



## **4<sup>th</sup> Annual ATL Lecture**

### **Introduction by Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary Association of Teachers and Lecturers and Executive Council Member, Trade Union Congress**

The topic of this evening's lecture would be an important topic for the trade union movement to reflect upon at any time. It is all the more important that we reflect at this time – with our economy in crisis, the generation of “*laissez faire*” in freefall, and with the State back in fashion.

In this 4<sup>th</sup> Annual ATL Lecture, Philip O'Connor will sketch out the genesis of Irish social partnership from the late 1980's to the challenges facing Partnership working in the midst of the current economic crisis. It is an issue of vital importance to the trade union movements on both islands.

I had hoped to keep my introduction brief, but do want to say something about the attitude and orientation of British trade unionism to collaborative partnership which, historically, has not helped our movement.

I know that Philip has written widely on the subject and brings an unparalleled historical, political and contextual grasp of this issue. I have just learnt that we have a mutual colleague in common – the late Eamon O'Kane. As many here will know, Eamon O'Kane was both President and General Secretary of our sister union the NASUWT. In Northern Ireland, he was also known as an activist within the civil rights movement and a political writer and thinker of some depth. Eamon was central to the negotiation, with New Labour's David Miliband, of the 2003 “National Agreement” in England and Wales (1). This established a form of social partnership in Education which has been unambiguously successful for all parties in Britain. Eamon's grasp of the political and trade union context were vital in establishing and embedding the Partnership. As a consequence, we are aware of how fragile the education partnership could be – as the only substantively “corporate” arrangement in the current British industrial relations landscape. “Corporatism” within our movement, of course, can be a dirty word – and I'll come back to this in a second.

ATL, in participating in the social partnership in Britain, does so consciously – as in the best interests of our members. It is part of our union's philosophy, our “DNA” if you wish.

We have argued that the decline in trade union membership that is not related - repeat, not related - to having more benign employment and union laws in place. Since 1998 there has been moderately positive legislation in individual employment law, but union membership decline has continued in Great Britain. Public policy is **not** the key factor in union decline or resurrection. ATL has realized this and looked at a wider canvas (2).

The modern economy has changed - with more high autonomy, high skilled, “MacJobs” as well as more low-discretion, low-value added, service sector “McJobs”. The labour market

has polarized to a great degree, with fewer “middling” jobs – the ‘blue collar’ skilled trades, technical or white collar associate professional jobs which were the very backbone of craft trade unionism. This trend is evident in Northern Ireland too, where relatively skilled full-time (and largely male) manufacturing jobs are disappearing to be replaced with part-time, often low-skilled (and largely female) service and care sector jobs. The economy now resembles more of a “hourglass” than a “pyramid”, with more “good jobs” at the top, lots of low paid service, retail and care jobs at the bottom, but fewer intermediate jobs. The imperative for trade unions is that we adapt to these changed circumstances.

Within teaching, we know that the terms of the debate are at least as much about the quality of work, and the quality of life, as about pay. Long hours, high workload, ridiculous levels of scrutiny and measurement, long commutes, stress, and poor management cultures are top of any league tables that ATL deal with. We find that traditional trade union adversarial posturing, and the rhetoric of “*struggle*” and strife simply doesn’t connect with the lives of our members in today’s world. Our members are resentful that middle and low earners are bearing a disproportionate tax burden, with rich corporates and super wealthy individuals ducking their tax responsibilities to the tune of £30 billion per annum (3). However, our members care more about “*getting on*” than “*getting even*” and have little appetite for fighting the battles of the past. The feedback we get is that our members want a union that is aspirational and modern, not stuck in the mud.

Notwithstanding the desire of our members to “get on”, there is a general understanding that the relationship between individual and employer often remains an unequal one. And, whilst the public perception of trade unions is not overwhelmingly positive, there remains a strong, innate instinct to seek collective solutions to problems in the workplace.

Interestingly, union membership has gone up in societies, such as Belgium, Denmark and Sweden– societies in which unions are implicated directly in running important social welfare systems. Union membership is highly valued in Germany where unions are a part of the intricate “co-determination” system of industrial and economic planning. Union membership has stabilized in Ireland where a social pact has entrenched the role of unions in national life since the late 1980’s.

Taking responsibility for running things – this has to be our direction of travel!

### **LOST OPPORTUNITIES**

In Britain, there have been significant opportunities for the union movement to take a strategic role at the heart of running the state. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Ernest Bevin offered the TUC a central role in administering the National Insurance system (4). Incredibly, the TUC found itself to be too busy with other things – too busy, in effect, to take responsibility for running the country! Had it taken up Bevin’s offer, the TUC would have put practical trade unionism at the heart the economy – central to peoples’ lives – and “locked in” Unions to an influential position for generations.

When, by the late 60’s, the post war welfare consensus was running out of steam, Barbara Castle sought to harness the enormous ‘negative’ or ‘blocking’ power of the trade union movement to positive effect in contributing to running the economy. Castle’s “In Place of Strife” failed (5). Edward Heath also failed, in proposing a tripartite, partnership style, corporatism in the early 70’s. And in the late 70’s the Bullock Report on Industrial Democracy sought to put trade unions in an indispensable position in every Board Room in the country, private or public (6).

We rejected all of these possibilities. In doing so, we opened the door to the Thatcher experiment which has only now run out of steam itself.

We thought we could go on as a simple, negative, blocking force. We couldn't! The failure of our union movement to take responsibility for the economic logjam of the 70's forced the electorate to clip our wings. If we are in any doubt about this, the 25 year retrospectives on the Miners Strike should convince us how peripheral our movement has become in the interim. The issue is not that we should "beat ourselves up" about past failures – but that we learn from them to take advantage of the current flux.

### THE IRISH UNION TRADITION

I understand that the Irish trade union tradition is different. Irish trade unionism, through the Citizens Army, played a role in the setting up of the state – and it rightly feels proprietorial about it. Irish trade unionism sees no contradiction in ensuring that the institutions of the Irish state work well. I sense, for instance, that the orientation of S.I.P.T.U. (4) still consciously derives from its sense of itself as the trade union 'wing' of the national movement.

Part of our "British" problem is that inflexible, left, ideology plays a part in holding us back from practical 'workaday' solutions which put working people in the driving seat. Equally, however, our view of the State is different. The British state pre-dates the trade union movement. Indeed, it pre-dates British democracy. We feel that the state is somehow "not our business" - it is about something else – about a wider role in the world - once an empire, latterly an unwise global adventurism in financial speculation and foreign intervention. Either way, our trade union movement has not felt that our role was to "run things".

The relevance of tonight is that we don't often discuss such things. **But the time is now. In every crisis, there's an opportunity.** The economic crisis wrought by the failure of "casino capitalism" gives us an opportunity. Things are fluid now, in flux. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to make trade unionism relevant to the new world that we build. But we can only do so, if we understand the past, and can orientate clearly within a changed - utterly changed - environment.

Colleagues, please welcome, Dr Philip O'Connor

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### NOTES / References

- (1) The 2003 National Agreement on "Raising Standards, Tackling Workload" introduced a new industrial relations framework for education in England and Wales. Ref DFES0172/2003 <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES+0172+2003>
- (2) This argument is given fuller treatment by David Coats: Raising Lazarus, the future for organized labour: Fabian Society Pamphlet 618, 2005 ISBN 0 7163 0618 2
- (3) The Mission Billions: The UK Tax Gap, Richard Murphy (Director of Tax Research LLP [www.taxresearch.org.uk](http://www.taxresearch.org.uk)) for the Trades Union Council, [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk) 2008, ISBN 978-1-85006-814-3
- (4) Details of the Minutes of the meetings where Bevin's offer was discussed are available from the TUC archive held at Imperial College London.
- (5) In Place of Strife: a Policy for Industrial Relations was the title of a government White Paper which appeared in January 1969. It was largely the work of Barbara Castle, the Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity (although it was her husband Ted Castle that thought up the catchy title), which sought to establish a new legislative framework for trades unions and employers.
- (6) The Bullock Report (1975): A Language for Life – Report of the Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA. London HMSO 1975 ISBN 0 11 270326 7 Ironically, one of the members of Bullock's Commission, Sir George Bain, has had a highly influential role in Northern Ireland Education since, within Queen University and as author of the Bain Report on sustainable schools.