

The future

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1969 has been described, by many a seasoned NUT speaker, as an 'historical watershed'. Beyond the initial usage of the term, there is only limited agreement as to what systems this supposed watershed divides. In a very general sense, the obvious division is between hovering on the brink of militancy (including endless convoluted debate as to strike effectiveness, 'image' considerations, strike funds, strike rules, etc) and, in the new system, actual strike action with a widespread willingness of ordinary members to actually 'walk out'.

Certainly one of the most important aspects of the NUT over the past few months has been the pace of militancy arising from, and encouraged by rank and file members (occasionally it seems, in weird cohort with more devious and politically sophisticated Union officials) but juxtaposed with a national executive which, in terms of composition and basic policy, has remained unchanged over the past 10-15 years.

Traditional

This traditional executive needs to be examined in terms of its appropriateness for a new period of teacher militancy and generally changing attitudes on the part of Union membership as a whole. On the question of salaries, for example, the executive has largely resisted, until very

recently, any move towards strike action. By a substantial majority, the executive recommended to our Special Salaries Conference last February that we accept the 7 per cent 'norm' offer of the management side. Executive speaker followed executive speaker exuding sorrow and regret at our having to accept an award which was, in terms of even moderate cost of living indices, actually a cut. The vast majority of the executive have always shown unwillingness to 'go public' on any awkward confrontation with the Government or Local Authority side. It is as though they felt trapped and attacked, on the one side by the 'big guns' of Curzon St and Sir William Alexander, and on the other by the potential militancy and intransigence of their own members. The strike action of December and January was largely the result of the Executive being finally pushed harder by membership than by respectability considerations in their relations with the Government.

However, it is simply not good enough to regard the 'tipping of scales' towards membership priorities as being anything like satisfactory. The executive of the NUT, like most executives, has enormous discretionary powers. True, broad policy lines are established annually by Conference, but the executive meeting fortnightly has the power to affect substantially the image and effectiveness of the NUT as a whole. The executive also appoints the officials of the Union who obviously control the day to day running of the Union and can effectively quash any non-conformist voice of which they disapprove.

The problem with the present executive is that its membership reflects times gone-by. There is a social club atmosphere somewhere between a respectable working-

men's club and an alderman's retiring-room. Obviously any Union has this type of strong group-feeling and with it a desire to absorb all newcomers within its particular ambience. When Max Morris continued, after being elected an executive member, his more prickly opposition to the 'let's keep everything quiet line', a number of executive members were heard to express consternation that they had been 'quite willing to welcome Max' but that his continuing intransigence was just 'plain unfair'. The average age of executive members is 55-60 and all members, bar one, are head teachers. Of course, just because a person is a 55-year-old head teacher does not in itself preclude militant and informed leadership (there are some very good executive members in this respect) but the overbearing dominance of this group is quite distorting in terms of the actual composition of Union membership as a whole. For example, half of all Union members are under the age of 35 and over 85 per cent are class teachers. It is also extremely limiting in terms of properly comprehending the strains and stresses experienced by the ordinary class teacher on the salary question, the class size issue, the effects of severely reduced capitation, or even more critical, the demoralizing effect of working under an autocratic head teacher.

Disturbing

However, the present executive is not self-appointed, but is elected (inexorably one feels) every two years by considerable numbers of ordinary NUT members. Disturbingly, many are unopposed in elections, and most encounter no serious

opposition. If the 'watershed' idea is at all tenable, then the real test will come in the executive elections this spring and in 1972. The upsurge of committed support by teachers for recent militancy has shown that organized leadership can 'produce the goods', but the long term, more important challenge is for teachers who are sensitive to politics and educational issues to stand for executive places all over the country and thus to develop a more reliable, effective and imaginative executive.

Modern

What would an improved NUT executive be like in the late 1970s? Firstly it would comprise people who actively and intelligently represent the wealth of experience and background within Union membership. This would include teachers from primary and secondary schools with modern, informed, and developing ideas concerning educational advance and change. It would include younger as well as older teachers, and fewer head teachers. More important than its composition would be its policies and strategies. Instead of executive debates being secret and unpublished, it would open out its concerns and divisions to membership as a whole – and *The Teacher* would be editorially free to do this. With major educational issues such as the forging of evidence for a new Education Act or the submission of evidence to an enquiry into teacher training, it would provoke and lead, in a radical way, widespread and intensive debate at local level. Its major long term objective would be to analyse with great accuracy and care the conditions and needs of the mass of Union membership, the needs of the ordinary class teacher. The present hazy assumption that head teachers are simply 'teacher leaders' in schools would have to be examined . . . to be a leader one has to first be a full member of the group, and how many head teachers are really this is at least questionable.

The sorts of issues which at present concern young teachers would probably become more important. For example, the iniquities of the promotion system with its dependence on head teacher reports and largely uninformed selection committees, 'secret' reports of any sort between head teacher and local education authority (eg probationary year report), the insecure and frequently unfair position of teachers employed on divisional staff or of temporary terminal status. Many of these issues already intimately affect teachers and are discussed, particularly at staff room level, but what is needed urgently is a practical strategy for implementation of reform launched seriously by the executive. All the more 'grass roots' professional issues would need more vigorous attack and should come higher on the list of executive priorities.

The whole question of democracy in education is possibly the most important future ideological 'watershed' in the NUT.

Most head teachers on the executive, or those who run the local associations, genuinely believe that they are fully democratic in the way they run their schools, or the more clever ones explain how much more 'progressive' educationally they are than their staff so they *have* to be autocratic. This latter point may well be true but is an extraordinarily short-sighted and limited view of the educational potential of most teachers. Young teachers consistently express dismay at the 'reality shock' when confronted by the very real and final powers of their head teachers. This is especially the case with young teachers, many of whom experienced far more democracy and consultation as *students* than they do subsequently as supposed professional teachers.

In the book *Teachers and Teaching*, Morrison and McIntyre point out that: 'Head teachers in British schools are men with great power . . . they are in positions of complete authority within the law over everyone else in their schools. In addition, by having a good deal of control over the appointment of teachers to better paid jobs, they can exert strong financial pressure on teachers.' The NUT document *Into the 70s* on the new Education Act suggests, in a short final paragraph on the whole question of educational administration, that: 'There is a strong case to be made in *some* schools for the existence of an academic board' and it recommends that education authorities should 'be given the power to set up academic boards from among the teaching staff in schools *where appropriate*' (my italics). This simple isn't good enough.

It may well be that the executive which finally approved this document felt thoroughly radical in this suggestion (as well as generous) but the full and responsible involvement of teachers in the running of their schools is an urgent need. It would raise the general level of teachers' understanding of the complexity of the corporate needs of their school and would implicitly recognize that the growing complexity of schools as social and educational institutions cannot be adequately managed by one untrained authority figure. Headmasters should not be expected to reach reliably refined and fully comprehensive decisions in such institutions as schools are now becoming.

Regionalization

Another aspect of the democracy question is the regionalization of educational policy-making both within the State education system and within the NUT itself. The centralized mode of operation as expressed in the over riding power of the DES and more recently, the specious notion of democracy ensconced in a Teachers' General Council, must be opposed. Educational decision-making should, in the next decade, undergo a de-centralizing process, and strong regional representative structures should be encouraged in the NUT as well as in the educational system generally. Regional analyses of teachers'

needs, with respect to in-service course provision, part-time B Ed study, secondment procedures, curriculum change, etc, should all involve much more high-powered debate and cross-fertilization of ideas than is at present the case.

Similarly, the present situation of executive members attempting to represent a quarter of a million teachers on Schools Council committees, BBC, University and ATO committees must be urgently reappraised. Instead, expert representatives could possibly be elected regionally and, according to their specialist knowledge, would serve on appropriate bodies as listed above. Associated with this is the clear need for a vastly enlarged and more expert NUT education and research department so that Union spokesman on complex educational issues can, at least, offer distinctively expert and informed contributions rather than an all too frequent negativism. This would replace the present fatuous position whereby executive members serve on multifarious committees of great educational importance but are unable positively or expertly to add much to these because of being 'committee saturated'.

Pressure

To summarize, the NUT is already a powerful pressure group within the education system of England and Wales. I, and many other active young teachers, look ahead to the time when the NUT will regularly, with militant action if necessary, insist on real educational advance and will resist all attempts by Government, or any other group, to depress and restrict the quality of State education. Part of this larger and more aggressive role will be affiliation to the TUC so that the organized trade union movement can support us, and through us, the State system of education.

Within the NUT itself, the main job is to stimulate and utilize the talents of the mass membership through a vastly increased information system and dialogue-structure. In overall policy it will be important to steer a complex, but essential, middle course between a mechanistic defence of teachers' rights and, on the other hand, to develop the role of the Union as a major source of radical innovation for better education for children in a qualitative, as well as quantitative, sense. Certainly, a special feature of the teaching profession, and very much reflected in the NUT, is a real concern for basic educational issues, but if successive governments try to exploit this concern for their own parsimonious ends, then the NUT will increasingly resist with growing militancy and organized opposition. I, for one, hope that the militancy we have seen over the past months is a real beginning of a breakthrough in my Union, not just in terms of the critical salary question, but that the 'spin-off' will result in a union which, more than any other educational body, will be associated with a massive and imaginative upgrading of the State system of education over the next twenty years. ■