

Cart Horse and Albatross

WHEN Mr John Smith and Mrs Margaret Beckett were elected leader and deputy leader of the Labour Party recently, they had the 190,000 block vote of the Confederation of Health Service Employees behind them. This union, which militates in the public sector and was noisily critical of the Government before and during the General Election campaign earlier in the year, held a postal ballot of its members on the issue. The response was rampantly apathetic, with fewer than 5% bothering to back Mr Smith.

Only someone over 30 is likely to recall the power of the big names in the big unions, and to remember when the Government (any government) could decide nothing without consulting them or taking elaborate steps to forestall their reaction. Yet the TUC is about to open the 1992 political conference season, and its leaders, largely unrecognised by an uninterested public, will seek what glory they can, as little fish in a shrinking pool.

Today's reality is that the Labour Party clings to the unions for their money alone. Unions present the wrong image (as, of course, does the very name, Labour). They represent the "smokestack" industries, old-fashioned dirt and manual labour. The modern Labour MP has never worn a blue collar. The new Labour activist is more likely to have a white-collar job in local government or belong to the National Union of Teachers than to be a member of the National Union of Mineworkers.

The Conservatives are conventionally associated with big business and are undoubtedly supported by financial contributions from it. Nobody, though, believes that what the CBI says at its conference is of fundamental importance for the Conservative Party, and Conservatives do not give a thought to allowing businessmen to take part in selecting their party leader or in determining their policies. This is not to deny that there is considerable business influence, but the Conservative Party remains free to decide whom to listen to. After all, business is not monolithic; interests do not necessarily coincide; indeed frequently they clash. Business is free to reduce or withhold contributions and to maintain regular contacts with other parties. When John Smith was on the luncheon circuit in the City, the traffic in ideas was not all one way.

Big business neither needs nor is allowed any formal control over Conservative Party affairs. Labour must wish it had a similar relationship with the TUC and the unions. Labour politicians know that the unions are widely mistrusted. They are not popular even with their own mem-

bers, except in their benevolent society role.

The modern "growth" and service industries reject old-fashioned trades unionism. Today's workers do not join unions or they join unions which do not affiliate to the TUC. Women workers are even less interested in unions than their menfolk. There seems to be very little future for the TUC, except as a talking-shop, on the CBI model.

The challenge facing the old trades unions is whether their best interests are being served by still acting as paymasters to the Labour Party. What do they hope to get for their money? Are we seeing the TUC clinging to Labour solely because its tired old men can think of nothing else? Are there no bright young men and women who cannot see how continued attachment to the Labour

Party is bringing them down? The Labour Party is now no more than the biggest of the minority parties. How can the unions attract members who are hostile to Labour or

Plummeting membership of Britain's trade unions has led to the call for Trade Union Congress leader Norman Willis to resign. But what future is there for Britain's unions?

indifferent to it? Do they want the freedom to exert a more general influence? How much longer will they stay where they are wanted only for their wallets?

How many of the unemployed does the TUC think will turn on the television set at conference time and expect to hear some sign that new thinking is needed? Bashing the Conservatives and paying dues to Labour, Brothers, is no longer enough. The unions must reclaim the freedom to act in their own, and their member's interests.

TRADE, NOT AID.

CAN ANYONE name a single nation of the "third world" which has prospered as the direct result of foreign aid? Have we not witnessed instead preservation of corrupt regimes, expanding bureaucracy, and expenditure on modern armaments to keep the military amused and cow both the neighbours and the local populace? Might we not be better advised to dismantle the trade barriers against "third world" primary products? Sugar is an excellent example. Europe's Common Agricultural Policy keeps out cane to protect a strikingly less efficient local beet industry. Consumers lose, poor overseas producers lose, and European exporters lose because the "third world" is not earning enough to pay for the goods it would like.

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