The New Politics of British Trade Unionism

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The New Politics of British Trade Unionism

Union Power and the Thatcher Legacy

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To Holly, who, I'm sure, will do better

Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xvii
1. The Historical Background	1
The Industrial Relations Act 1971	10
Conclusion	21
2. Union Power Before 1979	23
The changes in British unionism in the 1960s and 1970s and their consequences for patterns of representation	24
Union/government relations before 1979	29
The trade unions' access to the political sphere	35
Trade union power in Britain before 1979	45
Conclusion	52
3. The Origins, Development and Content of the Conservative Legislation	54
The development of Conservative industrial relations policy in opposition, 1974–9	54
The Winter of Discontent	59
The Conservatives in power: the triumph of individualism	64
The legislative onslaught: its scope and content	74
Conclusion	80

4. Using the Legislation: An Employer's Onslaught?	82
The operation of the Conservative Government's legislation	83
The use of the law of contract	96
The policing of industrial relations and the use of the criminal law	101
The indirect effect of legislation	104
Conclusion	108
5. The Unions' Political Role: Relations with the Conservative Government, 1979-90	110
The unions' access to government	111
Influencing government legislation	114
A strike with political resonance	119
The unions' role in policy-making and implementation: the case of youth employment policy	125
The European dimension	134
Conclusion	137
6. Trade Unions and the Labour Party	139
Trade unions and constitutional reform, 1979-83	141
Trade unionists' voting behaviour and political attitudes	145
Links between the Labour Party and the trade unions	147
The changing sectoral composition of the TUC	152
The political fund ballots	154
Beyond the ballots	157
The Labour Party Policy Review	158
Conclusion	162
7. The Changing Economic Context	164
The changing economic structure	164
The decline in union membership	169
New technology	171
Flexibilisation	176
Changes in economic and labour market policy	183
Conclusion	188

8. Shop-floor Industrial Relations: The Private Sector	191
Changes in shop-floor industrial relations in the private sector	191
Explaining the changes	207
Conclusion	213
9. Shop-floor Industrial Relations: The Public Sector	215
The aggregate pattern	216
Industrial relations in particular sections of the public sector	218
Privatisation	231
Explaining the changes	235
Conclusion	236
10. Thatcherism and industrial relations	238
Thatcherism and industrial relations	239
Thatcherism and the top-down view of policy- making	245
<i>Bibliography</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	261

List of Tables

1.1	Changing industrial relations proposals/legislation, 1969–90: the major features	14
1.2	Applications to the National Industrial Relations Court for relief from unfair industrial practices:	
	1.1(a) by sector; 1.1(b) by size	17
2.1	Changes in the membership of TUC affiliated unions, 1970–89	26
2.2	Union membership, 1974–89	28
2.3	Trade-union-sponsored MPs, 1955–87	37
3.1	Public opinion on government proposals/legislation on trade unions, 1969–84	57
3.2	The main features of the Thatcher Government legislation	76
3.3	The step-by-step approach: a cumulative process	78
4.1	The use of injunctions in industrial relations cases, 1980–89	86
4.2	Sectoral distribution of injunctions, 1980–87	89
4.3	Injunctions brought by size of company, 1980–88	90
4.4	The use of the criminal law in the 1984–5 miners' strike in England and Wales	103
5.1	Number and type of contact between government and unions, 1976–84 and 1988	113
6.1	Class, union membership and vote, 1964–87	146
6.2	Attitudes of trade unionists	148
7.1	Changing economic indicators, 1979–89	165
7.2(a)	Employees in employment, 1970–88	166
7.2(b)	Employees in employment, 1979–88	167

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DAVID MARSH

Abbreviations

ABP	Associated British Ports
ACAS	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service
ACTT	Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
(Formerly AUEW)	(Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers)
AJ	After Japan
APEX	Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
ASTMS	Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff
BG	British Gas
BIFU	Banking, Insurance and Finance Union
BR	British Rail
BT	British Telecommunications
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CLPD	Campaign for Labour Party Democracy
CLV	Campaign for a Labour Victory
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
CPSA	Civil and Public Services Association
CTU	Conservative Trade Unionists
DEmp	Department of Employment
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
EC	European Community
EEF	Engineering Employer's Federation

xiv *Abbreviations*

EETPU	Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union
ESC	Economic and Social Council (of the European Community)
ET	Employment Training
FBU	Fire Brigade Union
GMBATU	General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union
HSC	Health and Safety Commission
ICCUS	Inns of Court Conservative and Unionist Society
IDS	Income Data Services
IPCS	Institution of Professional Civil Servants
ITB	Industrial Training Board
JIC	Just-in-case
JIT	Just-in-time
LACSAB	Local Authorities Conditions of Service Advisory Board
MDHCS	Mersey Docks and Harbour Corporation
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union
NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NAPE	National Association of Port Employers
NCB	National Coal Board
NDLS	National Dock Labour Scheme
NEC	National Executive Committee
NEDC	National Economic Development Council
NEDO	National Economic Development Office
NGA	National Graphical Association
NHS	National Health Service
NIRC	National Industrial Relations Court
NJC	National Joint Council
NRC	National Reporting Centre
NTA	New Technology Agreement
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PLA	Port of London Authority
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
POEU	Post Office Engineering Union

PRG	Policy Review Group
PSBR	Public Sector Borrowing Requirement
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SOGAT (82)	Society of Graphical and Allied Trades
SUA	Single Union Agreement
TA	Training Agency
TASS	Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section of the AUEW
TC	Training Council
TEC	Training Enterprise Council
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TUCC	Trade Union Coordinating Committee
TUFL	Trade Unions for Labour
TULV	Trade Unions for a Labour Victory
TULRA	Trade Union and Labour Relations Act
UCATT	Union of Combustion, Allied Trades and Technicians
UCW	Union of Communication Workers
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers
WIRS	Workplace Industrial Relations Survey
YOP	Youth Opportunities Programme
YT	Youth Training
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

Introduction

Without exception, journalistic assessments of Mrs Thatcher's achievements in office, following her departure as Prime Minister in November 1990, highlighted her industrial relations policy or, more graphically; her 'defeat' of the trade unions, as a major, perhaps the major, achievement of Thatcherism.

The *Guardian's* analysis was typical:

The overdue reform of the trade unions will stand among the most positive legacies of the Thatcher era.

(Keith Harper, *Guardian*, 23 November 1990)

Of course it is not only journalists who have emphasised Mrs Thatcher's success in this field. Some of the most well-known British political scientists have stressed the curbing of union power. So, Kavanagh argues:

The government's legislation on industrial relations and trade unions has taken hold. Here is an area where the balance of advantage has changed since 1979, from union to employers and managers and from the consultative role granted to the unions to one in which they are virtually ignored by the government.

(Kavanagh, 1987, p. 243; see also King, 1988, p. 62 and Gamble, 1988, pp. 126–7)

This view has also been shared by sociologists (Crouch, 1986, p. 131), economists (Minford, 1988, p.99), historians (Holmes, 1985, p. 214) and even some students of industrial relations (Roberts, 1989, p. 78).

The argument of Kavanagh and others is fairly straightforward. In 1979 the Conservative Government had a limited number of aims. It wished to: remove the unions' role in the policy-making process; assert its authority, and therefore its image of governing competence, by standing up to the unions; change the attitudes and strategies of unions instilling a New Realism; and alter the balance on the shop floor in favour of management. Overall, the government wanted to weaken the unions' position in relation to both government and employers; to restrict what many observers saw as their excessive power.

Political scientists, like Kavanagh, argue that the Conservative Government has achieved these aims but, in so far as they present empirical evidence to support such a conclusion, they concentrate upon the changes in the relations between the unions and government. Their argument emphasises three changes. First, unions are no longer involved in policy-making and have had no influence on legislation. Second, the government has been able to transform the legislative framework within which unions have operated and has had limited problems of compliance from unions. This 'success' is contrasted with the fate of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act which union non-compliance turned into a virtual dead letter by the time it was repealed. Third, the government successfully resisted a number of public sector strikes, notably of course, the 1984–5 miners' strike. This reinforced its image of governing competence and helped confirm the triumph of New Realism in the trade union movement. The political scientists pay little or no attention to changes in shop-floor industrial relations.

Of course, not everyone accepts the Kavanagh view. The industrial relations literature, particularly, is critical of the notion that the Thatcher Government has transformed industrial relations. This literature concentrates upon relations between employers and unions and is mainly concerned with the role of government in so far as it sets the framework within which shop-floor industrial relations operate. Two clear points emerge from the majority of this literature. First it is argued that less has changed than Kavanagh and others claim; in particular little has altered on the shop floor (Kelly, 1987, pp. 8, 12, 14, 16–17; McIlroy, 1988, p. 233; McInnes, 1987, p. 6). Second, it is suggested that, in so far as these changes have occurred, they result more from the transformation of the occupational structure and the macroeconomy than from government policy and

legislation (Kelly, 1987, p. 17; McIlroy, 1988; McInnes, 1987; Wedderburn, 1985, p. 33).

These two positions are significantly different and result, at least in part, from the particular interests of social scientists as compared with industrial relations specialists. Each discipline pays insufficient attention to the other's literature. The aim of this book is to present a broader and more thorough analysis dealing with the unions' relations with both government and employers by drawing on the literature from a number of disciplines. To this end I will focus upon three key questions: How much has changed in the position of unions in relation to both government and employers? Why have these changes occurred? What is likely to happen in the future?

In order to address these questions the book contains ten substantive chapters. The first chapter looks at the development of labour law throughout this century, paying most attention to the Labour Government's 1969 White Paper, *In Place of Strife* and the Conservative Government's 1971 Industrial Relations Act. This is crucial, as it is impossible to understand fully the particularities of the Thatcher Government's legislation, or the strategy the government adopted, without such a historical perspective. The second chapter assesses the extent of trade union power before 1979, paying particular attention to their role in the 1974–9 Labour Government. Without such an analysis it is impossible to comment on the putative decline in their power.

Having established this background, the third chapter analyses the evolution and content of the five major pieces of legislation passed by the Conservative Government; the 1980, 1982, 1988 and 1990 Employment Acts and the 1984 Trade Union Act. Of course, legislation can easily be passed by a government with a large majority. However, the legislation may not be used by employers or unions. Indeed, that is what happened, to a large extent, in the case of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. For this reason, Chapter 4 examines the use of the Conservative legislation by employers.

Many authors emphasise that the Conservative Government has ended the cosy process of consultation and excluded the trade unions from policy-making. Chapter 5 looks at the extent to which relations between unions and government have changed since 1979. At the same time, the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party is crucial for any understanding of the position of unions. In Chapter 2, I look at this relationship during the key period of the

Social Contract. Chapter 6 concentrates upon the changes in that relationship since 1979, changes which it is necessary to understand if we are to attempt any assessment of the likely future of unions.

In Chapter 7 I examine the economic changes which have contributed to the decline in the unions' position. Subsequently, Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the most important question, as far as industrial relation specialists are concerned: how far have things changed on the shop floor? Chapter 8 looks at changes in the private sector, while Chapter 9 considers the public sector.

The final chapter initially presents a summary of the conclusions of the book. Subsequently, however, I raise the broader question of what this case study of one area of policy-making reveals more generally about the influence of Thatcherism on British politics.