresses, and I went as a sort of lay delegate from the Transport Union, I can remember - I can remember women being whistled as they went up. That was - I think that stopped quite soon, but I can also remember women being applauded before they made their speech. I used to mutter "let's hear what she says because that's the way I'd been raised. But I think that that did change, and I think there's been a recognition down the line. To be honest I've no particular assessment, but I think the door is open. But it is a very long hard road for them to go. I mean don't forget, the way you get elected is by becoming known in unions, I mean particularly if you're from a big region or if it's a national election, and that means doing a tremendous amount, going to a lot of places, and the fact is that women do get restricted by children and a feeling of family responsibility. So I mean I have had an experience of ringing up and saying instead of coming home I'm going to Brussels, and then so I'll have to go to Leicester on the way back and come back. Well if you're sitting there with, got two children being looked after, that is very hard. I think some men have changed in this respect but that problem still exists, so a big change and a big way to go.

Still a long way to go

I think it is it's a tremendous thing and - and not only is it important for simple concepts like equal rights, fairness, whatever you call it but I think there will come a change, women will change. And I have to say its five years since I've been engaged in some of these meetings, I suspect they have already. The timing of meetings, I think the date of Congress itself was changed because of the start of schools, the school year. And they will change the style and I think by and large that will be to the better.

Yes, absolutely. Now you've said you were brought up to respect the health service, the Home Guard and the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Now is that rhetoric or is that a fact?

Well, it's, I suppose one of my very few efforts at a word-byte. Laugh. I hated word-bytes, I always thought they were dangerous, misleading, and possibly disloyal to the rules of the TUC. But, no I mean it's not bad. I mean I would have to add Ernie Bevan. I suppose it would have been Bevan rather than the Tolpuddle Martyrs in the sense that, although my family knew and revered the Tolpuddle Martyrs, I suppose it was the mid-war, between the wars generation and experience that was theirs. No it was like that. I think it's difficult now to understand even for someone, as I say I was 12 when the war ended, and 14 was it when the health service came in, it's very difficult for people now to understand what that meant in terms of expectations, of the quality of life, if I may say, particularly for women. I mean my mother was no fool and she was not a doormat, but I think her generation and generations of women before, expected not to feel that well for a good part of their life, and here you suddenly had a concept which was a practical assistance, the health service, and said something ... that people were entitled not to be unwell as far as they could. Now all the arguments go on, and I've in the last year seen enough of hospitals, but people don't, I think it's very difficult now, with the demands that are being made, the new drugs that have come along, all the problems that are being thrown up, to remember a situation where you really couldn't afford to be ill. So that was that. The Home Guard. Well it was - my Dad was, he loved this country, he was a left of centre socialist and trades unionist but he never had any doubts about the necessity to defend our way of life, even if he didn't like it. I seem to recall, I'm sometimes surprised when I hear people you know saying what certain people did in the war, because I have the strongest recollection that my Dad won both world wars single-handed, and the second one was in the Home Guard. But he, they were heroes. I mean, they used, my Dad used to work hard ruining the British war effort by being a cook at the Feltham Ordinance Depot. But then would come home, and serve all night guarding Clockhouse Lane and the Germans never got down Clockhouse Lane, never got down Clockhouse Lane and

his pillbox is still there. And they did that for years. Now I don't know what precisely what strategic role that played, but I do understand that Hitler took regard to it, and whatever it did it freed people, and they were astonishing. I mean, they also to a certain extent had a bit of a good time in a way, it was a comradely period. But they were amazing. So I mean I'm not sure if I was raised to revere the Home Guard but I did. And it, I mean, we used to have rifle stood in our corner, and I don't want to do too many anecdotes, but I mean when you see, when you see Dad's Army, and in my experience, I used to sleep in a bedroom that backed on to the garden. Mr Porzer, who was actually my god-father was Captain Porzer because that was his rank in the First World War and my Dad was then Corporal, so he was Corporal Willis and Captain Porzer. And because there were a lot of aircraft factories around, Weybridge, and out towards Kingston and so forth it was a massive area, they used to drop landmines on parachutes, and they used to have mobile anti-aircraft things that used to go and shoot them down. And the searchlight used to spin. Now what now follows is, it happened. My Dad and Mr Porzer were out the back. They used to discuss the existence of God, I think which my father had some doubts about it and Mr Porzer didn't. And er, Mr Porzer said " get your rifle". So he said "Why? He said " And shoot that landmine down, I mean they were big round things, and my father said "no I'm not doing that. He said "Jim get your rifle and shoot that landmine down. He said "no. So he said "Corporal Willis. Get your rifle and shoot that landmine down. My father said "no I'm not going to. He said "Corporal Willis. This is Captain Porzer giving you a direct order to shoot that landmine down. And my father said "I'm not going to. So the tone then changed and he said "Jim why won't you shoot the landmine down? and he said "I've signed for five bullets and I've got to hand five bullets in. And that is absolutely true. So when I see Dad's Army - But these were not fools. These were not fools. And they had tremendous stamina in all the things that they did and held together a family on damned all. I mean what gets me occasionally, I read some of these old naval stories, and they talk about you know, the people back, the civilians earning big money. My father and our family existed on nothing. On nothing. I mean, and we weren't the hardest, we were just hard up, not poor. And all of that. And that's quite a heroic experience.

I don't think young people today have any idea what poverty really was in those early, I was struck by what you said about women feeling ill most of the time. And expected to be ill. And, what other enormous changes that we take for granted have there been since the early years of the century?

Well I think that in the home I mean, I don't know whether there were any Socialist banners with washing machines up on them, in the centre of them, but I think that would have been an absolutely wonderful think for working class women to have. The physical labour was enormous. I mean, to actually get water boiled, get it in, scrub away, and hang it up, I mean that would have been as quite a heavy physical job and they did that while they were keeping an eye on a baby and the other eye on the money, the income. And they, I mean, in - down here in Transport Hall I remember Larry Smith of the T & G told a story that I have enjoyed and used ever since, of Mrs Pankhurst. Actually, I had a cat called, which I used to call Emmy, named after Mrs Pankhurst and then someone told me she once voted Conservative. And I'd never, I asked that cat many time whether it had any leanings towards the Conservative Party and it never did, so we changed it to Emily Pettit Laurence, who I recently found out had no political dodginess and had a great row with Mrs Pankhurst. Anyway, I digress. Mrs Pankhurst knocks on a door somewhere in a fairly run-down part of Manchester and when the door's opened it's obvious that this is a poor house, but that the children are well looked after and she said to the woman "You look after the children don't you? and she said "Yes. She said "What does your husband do?. She said "nothing. Then she said "You budget what little money you have, don't you. She said "Yes. And she said "What does your husband do? And she said "well he spends part of it?. You know. And she asked ten questions, each of which led to the woman did it, and the man did nothing. Then finally Mrs Pankhurst gave her a punchline which was "Doesn't it make you angry that you do all these things, your husband does nothing and yet when it comes to time to vote he goes off on his

own?. And the woman said "Look. It's the only thing he does for himself. So there was all of that, all of that went on. And I think that, I mean someone once said cynically if they had a chance to have a really rich diet the only that saved them was probably the basic food of what is now recommended as a diet but I don't know about that. Too much fat but - it was incredible that experience, looking back on it. And they juggled all the time, juggled all the time.

With pennies

With pennies and little room. I mean I have to say we weren't poor, but I mean my bed was chairs made up every night.

Yes.

And she, my mother did that. You know two chairs put together 'cos their house wasn't actually it wasn't that small but it wasn't big enough. So the other thing of course, I think throughout history transport's always been a great factor in freedom, and of course the roads were easier to use but you never had any car, so I mean it was always public transport and I don't recall it as being that dear. And we used to go backwards and forwards to London but I would say that's another very big change. Child benefits, things like that. The recognition of need and service in benefits was important.

And in making this huge, huge change, what has been the contribution of the Unions in all that?

Well, I, some, I don't know whether it was another attempt at a word-byte or something that someone asked me, but it seemed to me that everything we had, looking back on it, that took us away from the edge of the poverty precipice either came by bits of legislation that the Unions had helped to get, or by a little bit of Union activity. I mean we were not wealthy you know by any standards, not comfortable at all. But the fact that we weren't over the edge came from wages legislation, it came from the Wages Council. That was the bit of the edge. But the other thing, I'm sure that what my father felt, and I still feel very strongly, though I think it doesn't always happen and it's certainly not inevitable, is that you get a part of ... I've never found it easy to distinguish between a way of life and a standard of living and part of your standard of living was the fact that you had someone to speak for you, and that was -that gave you sometimes a certain courage to speak up for yourself. So I think it's both a material and spiritual thing. I mean I've never doubted what I may have taken in in the womb that free independent democratic common sense trade unions work, a bit of heaven to come.

More than just for wages, more than just for better conditions, longer holidays and all that. They had a more fundamental

Absolutely. One of the, I mean their, I mean it would be a bit of rhetoric to say they're part of the things that distinguish free people and slaves. But you can't imagine slaves having trade unions and you can't imagine dictatorships that had free independent trade union movements because the dictator would also always want to go and smash them and that's a good test. That's why I've always felt that there was a difference between, people say you know you made a contribution, well I was particularly lucky, but it was always I think for everybody a privilege. And it gave you tremendous opportunities but always this concept that you had something that was your own. I mean I, it took me a long time to understand why in the - I think a large number, perhaps almost all the cases, how important it was when workers could either employ their own Trade Union officer, or have sufficient power to make the employer treat them with respect, or pay. And that was saying this is something that's ours. It's something that we have that gives us some form of independence and I think the word dignity is often misused, but that's what it was - what it was about, and that's why it doesn't surprise

me, well it does sometimes astonish me to what lengths people would go to defend their unions. Unless they felt the Union that's grown away from them or was a separate organisation, and that's always been my, something that I hated.

Now both your parents must have been in the general strike, and you must have had a whole childhood dominated by stories of the general strike.

Well, not, I mean don't forget, this was, we were in West London and I suspect that the impact of the general strike wasn't quite like it's been written up in any book. But certainly my Dad came out in the general strike and I think one of the few times that he didn't obey the TUC was that, he didn't go back. And some, I can remember him as a sort of a young activist ... as I say he was a barber's assistant you know and saying to him well you know it must have been very difficult for my family, and I wasn't there then, and I was saying well what, I think I said what economic pressure did you exert, I said who knew, and he said well I knew, and now you know And that to him was right, so there was, that was it. I think that my mother probably may not have been working at that time, but it wasn't the dominant thing, I mean I may not have heard it. Don't forget, as I say, I wasn't born until seven years later

Sure

And a lot of it was dominated by the war

Yes, it's the war more than the general strike

Yes, but no, he would have been there. He knew a lot about it. I can remember going along to some Mayday meeting and the - probably the only early sort of leader that I'd met was Harry Pollitt of the Communist Party. Now my Dad was never involved in the Communist Party. I think the last time he'd been involved in Marxism was the youth section of the Social Democratic Federation some time before, you know at the end of the last century.
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Yes

But he quite respected Pollitt, and later on defended the rights of Communists inside the Trade Union movement. Though he was always, I think he regarded them with a bit of a pat on the head really. He never understood what the attraction of it was. He would have been in on things rather than spinning things out.

You never met Ernest Bevan yourself?

I did indeed

Oh you did

And I have to say that, because I worked at the Transport & General Workers Union

Yes

When I finished - when I was - I was a scholarship boy

Yes

Somewhat to my surprise, and so I mean I got through the selection system, then immediately fell foul of it, because almost as soon as you got to grammar school they would decide in their ... certainly in their mind really who was likely to go on to university, so I and I wasn't, in fact no-one ever told me that, I thought what you did at university was do everything you did at

school, only worse. No-one ever told me you could do other subjects let alone politics.

Yes

But I was going be a world famous scientist, but the exam system sorted that out and I clearly wasn't, and for various reasons I'd seen this job working at the head office and that sounded all right to me. So I used to carry papers around and things and I was the worst messenger boy there ever was, because I used to sit and read the correspondence all the time, it was fascinating. And it would have been even more fascinating if had got there on time, because I mean I often used to delay it reading it. But Bevan of course, had been the General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers Union, and in 1945 when he became the Foreign Secretary. No sorry, during the war when he became Minister of Labour. He then went on leave of absence. He didn't cease being in the union and then later he became acting General Secretary. And I think there was some sort of row because in the General Election of '45 Bevan came back and said well I'm back now, while the election was on. Now this does sound dangerously stupid. But when you revere someone and you think you may have played a part in their death. I can, I think what happened anyway, what, I don't know the background to it, but I took some papers into Arthur Deakin's outside office and Bevan was waiting outside, in the outside office. There was the later story that Deakin used to make him wait, but I don't know about that. But the window was open and there was a carafe of water, and as I opened the door, there was strong wind, it blew water all over him, and - this is Bevan - and very soon after that he got pneumonia And I think for a few days I seriously believed that it was my fault, but -

And did he die of pneumonia?

Well, I'm not sure about all these details now, but certainly I was, I was not happy with myself that I'd managed to give Ernie Bevan a soaking because he was a -

Well he was a god to you

He was a revered figure, and I mean certainly he was no doubt many flaws, going into all those arguments now particularly with his statue there with his Transport & General Workers Union badge on

Yes

But that, he was a giant, with a massive mind. And the way in which he tested out all sorts of institutions to see what you could bring together to give workers strength. He was also wily and dangerous to his enemies, and I think the old remark that he treated the Soviet Union as if it was a breakaway from the Transport & General Workers Union may well have had a good deal of substance.

Yes

But I mean that was my knowledge of him. But as I say I will always remember seeing the delight on my father's face at the thought that our Ernie could be Foreign Secretary, but I'm told that he was a very controversial but great one and much respected by the professionals. It doesn't surprise me, he had a great deal of international events.

So you were an office boy in the Union Headquarters and then somehow you managed to get to Oxford. How did that happen?

Well, I was an office boy and Arthur Deakin was the General Secretary, and I used to take him his papers in the morning. There is something about being 16 that gives you certain

protection. I think there are certain religions that regard crazy people as protected by God, and I believe that probably youngsters of 16 may also be, because I used to go up on the train. I read The Daily Worker and although I was never tempted to be a Communist or anything like that, but it would have a lot about it, and I'd go in and I'd tell Deakin and say oh you know you'll never you know, made a muck of that - I mean disputes about blacking the ships I remember once, and said you're gonna be in real trouble about that. And the amazing thing, I mean he was a man who was quite capable of just you know he was a bad enemy to have but he just used to grunt and groan, I think, I don't know why, I mean he wasn't sort of particularly cheerful with me. But I mean I used to give him advice in a direct fashion that I never gave to any other General Secretary, although later on in a way I was paid to. So I went through all that. I then went away on National Service. And came back, nearly didn't get my job back because I hadn't learned to type or do accountancy which my conditions of employment stated, but anyway. I think I stayed on because the National Service actually required me to stay on. And then so I went almost by my own choice into the education department and as soon as I could I went to Ruskin College, on a - it's a bit confusing. I certainly, I think I went on a County Council grant, but I got a place and I did that and two years at Ruskin and two years at university, which was a bit too long actually.

You came out with what kind of degree?

Pardon?

You came out with what kind of degree?

A good second. My - I'm pretty sure my theory at the time about why I didn't get a first, I was, it was reckoned I was going to, it was a sort of, as we say in these hallowed halls, a composite between not giving in to the establishment and getting tonsillitis, but as combination of those two things I got - but it was a good enough degree. Although I have reason to believe that my marks on industrial relations were about the ... much lower than those on general philosophy,.

Yes and then you say, then you went back and became assistant to Frank Cousins.

Yes, I was his personal research assistant which - it was a funny old job, I mean I'd known Frank before, and well I used to read all his TUC papers and he said at first he wanted them summarised. I don't think he did actually. What he wanted was written down the side points he could make because he read them himself. And I used to write his speeches. He never used them, but that was my job, and he used to use bits of them at different times. I mean, he had an enormous impact, Frank Cousins and - but as I say, that sort of structured stuff wasn't wasn't really what he liked, but that was what I was supposed to do, and I did. But I also remember, it finished me for many years, it was one of the reasons I first took up poetry. I used to read all the newspapers and cut bits out, and write comments on the side, in about 20 minutes, and if it was longer than 20 minutes there was no point, he was away, and so I used to perfect the technique of finding bits in papers. And I, to this day I still do that, in novels, so I took up poetry on the whole because that isn't what you do in poetry, but he was an amazing man. A man offering an enormous impact. Because of course the union had then sort of turned round and Frank was very much the powerful leader of the left, although he'd got a very good relationship with George Woodcock but ...

But I mean in Deakin's day he was thought of as a right-wing -

Oh yes he was leader of the right and he had powerful people in there.

And then Frank Cousins was the leader of the left.

Oh yes. And

Leading Aldermaston and all those things

Well yes. He was never, he was always a little bit distant from the C&D, but I mean Frank was interested - I mean, one of the stories I remember, I mean I used to, later on I became his personal assistant and I actually used to go and sit as a delegate at Congress. That was not, anything much wrong with that because the T & G never used to take up all its seats, they had such a vast number of delegates, they probably didn't want to spend the money, whatever, so I just used to sit there to carry the bag and do whatever. But - and gradually I got a relationship with a lot of other unions and I used to, I was a sort of gofer and I can remember the occasion and sitting in a hotel room with Frank and I, I mean look I can't remember what these rows were about. I can remember they were very crucially historically important and big, but most of us can't remember what they were, but it may possibly have been something to do with the Common Market, and I said sort of warily to Frank, we got on well, because there was never any doubt that he was General Secretary of the Union and I wasn't, so we got on well. But, so very gently I said to him I've been reading this stuff General Secretary about all these resolutions down and I said I think there's a, if you want it, there's a good compromise here. So he thought, and he said all right, he said, go and get a compromise. So I dashed off before he changed his mind. Just as I was going out the door, he said Norman, and I sort of looked back and he said, our compromise man.

That was a lesson for you was it?.

Well it was. And I think actually, I'm not sure I did get his compromise but I think but - I, it was partly for that reason I did learn to work with other unions that didn't agree with us. I always suffered from the fact that I thought all unions were on the same side, so you know, I believed that, so I did get a good relationship with unions and I used to, I used to quite enjoy the Congress. I used to enjoy the Congress more then and I actually once got to speak.

Was he a great man do you think?

Frank Cousins?

Yes

Yes, he was , he made great changes. And I mean he was ... he could be querulous, I remember we had our, the annual delegate Congress and I used to write all these notes for Frank used to reply to every motion. And I had done goodness knows how many - and he would never really discuss anything until he got to the seaside, I mean it was, which was probably a good thing because they were pretty vivid. And I can remember, I'd done all these things and Frank had done them all, and there was some motion that one of my leftwing mates had assured me no, he's not going to press it, it's all right, and I though oh great I don't have to write any notes on it and then for some reason he got a round of applause or something happened and he pressed the motion. And Frank turned round to me and he sort of the notes, where's the notes, which I hadn't done and it was the end of a very long week and I wrote on this piece of paper, I put, accept the motion, which was the norm ... you know I said there's no good reason for it but it's already our policy anyway, you know. And he was really angry, and he took me off to one side and said why did you do that? Well, I couldn't say I was fed up with giving him bits of paper, and anyway he took me off to one side at the back of the stage which of course it normally was then and he really went on and then he said you know I can't sack you don't you. So stupidly, I mean, if some boss says he can't sack you, you just nod don't you, but I said why can't you sack me? Which was really very silly. He said because I appointed you and if I sack you my judgment will have been proved to be wrong. And then he walked away and I thought well that sounds like job security to me.

Yes

But it was quite exciting, but actually funnily enough although Frank was a very controversial character, for me that period was a great learning curve about working with other unions, and if someone, occasionally you think what was well one of them would be sitting in a composite meeting and I think this was the Common Market, and there all the big unions there and quite a lot of the small ones, and they actually let me go away and draft a composite. No-one had, they hadn't sort of agreed entirely, but they all agreed that I would draft the composite, and I thought that was, it was a great trust that they were, I mean, considering we, our union was the leading advocate on one particular side, I was greatly honoured by that. And I think the composite that came up actually was less favourable to my own union than it was to the others, but I think that was the sort of thing that was remembered later on.

So how old were you then, I mean?

I was, oh late 20s, late 20s, no maybe a bit older than that, I'm not sure.

And then you went on to work with Jack Jones, is that right?

Yes, I worked with Frank Cousins, Frank went in - I came back in '59, Frank went in, I remember these dates better than I do more recent ones. And he went into the government, that was when I made a mistake with Frank because he went up on the Saturday morning into the Union offices and I'd actually because the Labour Party used to be in the building then and I actually sat the day before watching Wilson waiting to be called to the palace, with all this, his formal dress hanging behind the door. I think it was Alex Douglas Hume he wanted to get dresses and get it all done but it was very close. But I went in the next morning and Frank confided that the Prime Minister had invited him to join the Government and he said to me what do you think? Unwisely I answered because I said I wouldn't if I were you, I said you won't like it, I mean it turned out to be true, he ... I knew he was going to hate jumped up Tory backbenchers asking him what he was doing and why he was doing this and everything like that and I hadn't really thought it out but I had a suspicion the new Ministry of Technology was not actually going to oust the Treasury or whatever. So anyway he went into the Government and Harry Nicholas first of all became the acting General Secretary and I was assistant to him and I wrote for Harry and then Jack came down from the Midlands. So they were a very very powerful four and very creative and I learnt what it was to work very hard.

So how did you then become Assistant Secretary of the TUC?

Well, I, in a sense I'd gone, I mean I was still pretty young. I'd gone as far as I could. I wasn't, in a way I was fairly happy to stay on, I'd become head of the research and education department, it was a big department and so forth, but I can't quite remember, I was a bit unsettled. I think that I sort of had the feeling that I had strongly supported the age of the shop steward and all that, but I sort of, I felt a bit of a fish out of water in a way. And then this vacancy came up, and this is what, and the, I mean there still are pieces of paper, and I'm sure some time someone will get round to doing it, will write that I was put in as a wooden horse for Jack Jones. I have to say, that that was totally untrue. I didn't tell Jack I was going to apply. I told him that I had applied and he was, I mean Jack was like a number of others, probably couldn't see why I would not want to work for the Transport & General Workers Union which is where it was all at. And, I mean, it certainly was not his suggestion and, or anything like that. People, I can only say, people don't believe that it was a combination of my mother and an Indian fortune teller. And I went along to a local Red Cross do, and this was and this was a chap with a brown skin and like a theatrical turban, I mean it wasn't

anything that was these days there was nothing sort of new world or anything about it, and he told me that I was going get a new job, it would be a big change, I would travel a great deal and all sorts of things like that. I thought that was interesting. And then a bit later on, my mother who was very ill and actually died before I got a job, she read about it in the Tribune and she said I see that there's that job going, she said, you ought to have a go at that because you're a good lad. I'm not sure whether being a good lad was sufficient in the TUC's eyes but - But she was very ill and I said yes OK mum I'll do that. And about two weeks later not having referred to it again, she said have you applied, and I said yes. And she said you've never been able to lie to me, now you apply. And I applied, because I got intrigued with the thought, I don't think the Indian fortune teller would have been - I mean it would just disappear, but I got intrigued with the thought and she was very unwell and I promised I would so I did and I got it on the vote. That was with the support of Jack Jones and others but it was also -

And Hugh Scanlon

And Hugh Scanlon, yes, but it was also very - in fact the only person, I only contacted two people, one Terry Parry from the Fire Brigades Union who said he would do what the others did, because he was being very cagey, and the other was Tommy Jackson, who was very much the young bustling leader of the right. He said I'll not only support you, I'll move you if I get the chance. I'm not sure whether I was that keen on Tommy being the one to move me, but - no. But I'd worked with a lot of them, I mean and my credentials were not, I think they, well they must have trusted me because a lot of them didn't vote for me because they were afraid of Jack. They would have been nervous and so one of my neighbours said to me how on earth did you get a job like that, and I wasn't sure really you know. But I can remember the first morning I came to the TUC going down to Ashford Station when my good friends at ASLEF were engaged in a work-to-rule and the platform was totally full of commuters. I mean not just crowded, I mean you could hardly move. You had to go up over an open bridge and walk down the steps and there was a woman who lived near me when I was a kid, who would always take an interest in my activities, and as I got half way down these open stairs, she had a loud voice, and she said in a piercing voice, congratulations on your new job at the TUC Norman. And all these heads turned towards me and I suddenly realised I could spell the word tumbrel and it was that was how it was but it was, I was glad to do it and then I came here and what I particularly enjoyed was the interplay between policy and administration. I was never a good administrator but I liked the respect that the TUC had for the work of its staff and everything like that.

And you caught the public eye first in 1972 Congress talking about the toddlers liberation movement.

Oh that was when I was a lay delegate. That was the only time I actually spoke and I was head of education, and I seconded a National Union of Teachers motion about very young children, and it was distinguished by the fact, as I recall, that the NUT delegate wore a very long coloured scarf which he had got in Ghana, which fascinated me. But I think, I'm not sure if it was three or five minutes, but I must have worked on that for several years, because I remember it was full of real snappy things like the new triple alliance, parents, teachers and the TUC and, actually I don't think, I think that my mind-boggling phrase was TUC stood for toddlers united campaign. And they all quite liked it and it showed that you could actually get on the rostrum and get off again without falling over which is you know something you need as a General Secretary. But no, I didn't speak again at Congress until I became General Secretary. So I used to go to a lot of places and I can remember, for example, the worst thing was you had to do was if someone had not qualified for the TUC silver badge, only having done 24 years 11 months and 3 weeks as Trades Council Secretary or whatever it was, so he didn't qualify, but you used to have to go round and take books signed by everybody, and it

was outrageous really, but you have to have a limit somewhere, and experiences like getting on - I can't remember whether it was Ammersmith, I know it began with an A, Amersham, or something like Amersham, anyway, wherever it was, it might have been Aylesbury, and because of a disagreement with a taxi driver I actually got to this place an hour later than I should have done and the local - with all these piles of books and several medals for other people and all there was was one man, his wife had met him and so I managed to get a lift because he was going - it was the Bowater Social Club and whatever time it was it was just a few minutes out of time and he was saying what are you doing at the Bowater Social Club and it was the end of a long week and I didn't want to talk so I said oh just a sort of social thing. So he said well what are you doing? I said oh I'm presenting some medals. And he said what sort of medals and I said long service medals. And he said now what sort of medals, what are you? And I said I'm the Deputy General Secretary of the TUC. The car drew up to a halt and he invited me to return to Russia. Now I was almost tempted to explain which was true that I could not return to Russia since I'd never been and I didn't want to go to Russia but that was not his mood and he then said aren't you ashamed of yourself for ruining the country? And I toyed with the thought of saying well I've been trying to give it up lately, you know the withdrawal symptoms, and we were so - and then, then we just sat there and his wife who had got into the back seat when she picked him up joined in the conversation and proceeded to upbraid her husband on courtesy to guests and she said, John she said, I don't believe it she said you can't turn this man out in the dark, no street lights, doesn't know where he is, doesn't know where he's going and I thought oh she has heard about me after all and she said if you, she said you can't do an awful thing like that she said, if you do that you'll be just as bad as he is you know. So you've got these - another lady, another lady - I was on a - it was a long journey between, I mean several hours, and I used to try and avoid conversations, this when I was - a bit later on and she recognised me and she said you know what's wrong with the world don't you? Now having a few obsessions myself I recognised someone with a good obsession and I thought well you know I've got a couple of hours, so I said no what's wrong? And she said they should never have done away with the Emperor of China. She said it's all followed since then. So I sort of perked up at this stage and I thought, I said so everything that's gone - she said everything. I said like the sinking of the Titanic. She said yes and she explained to me, totally convincingly. And I went through the general strike, all these things, and she had a total answer for everything. I realised afterwards she had actually three answers that she just sort of played with you know. She was brilliant at it and I was sorry to get off because I hadn't finished you know all the questions I wanted to ask her. We went to this thing and it was raining and I remember this chap, halfway through my speech saying you know what's wrong with you don't you? And I said yes actually I do. And he said what? And I said it's all since the Emperor of China and I explained to him and he went away, I can distinctly remember him muttering I don't know where they get them from you know but no it was - I can't say that it was the best period of my life but there were many periods that I enjoyed.

But there is a serious side to that and that is that for a long period the Trade Unions were the bogeymen of the British public, now how did that come about and how has that changed?

Well I'd say Fleet Street and the Unions in a way and I mean I reached the conclusion after a long period as General Secretary that the description of Unions given by the major newspapers reflected very much their own troubles, industrial relations troubles and everything that had one on because it really wasn't a correct description, I mean there were many good agreements but there's no doubt there was a sort of a locked in relationship in the newspapers that many of them hated the employers. I think that there was an enormous long period of growth and stability and unquestioning and I think frankly there were quite a lot of faults on the Unions' side. They accepted that, that it would always be like that and I don't think enough change was recognised, but there was change going on all the time but I think a lot of it reflected not what the Unions did so much but what they said and then once they'd

said it I mean and then the papers took over. I think that's possibly a bit of a shallow thing but it just grew and grew and I don't think that - there was felt to be a need by the Unions to address themselves to criticism because they felt secure and to develop in the way in the last few years and I don't think it's just because I've gone the relationship with members, how much role members should have, what services they needed, that it wasn't all collective, you needed a lot of individual things and I just think it grew and grew and I think Tebbit spotted that and it came as a shock to quite a lot of us. You see I think that there is always a dilemma about working class organisations, which is that in order to be effective you do need to have a structure, I mean it's not sort of sitting round a table and touch things and then it happening through osmosis or whatever it is, you need structures to make policies, take decisions, carry out action. And as soon as you do that you have people who are part of that structure and I always used to say the one thing that is absolutely certain about a representative is that he's not going to be a typical member. Because your typical member does not want to be a representative, I mean they - that's a fact of - in every organisation, there are some organisations that may be able to get on because they've just got a product they can sell or whatever, but we are absolutely intimately involved with our members and I, in as far as I - like I did used to express it a great deal and said look we may have the best arguments, the best statistics but the only thing that makes us different is our representative nature and if we in any way move off to become a sort of club of active people, which in a way you're almost always going to be that because that's the nature of people, then there is a gap and I think that gap was subsequently sort of filled with Tory legislation to our damage. And it was not aimed at returning the Unions to its members, it was aimed at returning the Unions to outer space if possible or the furthest away from any power they could have.

Now how much of the fault of that lies with the wild men of the left?

Well I think that the problem, the real problem was that for any system that actually assumed it was speaking, what it said was for the members. I mean let me give you - and I will change the names to avoid offence, although I personally know the names. When I was elected General Secretary, immediately you move from being not too well known - they want to interview you. So I was whipped off to be interviewed and I was walking through the outer shades of the congress and a chap from an African country leapt out and said congratulations Brother Willis he said, the people of North Africa are absolutely delighted and I could - and he was such a nice man, it was a shame and I said they know already do they? And I was standing there because I'd just had this vision of racing camels going across the desert and people shouting Norman has won! And there'd be Praise Be To Allah and they would go off to feast or fast or whatever is their way of showing delight. And always in my mind that sort of capsulated these things in that you tend - I mean once have said on behalf of 12 million members, paused for a quite a long time, I thought oh I only know about a million of them, and so I don't, I mean I think the language has changed and if I've played some part in that I'd be absolutely delighted but the idea that all your members will believe one thing, all of them are with the Union and that that is exactly and intimately expressed by your annual conference and so forth, it's important to know that that is not entirely true. For a number of reasons. If you don't know that you don't go and argue with the members and part of your job is actually to campaign. I mean to get solidarity when you need it when they, perhaps not everyone wants to give it. To get change when they need it and perhaps not everyone wants to give it. All of those things, and if you say oh well what I say is what the members believe I think you miss out, you know a tremendous important creative dilemma in your life and the life of your Union. Now I think I have to say that politically and I experienced it not far away from here, throughout a quite, a very long period, the Labour Movement were seen as being what the Labour Party was saying and on behalf of workers, and many were actually saying things that I have never heard a single worker in my life say. So you've just got to be, you haven't got to be arrogant and you've got to be close and you've got to recognise that whilst undoubtedly what you personally believe is perfect the others may not have caught up with you yet. So you've just got to - and it was very damaging and very dangerous and for the Labour Party almost deadly, almost deadly, because people knew that what was being said

and unfortunately they got television coverage was not what was being said in the pubs. Now that doesn't mean to say you have to go for the lowest common denominator but the highest common factor might not be a bad thing to strive for and it was damaging.

What period are you thinking of?

Oh I think in the '70s and into the '80s. Some of the Trade Union problems may have been developed in the '60s when we developed, well we you know, the shop steward movement was developed but in some cases it didn't always stay close to the members so there were some problems then but when you look at what was being said in policy and the -
Give me an example.

Well I just, I think the issue of public ownership, the issue, the issues of education were not probed. For example I don't think that Trade Unions always understood how important it was for people to get promoted and if they did understand it, not all of them would think oh that's a worthy thing. That's almost you know disappearing out of your own class, although then you wouldn't have used the word class. I have to say, although I was an Aldermaston marcher and I, although my demands in a sense, my real demands which were against atmospheric nuclear testing which I believed was wrong and I think science proved it, the fact that I was on the deterrent and all that, I was always more confused but that was not something that many of the members had come to and because the Unions said it was the policy that didn't convince him and it never did. So there were many things like that but the whole atmosphere had taken a shift where in fact many of the people were not representatives.

So you feel that the leadership was on the left of the -

Oh absolutely, absolutely, and when the culmination in 1997, I mean the person who started that process was Kenneth and I saw, and he did some of that at our congresses and so forth, I mean I think he was convincing, changing himself as time went on, but it was very necessary or you'd never, I mean for a mass party to have got down to the low level of votes that it had got in the end didn't surprise me but it was a betrayal of what was needed.

And this was in your period of -

It was all over that same period yes.

So you must have found yourself swimming against that tide?

Well I was I mean I really have no means of assessing it because I haven't sat down and re-read thankfully what I said but many of the things that now fortunately have become accepted, like it is a good idea to work for a company that is not profitable, you know Richie used to say who the hell wants a company that's not making money? Now it all depends how you share it and everything else but you do not, that makes your job very insecure. Point two, workers do not join unions to go on strike. Now I'm not saying that every union believed that or every union activist did but it's very important to realise what they want is someone to speak for them, particularly if they're in the wrong and all these other things but when you join a union you don't then become a member of either a sort of revolutionary club to change the world through industrial means, or indeed particular - what you're looking for, and it's not a cynical thing, it's an instinctive thing and that's what adds value. So there was all of that. But I used to sit and I mean I certainly stopped looking at the Labour Party Conference and listening and looking at them and they didn't reflect even the people who were still voting Labour. And you'd have people saying what are we doing? Look at the votes from the Tories? Well yes, that's the answer to that. Now life is a compromise and that is not a cynical statement.

So you welcomed the Blair real policies deal?

I well I mean I saw the changes, I saw the changes come, I had a particular reason for - I mean they made the Clause 4 argument, not my problem, and I certainly didn't make speeches about it because it was not my problem. It doesn't mean to say I didn't have views about it. I always though it was, from my experience, and I've knocked on enough doors in my time, thousands, that if you weren't going to do what was stated in Clause 4 there wasn't much point putting it down and annoying a lot of people who might give you the power to do some other things. But I never liked Clause 4 because it actually said workers by hand or by brain and I had a dream that workers had both and I never liked it, it was - and people actually used to say no it works by hand by - and I said no it didn't. So I mean I saw that change, I was more and more attracted than the Labour Party to the one member, one vote system, and indeed in my own local party we had it for a long time until we were told that we couldn't. I just didn't think that the few people who went along, and they were very, very few, who went along to a local meeting should somehow - who were self-selected because anyone could go but you know, that that should then be regarded as a way of creating and transmitting policy. And it was so distractive, I mean it became a - I'm sure people joined the Labour part to have fun - but it wasn't very nice and what I regretted was that you then had this growth of continuous arrogant conservatism, that was a total rejection and so when I look at whatever is done, and I mean it's - as far as the policies of the present government are concerned it's for John to comment on those, I just done, and that's not because I don't have views -

No sure

But that's his job and I'm a fan. But every time, if someone says well aren't they terrible, and all I can remember was that I expected to be under a Conservative Government for a lot longer. So I'm rather grateful about that and I'm very interested in the changes that are going on. But I did not like that period and I don't think it did working people a service, or did them justice.

Now is that why you only served nine years of the fourteen you could have done?

No I mean, just to have a go at this nine years. Someone asked me once fairly recently, they were introducing me and they said how long were you General Secretary of the TUC and I said 900 years and - which they then used, fair enough on doing the introduction, it was a long period, I'd done ten years before that. I tend now only to read books where the good guys win like Hornblower and the 1997 election results which I have in a beautiful volume that I look through - even now I go Good Lord - and many of which took me back to 1945, places with only ..... but in one of these there's a man, a great hero called Belitho, he's like a Hornblower character, he ends up as an admiral. And he has a phrase in one of these books that I wish I'd had all my life because at some stage in one of his stories he turns to his second in command and he said Mr Mate, life is a bloody rearguard action from the day you're born. And I wish I'd read that when I was sixteen and understood it because looking back on that period it was a rear guard action,

it was not long since what we all hate to call the Winter of Discontent, a dispute that should have been resolved much more quickly than it was. We started with - I'll come to the miners in a minute - but I started with an argument over the Engineering Union taking government grants for balloting their members which we resolved fairly quickly and via means of saying that it still was terrible and against rules and our decisions and we'd deal with that very soon so you know that was, I remember one of the General Secretaries said deal with it with dignity if you can but deal with it anyway. But it was very engrossing because a major you know and it wasn't just the money or the members but for me - raised on Bevan and the idea that workers came together in a union and unions came together and the pride we had in this country, as there being only one centre, that would have been devastating and it got worse.

The first day I came in this office as General Secretary was exactly halfway through the miners strike, the congress at which I was elected was dominated by it and I had an early glimpse of absurdity and expectations. I walked down - I think I had been, I think it was probably the Thursday or something, I'd been elected on the Tuesday, but Len was still doing all the business, that was the system then, and I saw this, I think it was the Mirror, yes it was the Mirror, this great big headline, the two men who can solve the miners strike, and I thought God perhaps someone's going to solve it and I walked down and one of them was me, and there was this picture of me and Peter Walker and I thought well there is a word for what I felt but I won't go into it. And - but that was halfway through and I mean I don't have the slightest doubt that that miners strike was an avoidable disaster. If I could attempt to sort of word-byte on it.

It was a strike of two halves. The first half was where the National Union - the President of the National Union of Mine Workers refused all help from the TUC. I used to sit with - I was the Deputy then - I used to sit with Len Murray who phoned up before every general council to say do you want us to do anything and the General Secretary would answer no and I mean that was run up to our congress. So the first half where we were refused a role in it and in the second half too much was asked of us, it was impossible. There were two opportunities, one in the June and certainly in the October for a negotiated settlement, I was frequently in despair, I've never seen such loyalty given and seeing that loyalty being disintegrated, people going back to work, arguments about how people were still working and anything like that -

The miners' loyalty?

Oh yes, yes I mean these were incredible. And whilst I, I mean I think that others in the leadership should have pressed for different things, I can understand all the sort of pressures that were on them but there was just no negotiation and I mean I was raised to be a negotiator, that doesn't mean you always have to, there are some times when you know that you're just on a - it's just not possible to start them but I honestly believed that Mr Scargill could have been a good negotiator but the real negotiations never really started until, I mean I sat with employers and I got the unmistakable smell of having lost and it was said that principles were at stake. Well I think that you just, you know one of the greatest words I've ever heard, and I didn't hear it directly and I wish I had, was from Nelson Mandela when he told Trevor Macdonald on the BBC he said you know we're going to have to give up some of our principles. And Macdonald was so startled because nobody ever says that, he asked him to say it again, and Nelson said we're asking them to give up some of theirs and if we're going to have an agreed settlement that's what we're going to have to do and there were principles stated that weren't what was involved. I believe to this day that you would still have a sizeable coal mining industry in this country and "do I blame Scargill", I blame Gormley, Gormley - Joe Gormley held back his retirement to stop Mick McGahey becoming the President. And Mick McGahey, the President of the Communist Party would have negotiated a decent honourable settlement and I'm sad to this day and people say wouldn't it have been a disaster for the miners to win? And I know it was a very - it was a disaster they lost. So I wish I - I mean we sat in this room and went everything, I don't - looking back on it, and I do tend to be rather self-critical, I'm not sure there was anything I could have done, I'm not sure there was a disposition to negotiate on the part of the union when that could have bought results, I mean they were, the board and the government were running scared earlier on but then the second half they'd got, some of them had got the wind behind them and the net result was that the industry went. We had another go to defend it some years later but what you had to do was get a plan, get a settlement, get an agreement. You did need change, I mean that was going to happen and they would have to change practice and say we're changing nothing and then regard it as a victory to go to a congress and for other trade unionists to agree that nothing was going to change. They weren't the people you had to negotiate with. What did they say, I forget who it was in Israel, and they said you're negotiating with the enemy, and he said who the hell else do you negotiate with? I mean you

don't - well you can negotiate with your friends. And the trauma that went on and that carried on, it dominated us for years.

It must have affected your whole -

Well it didn't cheer me up that's for sure, I mean it was very, I mean it was - I may have made myself too available, I mean I was always here you know, anybody who wants to - anyone who's got an idea then - we had lots, we had plans and we had enormous assistance and people really went out of their way, I think partly because there always was this concept of the miners although I mean there are other - in fact in my Dad's old union the shop workers have a very consistent history of looking after people and everything like that. But mining is you know it's this sort of great thing about all that. But no it did, I didn't like it and I didn't like the idea that so many outstanding colleagues were totally engrossed with it and at the time lots of other things were happening, I mean whole sections of the building industry were just being destroyed and skills were being lost and although I'm bound to say that my successor has I think caught up with things, while you were sitting in here having debates about what the coal stocks were, you weren't recognising, there wasn't time you could lose to recognise how many physiotherapists there were and they're workers, they're skilled workers who had developed good unions and all this was happening. What was the role of women workers and so forth. So yes I think it was difficult.

What could have saved the mines?

Well I mean it's, it's a long time ago and I didn't, you know I'd have to find someone else's notes to be honest but I mean the fact is that just simply saying that the structure of working hours had to stay the same as it was, that - I mean you - if you were going to get money into some of these pits and I don't want to go into a lot of it because it sounds like I'm making the Coal Board case and I'm not. I think that you could have extracted enough of it to have a successful industry but you did need to change working hours to get the investment and everything like that and you weren't going to get that by getting the TUC to pass a motion about what should happen and the Labour Party in opposition to what would happen.

And it made no difference -

No of course it didn't, and I mean you did have to negotiate with the enemy and I have no doubt that Mrs Thatcher was the enemy and not just of Scargill. But you, I mean there were others there, there were others there we could and did talk - I used to talk to people, I suppose I wasn't, I was required not to negotiate but I mean all the time we were talking and saying well what about - so I think it was a bit -

So did it wear you out? Is that why you packed up after nine years?

Oh no that was a long time after that. No I mean you then had all the continuous legislation and everything like that. But no, I think I think at the age that I was at and that particular set of circumstances, nine years hard was enough, there was no - I was looking for time behaviour of some sort, whether it was good or bad. But no I think there came a time where I'd done whatever, I think people wanted to change. There'd be massive changes inside the TUC, that had to be managed further, frankly I didn't want to do that. I didn't like all the changes we'd had to make, cut-backs and so forth but that, I mean I'm not asking for sympathy, I'm just saying it but it was all there and I think I probably realised that my priority had been to hold the TUC together. The day before I retired the electricians came back into the TUC and I mean to say not with claxon flying and ticker-tape and everything like that but they were back in and I have to say that my decision, I mean there was some press attached now, given the way the press behave now it was quite minimal. But I think the key probably in my mind probably that I was - guessed confidently that John Monks would succeed me and

that was fine so I'd no problems, no problems about what might happen and I think events have proved that.

So for you no knighthood, no peerage, no honours, why not?

No. Well I didn't want them, that's not that I'm critical of people who get them. I - in a conversation with John Smith, the thing, not in a sense he was offering, but he said well you know at some time you'll be - there was something about the House of Lords and he referred to it and I said no I didn't want that. And John Major politely offered me a knighthood which I politely declined. I almost wrote him a letter saying Dear John, Cannot accept knighthood, cannot ride horse. But that would have been discourteous -

Yes

He did say on the bottom if you change your mind let me know. No but I think the truth was that what I was, what I really wanted was to do something different. If you were a lord people were entitled to ask for your opinions and ask you to do things and I wanted my own agenda. And I didn't want a title that got in the way. I - someone asked me this once before and I'm not sure whether I gave the answer but - or just thought of it, but when I was sixteen I was pretty clear what socialism would involve over the next thousand years. By the time I was sixty I had some difficult in interpreting everything that had happened over the last week, not that I'd forgotten it but it had got more complicated. But I decided there was, that for a socialist there's one thing probably you should have, that is you should know your neighbours' names. I'm sure good societies start with people who know that and I didn't know enough of them, I wanted to live a local life and that's what I've done. So it's not a - and I genuine - I do write to people, not all of them, but I do quite often write to people and say that that's come up so it's not a thing that I think you know that I - they've betrayed things that I haven't betrayed, it was a personal choice and I must say I've never for one second regretted it.

So what is your proudest achievement in the movement?

Well it sounds, if you start thing - it makes you sound a bit arrogant saying now which one of these shall I choose? I suppose of the things that happened, of the things I guessed that may live on for a bit. I suppose the first was Europe. I was fortunate, I mean I loyally campaigned for withdrawing from Europe and I had a vision at one time that the Commonwealth was a better bet but I mean clearly that was a different thing. But I was around for quite a long time with the TUC as General Secretary when our policy was still for withdrawal and I used to go to Brussels and see all sorts of unions beavering away doing things. And then when Jacques Delors who I had a tremendous regard for, virtually changed the concept of Europe from a market to a community and there seemed to be a lot of - it wasn't, they said is this getting the power in Europe you can't get it Britain, it's just that it looked a better bet with what he was trying to do. And then we invited him over to our congress and it was, it had enormous repercussions. I would like to claim that I had planned all this but it just seemed to me, David Lee was the Assistant General Secretary, phoned me up from Stockholm where I was supposed to have been but I couldn't go, and he said he'd just made this good speech and I said fine well let's invite him. And he came. And that enabled us to change our view which meant that a month later it was very easy for the Labour Party to do it and that was an enormous historical change. It also was a personal change because Mrs Thatcher go so really enraged about seeing me and Delors, we had - funnily enough they were like champagne glasses, they looked like, you know the long fluted ones, they had water of course but they looked - and I raised my glass and he did and this I think was in the Times, and she was enraged about it, she started steaming round Europe, revealing how extreme she was on the subject which actually shifted the balance of opinion, as she went to the right I think it made it easier to be sort of positive about Europe. And it did

damage her, I mean I'm not saying it was the only, it certainly wasn't the only thing, she played her own part in getting rid of herself but that was, it really turned out to be quite significant. I have to say that any time I'm tempted to forget and I still, if I get mixed up about dates I always did, not because I'm - but I forget which congress year but I know it was at Bournemouth and every time I'm tempted to forget who came - well anyway he made a good speech to congress and it all changed. But we went out on the shingle and there was a camera crew and they wanted to take a picture of me and the great Jacques Delors and I was beginning to learn what an important bloke he was actually, gazing out to the main continent of Europe. We're standing on the shingle and he's gazing out. Now Delors spoke good English, when he read it it was a bit more, sounded a bit funnier you know but I mean he spoke good English. And so we're standing there, on this shingle sort of trying to look to you know the future out to Europe, and he said to me, and I thought what is he trying to tell me, he said something like there's a man with a large bicycle fighting with one of your colleagues. And I thought perhaps his English isn't so good. And I looked so I said - anyway we got this photograph - and I looked round and there was a man with a very long bicycle, about fourteen feet long fighting with two of my colleagues. And it was a man who used to campaign against smoking and he was trying to push this bicycle behind where we had the camera on, but I always remember you know so what were the most famous words you ever remember from Jacques Delors was there's a man with a very large bicycle. So I mean that was the - I think that for various reasons that the fact that we were able to structure the role of women certainly at this level was important, I guess it's going to be very important, I'm not sure at the moment where women are past 50% of the labour market but they've been pretty close for years, for all sorts of reasons. What we were able to do on South Africa was massively important to me. I mean we'd always had a policy against apartheid naturally but - and I must say I never thought that events would move so quickly and they didn't move so quickly because of things we did but we were able to do a lot and overcome perhaps some of our reservations about the - well it was difficult, the ANC was regarded as being very close to military solutions and so forth but the policy was OK, we were able to do a lot more and I was astonished at the speed - we also did do something for Namibia which preceded that and for some years I used to proudly proclaim God this building has been part of freeing Namibia on their National Day and that was great, I was actually there on the day that Namibia became independent and free. They gave me a little plastic flag of the new Namibian flag which I put in my straw hat, marching around all day, but in the day I swapped it, they had a freedom march and I got another one and it had boot marks on it so I swapped it for the new one, left it in my hotel room and the hotel manager changed it for a new one that an honoured guest couldn't have such a tatty old flag but I remember all that. And I remember one of the best jokes of my life being told to me by an old friend from the Inland Revenue Staff Federation. The year of the first Mandela - no the Mandela concert when Nelson was going to go to Wembley, not the first one when he was still in prison, but the one he was going to go to, it was also the year that Liverpool got knocked out of the cup at some incredibly early round, and one of the officers told me that as they were coming out of the ground he heard one person say to another, what's the difference between Liverpool Football Club and Nelson Mandela? And the answer was, Nelson is going to Wembley. Which I think is clever, and I can remember talking to him and I think, I think I thought I was being tactful but not too tactful because he said to me I'd been asking him how he was and how's things? And I think he was quite direct and he said are you asking me if I'm going to die soon? Well I - yes, I would like to know how well he was. And he said don't forget that fitness was a political act for the ANC leaders, he said anyone who started laying around would be visited and told to keep themselves fit because we believed and had to believe we were going to be involved in the freedom of our country. And I was there on the day he was inaugurated and so again and we've had many acknowledgements of the assistance we were able to give, and give gladly, and I just was amazed that it turned out to be such a -

And your greatest disappointment?

Oh it has to be, I mean in a sense the loss of membership. I mean I was disappointed for a very long time over GCHQ -

Yes Cheltenham -

Yes at Cheltenham. I mean I was sitting in this very room when Peter Jakes one of the heads of our departments came in and said that the Government had told them at GCHQ, jobs - and they should leave - and my critics may say typical, but I just couldn't believe it and Peter was always accurate but - and then the battle that we had and we did it internationally, we did it every possible way, you had to negotiate with the enemy but for some reason you know there were sort of promises and hopes and everything like that, and I felt for those people. I even felt - it was my first speech at congress and some people argued that - it was the first speech I ever made as General Secretary and some people argue that it was my worst speech. Others argued there were other speeches even worse but it was difficult because I'd been with those people when, I mean some of them, people called them you know sort of mortgage martyrs they called them, but I was with people where a husband was deciding to sign, to stay with the union and lose his job and the wife was going to stay on just simply because they, you know just trying to keep the family going. And I thought it was terrible, it was absolutely terrible and so that was - and I was delighted to be there you know when that was changed. I'd hoped that the system would provide ways in which we could have done that earlier on but again I can remember going down there, I mean I just used to spend a lot of time with them. I admired what they'd done but I was also, we were in their debt, and not only because they'd stood up for the principles of Trade Unions but they never made unreasonable demands, I mean they never marched around saying we must have a general strike to solve it which we couldn't deliver legally or otherwise, they never - So as happened in quite a few disputes you know we were the nearest at hand so in a sense we were the ones that let them down although we were very limited in what we could do but that was quite typical, but they never ever, never once did they put us in the position of saying we're not able to be members of a union because the TUC hasn't done enough, they knew we were doing everything that we could and for that reason it became a unifying force rather than disintegration, rather than just spreading out and I've had them in this room many times and of course the leadership had changed over the time. So that was a big disappointment. But I can remember going down there once and they came off shift and it would have been - and one came to me and said by the way you know the TUC was talking about doing a little film on the Tolpuddle Martyrs, I said yes, he said you don't need to. Blue Peter's done it and it's brilliant. So I said that's nice to know. And then someone else, two or three were coming up and I said to them in the end, what are you doing there I thought you were supposed to be watching for Russian missiles. So it turned out they weren't watching it but just for a minute I had this vision of looking for all this spies and in fact they were all looking at Blue Peter. But they had in fact been somewhere else first. But those are the sort of things that I remember with pleasure. But no I suppose that loss of membership and -

But why has there been such a loss of membership, I mean obviously there's a sea-change in people's attitude towards unions but why has there been such a disastrous loss?

Well I think that the TUC membership didn't reflect early enough what was happening in quotes in industry. I think that there was a vision of the TUC, I remember and I won't name who it was, someone came to me and said oh all the change in this general - we've got to have trade unionists on there like firemen and miners not I forget what it was health service workers or something like that. And this, there was this sort of picture we had and so there was this enormous change up from big units to small ones, from full time to part time, from men to women and I mean no-one is going to see that early enough but I mean I think that is largely the reason and then when that happened, I mean I again, you must talk to other people who still look at all these statistics and know and live with them, but I mean a very

large proportion of British workers still have their wages negotiated by trade unions. I think one of the biggest mistakes and it may have been part of the problem, was that people thought the trade unions were more powerful than they were and now think that they're less powerful than they are. The unions also in some cases thought they were more powerful than they are and so we didn't integrate these things. Now some of that is being reversed. Let me give you one nice change that's come about and I have to say I never thought about doing it but the present General Secretary had, it was always the absolute view that the TUC never asked people to affiliate to them, you came and asked us, we interviewed you and then we said well you can join - then other unions would say well we've got members and that, whatever it is but whatever the reason they came to us. After I finished they found out that quite a lot of unions said yes we'll join, you just had to say would you like to join which is after all how we recruit members to unions rather than asking them and perhaps then them asking us. And if you look at the spread of unions now in the public services, I mean again I don't know all the statistics but there's a very tiny miners union, there are much bigger unions in doing sort of technical work in various sectors. And the sort of change from blue collar to white collar and everything like that. No win an ideal world perhaps there's no change at all or you know enough about it in advance to be on board before it happens, I think that is largely the case, I think that will change, I think that what has happened, I don't say regretfully but it certainly has happened over the past five years so I don't know it in detail, is that there is much more flexibility, you see unions being, making it very clear that their future depends on the survival of companies in that area, now that's never seemed to me to be wicked, it sounds to be to be absolutely quite sensible, so that sort of change, how big it will get, what it will come to I don't know, but the changes have been made and let me just list one of them. I mean I used to talk about them and I think more has been done about them, I mean the concept that a major part of what the union did was dealing with members and individual services and so forth, was regarded at one time as a bit of a cop-out or you put it on but it wasn't serious but that's what people want, all of our surveys always showed that what people wanted more than anything else was to have someone to speak up for them and as I said particularly if they were in the wrong and that's all sensible stuff so -

Did you do enough to get young people into the unions?

Well a tremendous amount is done, I mean there is - the obstacles are not sinister. I actually can remember years ago a young Trade Unionist saying to me ..... I said what's the matter with you? I get very worried you know he said I spend more time thinking about the union than girls. So I consoled him that this was no doubt a noble cause but no I mean you clearly, I don't think that you do this by you know, you throwing out hip or whatever the current word is, but you do, do it by all the people being aware of the things they're worried about and that which effectively is job security.

This seems to be much more idealistic than ....

Oh yes. I mean they would understand solidarity but don't always practice it. But no I mean you do need to do more for -

And is that done to attract people?

Well again I can't speak and would not speak in detail, I just know that we were early in the field and although there were quite a lot of difficulties, I can remember going through a period where people were a bit cynical about it in both ways, and yeah that's the union's policy, fine for them, or black people saying oh yeah they talk but they don't do. Now the TUC has something like I don't know two possibly more decades of serious work on this, I think some of it has worked, but although they can contribute to it and draw on any other changes that are made they can't do it on their own. But you know I can remember actually when I worked for the Transport and General being sent by Frank Cousins to go along to a union meeting

and just saying whatever anyone else says you say our union wants legislation. And that's been one of the big changes in my life, I think it's been enormously valuable, again a massive change, the trouble is a long way to go because you're dealing with people and human events and my experience is that that takes more than a motion of congress to change.

Do you think the ideals of socialism will ever be achieved?

Well I think it depends how you do it. I mean I have to say that in the back of my mind and it may be a throw back to not old Labour but a very ancient concept of socialism, I think that there will be massive changes required. I mean we at the TUC did a lot in relation to the environment, I don't think anyone is doing enough, I don't think the concept of the problem is anywhere near fully understood. I think those things will bring great pressures and there will be choices to be made, there will be allocation of resources, those things will be done either by dictatorships or by democratic socialism in some form. I wouldn't - it sounds as if I'm waiting to say the only way we'll have socialism is if we have a sort of great breakdown in the ozone layer, but I think that those changes will come. But in general I don't regard what has happened with socialists in this country as being anything like a disaster, I think it's a - they've actually got closer to working people properly defined today than they have been in my lifetime. I mean this question of what; you're proudest of, I mean I have to say that some of the things that I remember and was glad that I've done, first of all was in relation to Northern Ireland. You'll understand that although many - the trade union movement in Northern Ireland is one congress across North and South, many of the unions in Northern Ireland are members of British based unions and so we have a sort of overlap in relationships. But we were able, these were people who kept violence almost entirely out of the place of work and they were heroes and I can remember phoning up one of them for something to do with the miners' dispute and asked him for some statistics or something on a Friday night which he supplied about two hours later and later on I found out that there'd been mayhem in Northern Ireland that night and the unions were always involved because they were one of the very few institutions who could sort of hold the line for everybody and all this mayhem going on and Terry Carling was - had been there sitting there looking at my statistics that I'd said I'd really you know it would be handy if I could have them by tomorrow morning - and incidentally he didn't, he wasn't my employee or anything like that. But I mean the steadfastness and one thing I'm glad I've done, they invited, I spoke in Trafalgar Square for the Northern Ireland Trade Unions and a peaceful life and we went for a drink afterwards and I was bought a few and they kept patting me on the back and I - and they said that was very brave. And after about three drinks I said what do you mean brave? And they said oh there could have been a lot of trouble there but fortunately no-one had told me. But they - I admired what they did and then I went over to Belfast at the very last minute at one stage when they held this very big, strange rally, quite biggish, very quiet, everyone standing there and all very tense because it was - and I'm up on the platform and then I did know that it could possibly be dodgy, but just seeing these people who organised this and then being with them an hour later when they got news of another act of violence as it happened was a very quirky business of a British serviceman running amok virtually. But seeing all that and then they still kept it up and nobody, anywhere has anything I think other than - no-one who wants and has succeeded in getting peace has anything other than admiration for what they did. I was fortunate to be President of the European TUC on the run up to Maastricht and we used to have a system where every time a country took over the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, the first person they saw usually was the President of the European TUC, mainly, so you'd go and tell them what they had to do for the next six months and six months later you'd go and say why didn't you do it? Was I not clear about this? But I'd met them - oh that was fascinating. The one people I wanted to meet was the King of Spain because I admired him for everything he did for democracy and I'd got in a confusion and turned up for lunch or dinner at the wrong time, but I mean meeting all these people and learning what continental politics is about, Christian Democrats who had as strong views as I did about fairness of legislation at work

and things like that and - but meeting all these people and sitting there and watching Mitterand, trying to talk French to Mitterand. So I mean all of those things but of course I mean it sounds silly, a spin off of that was the break-up of the Soviet Union. I mean I'd never been a sympathiser of the Soviet system, and when people asked me they used to get very irritated because I used to tell them - well it was all down to a Sergeant Major I had in the Army, I was charged with something in the Army and this Sergeant Major explained to me, he was quite an intellectual actually, I remember he knew what the anagram of tortoiseshell was which was something not everyone does - and he said you know you're going to lose? And I said well I've got a very good case. He said that's nothing to do with it. I said well I'll put my case and he said but you can't possibly win he said if you win I lose and that's the system. He said apart from the fact that you did it, you wouldn't obey the order. And I then sort of encapsulated in my mind one of the things I really hate in this world which is executive justice, that you don't have access to courts, you don't have your day in court. And it's not that I want to break the law and then have a fair hearing, it's what happens all the rest of the time, if you don't have some form of independent judiciary, I'm trying to think of the proper - well you're buggered, and that's what I felt, that's why I never supported breaking the law in industrial relations, and why I didn't support blockades and things like that because if you run a blockade which is illegal and win what's the outcome? Someone else can run it and everything like that. So in a way what I hated about the Soviet Union was that the state, and the courts and there were many other things. After Gorbachev I did not want to go to the Soviet Union still because I didn't think the Trade Unions were independent and they weren't, but that was the one vote I ever lost, I think I only ever lost one. Post-Gorbachev everyone wanted us to have representatives and I went there and I suppose I would say we went with a list of over 400 people, Michael Walsh, the head of the International Department, who were refused - people they wouldn't allow to come out of the Soviet Union, people who were in gaol and things like that and life is full of contradictions and I suppose one of the proudest things I could say is that we thought all of those out - and I'm so proud of that and I was so embarrassed I felt degraded by doing it because who am I to sit there and bargain for people's lives. But every time I got sick of it fortunately I had someone sitting alongside of me who said stick at it. And we did. And so I was able, I was in a position to be able to help Solidarnosc in Poland, I didn't agree with everything they did then, nor now, but I think I knew then that they were an independent trade union movement, to help to do other things to assist, it's been a sort of maelstrom of who's got it right and who's representative or not but I was able to do some of those things and people say you ought to write an autobiography, I suppose - I think well I just can't remember everything, but if I was it would be to say here was the event, here's what I remember and the trouble is it looks funny but if I remember anything about that, I mean Solidarnosc I had a great deal to do with and yet what do I remember? It's being in Geneva, standing by the lakeside at Geneva and a message had come to me that Solidarnosc was, Poland was under martial law so Solidarnosc in that sense was banned and they were going to make a film that was going to go underground all round Poland, which was partly fascinating but I mean with things like that I used to think why am I doing this, this is very odd you know. And anyway I immediately said yes and so they said well you go to a certain place alongside the lake and they will come. So I stood there for ages and no-one came and then this van with two rather nervous looking cameramen got out and started looking around and started to unload this thing. I don't think they were worried about themselves but you know they didn't want a commotion and they put the case back and then suddenly and then they got their camera all set up and I'm standing there like this and it was - I'm trying to avoid looking around like this, but I wasn't - but they were nervous. And then one said we'll have to make this very quick because we don't want to get caught. So and then so they said have you got one message for the workers of Poland and I knew - and I'd had some thirty words or something that got everything in and I said well - and at that stage, just about I don't know half a mile away, there was a Catholic cathedral, and I said well, and the loudest bell I've ever heard rang, I'd only ever heard one louder which was just when I was going to start a speech in Nottingham town square but apart from that - and it went boing like this, and then I was just going to start again and it went boing, and I mean you just could not do it. And

at this stage, and we didn't know that it actually went on for 20 minutes and we didn't know that because I had no knowledge of local Catholic behaviour. I did mutter to one of these blokes, are you a Catholic? You go and tell them to stop you see but it - so anyway we were sort of standing there, they were getting nervous, I was just feeling you know all great moments of my life somehow are all so ridiculous, and I looked around and across the lake was coming the monsoons, the monsoons were coming early, and there was a wall of rain which was coming inexorably right up the lake and so we're sitting there with the bell going so I couldn't speak, the water just about to come and then - so we just stood there and it stopped and I just got these twenty words which were get my name in, European TUC, independent free trade in and we'll you know - just before this rain came. We stood there, me and these blokes - and I walked back to the hotel absolutely soaked and someone said what have you been doing? I said don't ask. But I remember it now. And all that - I was lucky, and there were great changes good and bad but would I have it different? Well you'd be foolish not to, I mean you can think back and you'd say I should have done it differently but it was a job I was not unwilling to leave, I was delighted to get, I was not unwilling to leave because there's a time and tide but -

Looking ahead to the 21st century, what will be the role of the unions? It must be a changed role.

Well I think the ingredients are there, there must be a, there probably is a very clever Latin-based name for deep admiration of your successor and if not they should invent it. Because I do admire, I always did, John was a Deputy General Secretary for a - in my last years of General Secretary, terrific. Someone said to me once, what would you - if you said to a young trade unionist what model should they take? And I said something like John Monks' brains, his commonsense, his soul and Arthur Scargill's energy. And so I think what, I mean what John is doing I mean when I said to him vaguely I think in this room, I expect you'll be making a few changes. I didn't know he was going to change civilisation as we know it, I mean they abandoned most of the committees and everything like that, I think they've got a decision making process in being, but the changes, I think the indicators of the changes are all there. I mean there will be, the organic growth in the representation of women workers is going to make great changes, it is going to be more white collar, more public. I - the global market is there and you see unions who I'm sure say and regard themselves as being effective, militant unions saying now we've got to deal with this problem, which 20 years ago it could not have been approached that way. And that's not giving in, that's giving recognition to what's happening so I think it's all there but I'm sure that the key will be individual service, individual representation. They will stand or fall by the extent to which they can create a new concept of job security. It is true it's never going to be the way it is, and no-one can wave a magic wand, even a unanimous vote of congress may not solve some of these problems I have to say, although I had, there were some delegates who said but congress said unanimously, and I said well it hasn't changed you know, it's not changed the world. But you need to have objectives but I think that's what it's going to be like and job security will come out of skill, it will come out of industrial literacy -

Will the number of members go up or go down?

Oh yes yes, I'm sure whatever anger and arguments there are about what is now going - if you've got access to standards in the end, with some difficulty, and I've no doubt we would all of us have liked this easier, I think that will produce results. You see throughout this whole period no poll ever actually showed that people didn't want unions. Unfortunately they would say yes to an opinion pollster and either they weren't asked or said no when someone asked them to pay. Now there's a difference between saying unions and great and paying your annual, paying your weekly subs.

Yes I think demarcation is important, I think a lot of people don't know what you need

to join.

Well of course it's changed a great deal, I mean no-one ever liked demarcation, I mean it was the worst abuse that was always hurled at it, no I think probably I suspect that what's happening, particularly since the TUC's disciplinary control over unions, it will never ever be the same as it was. And I think that people, there will be an extension of what I always saw when someone said what union are you in and they said Joe's, you know they, it's the nearest person to them and what they do for them and I think that sort of competition is inconvenient but may not be wholly harmful. So I'd, I mean it's easy for me to be optimistic because I'm not the one who's going to have to do the hard work, but they are fortunate as they go into the Millennium.

What about the role of women in the unions - will that be a big change?

Yes oh yes I mean it is now, there's no doubt about that. But that was in a way the most obvious change, that and the way Europe was a big change. But as I say I think that more and more women are just being recognised but it is damned difficult.

And how about voluntaryism, what can be learned from earlier -

Well I mean this is still the greatest voluntary organisation in the history of this country. Many, you know, you say oh it's only six million now. Six million? I mean that is, I mean it's by no means enough but that is a lot of people and don't forget they pay it every week, and there's no closed shops any more but I mean if something, if you wanted an indication to me of - I mean I know you can say well someone who pays under - well 1200 or whatever for a season ticket at Chelsea, that's a pretty good commitment. But apart from the odd fanatical commitment of that sort, someone who pays a pound or so every week for something, that's a pretty good commitment. So I - one of things you have to do is provide professional service, people want that and in a increasingly consumer society they need it because it's a jungle out there. And if you a union's got access and you can get good advice for people on how to buy things, how to complain, how to do things, I, I mean a revival of general union influence at local level on things like hospitals and things like that which is difficult but you know, so - but you need professional - but my mum and dad never got a penny, and that never reduced their commitment. I mean my dad was treasurer of the Trades Council, how was I raised? Each month I was - we didn't have - this all sounds, the kitchen I don't think was really big enough to put a table in, but certainly it was a kitchen table that happened to be in another room, they would sit at this table, my mother was a Trades Council delegate, my dad was the Trades Council treasurer and they would do the accounts. And this would go on for a bit and at a certain time in the discussion, every time there would - I could hear my mother saying well you must have the receipt, where's the receipt? Look in the top pocket of your best suit. Well he only had one suit but that was certainly his best one, and at some stage he would say I'm the treasurer kid not you and she'd say all right you go and do it on your own. And he'd say now don't be like that. Now that was voluntaryism. I mean my dad was a great guy but I mean - and he could write and read perfectly well and everything else but numbers wasn't his biggest name, perhaps that's why they made him the treasurer, but that was people, now no-one ever got a medal for that, no-one ever knew about it but the quality of that was that someone somewhere down the line got a slightly better voice than they would otherwise and that's what I remember.

And is that what the trade unions should be doing today, getting closer to their members?

Oh always, always that but as I say look trade unions only have to answer this riddle. The relationship between the individual and the State. It just so happens that the Greek philosophers ever solved it, no-one's ever solved it, all they've got to do is that. Then they've

got to resolve the problem of how do you mix top class professional skills, paid for at the rate for the job necessarily with all the voluntary people and then when they've done that problem, how do you resolve the fact that you need representatives and there's always a problem that representatives might get out - all my successor has to do to solve these problems, which history has never solved in any institution but I think they'll make a good fist of it, that's what voluntary - but without voluntaryism all of the things that you say you need and want, all of it, all of it will fail because you actually need that. There was a man called William Sinclair, arguably the greatest philosopher ever to come out of West Renfrewshire in the later 18th Century, I am advised. And he said it is better to get within one Scots mile of where you're making for than arrive exactly on the spot of somewhere else. Totalitarian movements arrive exactly on the spot of somewhere else. If the Trade Union Movement can get within that one Scots mile of what their people want of them, they deserve all the medals going.

Now just about yourself. Your great passion - you have two great passions, poetry and embroidery, is that right?

Yes that's right yes.

Tell us about the embroidery first, it's an odd thing for -

Well so they say, so they say. Well it came about as a joke for some friends of mine, in the last year or so that I was at the TUC. I was President of the European TUC, I found it an absolutely perfect hobby because instead of going out to dinner when I was away or wandering around the streets or whatever, I could sit in the hotel rooms and stitch away and I found I was good at it and I liked doing it.

What do you embroider?

Well mainly - I like lettering medieval things, very strong designs, but I - and I used to do it on trains and planes. And I remember going in the Spring of '93 on a train that was going to Scotland, I was going as far as Newcastle, accompanied by several hundred Welsh rugby union supporters, many of them union members, and I sat with this, doing this and they would sort of come and lean over and say oh you're doing that then. I can't do accents, I won't even - and I'd say as you see, and they'd say do you like doing that? And I'd say well no-one's forcing me to and no-one's paying me for it and then they would go on a bit like that and the conversation usually ended at some stage when one of them would say you could go blind doing that. At that stage I used to move the conversation on to something else. I can remember being in an airport with some employers, I was the only union - and the plane was delayed for six hours and I mean they went spare, they telephoned everybody including each other I think. And after six hours one of them came and said Norman we can get on the plane now and I looked up from my hoop and I couldn't avoid saying already? And he said yes, he said you are the sanest one here, he said mind you he said we'd have been even worse had we not had you to talk about and that's when I realised that I had discovered a great truth in life that there is nothing more calming than seeing a woman embroider and nothing more disturbing than seeing a man doing it. But someone asked me was there any connection between - I mean I do talks on it because they think it's all a bit funny and all I know is my mum the suffragette would have quite understood it, and someone said it's very different from being TUC General Secretary and I thought about it and I said not quite. I said if you get - if you push a needle through the fabric and there's a knot, I said you never get rid of a know by pulling it, just tugging at it until it come out never solves it and I said that was my experience as General Secretary of the TUC as well, so I enjoy doing it and it certainly is a - it's another slice of life. As I say I'm really quite good at it now but I enjoy doing it.

Poetry?

Yes as I say I started reading poetry as a lad when Frank Cousins ruined my reading habits where I'd just read all these newspapers in such a fast time that I lost the habit of being able to read a book, you know you get a novel and you're looking down you know what's the point here, what's you know - and I'm still like that, so I started reading poetry because there's no point in reading poetry and then later on I learned to love it and I'm in fact the Vice President of the National Poetry Society, which doesn't mean to say I'm the second best poet it's just that they quite liked what I'd - and I liked it and I liked - it's not true poetry but there's some lovely word-bytes in poems, you suddenly see a bit that looks like someone highlighted it and it says -

Favourite poets?

Well I'm a great admirer of W B Yates, a flawed man if ever there was on and indeed not far from here you can - I actually embroidered one of his poems with a portrait of W B Yates which is at the Poetry Society. And so many poems, but there's one which is called 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', and it had these lines in it, 'My country is Kiltartan Cross, my countrymen Kiltartan's poor'. And I would have to put asterisks against it, in the first place it's not countrymen it's women as well and if - these days if you're going to protect the poor of Kiltartan you've probably got to reach out right across the world and the global - all those things that being General Secretary of the TUC can make you destroy a good bit of poetry with all those thoughts but that's a way of saying something. That, I mean I just admire, even - I mean one of the most devastating things that was ever said to me, I was at a small union meeting and I was ploughing the way for what you'd probably call the Third Way now but you know generally ploughing on and there was an old chap at the back and he was, I could see he was getting to loathe me or my speech more and more as time went on and it was only a small meeting and he obviously a polite little bloke because after about twenty minutes he suddenly leapt to his feet and 'Willis' he said 'in a class war you're fit to be nothing but a bloody ostrich' he said. And I always swore that when I got the answer to that I was going to go back, and I will, when I work out the answer to that chap I'm going to go back and devastate them. But I love Yates poetry, I am a great admirer of Robert Frost, the American poet because I just kept, it was the words that Robert Kennedy used at JFK's funeral, 'For I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep' - and miles to go before I sleep, I thought that was a great reminder that you may make great progress but you've still got to get to the end.

How would you like to be remembered?

Well these days as Norman Willis the embroiderer I suppose. But I suppose as someone who didn't, well did his best and didn't try to kill anyone. I once, someone - I once said I never like cheap applause because someone always paid for cheap applause, usually those who were clapping and as someone said to me perhaps that's why you never got so much applause so I don't know but no I - I had cowardly thoughts but I tried not to be a coward is an old quote and just to tell people how it is, that was my job. And I've just realised that as General Secretary of the TUC I would certainly like to be remembered as someone who tried to reflect the interests and views of those who didn't go to the meetings. In so far as I could define my job, that's how I defined it and I didn't intend to make life difficult for myself by that attitude and I've wished it hadn't been like that and I wish it had been applause all the way but I don't think that would have changed anything.