The modern role of the UK trade unions

A research document by the PA consulting group

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Foreword by Lord Young of Graffham

For a long time now the Government has been stressing that economic growth and prosperity in Britain depends on our willingness as a people to respond and adapt to new ideas and changing circumstances. It is through the enterprise and energy with which we adapt to change that we are building on success and creating the jobs so badly needed to overcome unemployment. Government is playing its part by helping to create a climate for enterprise, especially by removing obstacles to the working of markets, including the labour market.

Better industrial relations clearly have a significant and sometimes decisive influence on the introduction of new ideas and technological change. I therefore welcome this report of the PA survey of trade union attitudes, illustrating as it does a more positive union approach now increasingly in evidence. There is still some way to go in certain industries but I hope that the report will be widely read and discussed as a valuable contribution to public understanding of this field.

Young of Graffham

Lord Young of Graffham
Secretary of State for Employment



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Foreword by Sir Terence Beckett CBE

This report does a valuable service in putting the record straight. There are too many people in this country who believe too many myths, and who are too keen to run down British industrial performance. Now we have it on the record that this country does not have a worse strike record than the rest of the world. It might have been true a few years ago, in a few industries – motors, shipbuilding and coal mining – but even in those industries today, a new realism has emerged.

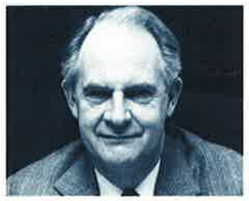
The genuine evidence presented by this report will, I hope, at least cause people to review their opinions in the light of the facts. The Japanese and the Americans are not known for their acceptance of sloth and inefficiency – yet both these countries have been stepping up their investment in the UK over the last few years.

However there is a lot more that Britain can do to improve her efficiency. Enormous strides have been made but we still have three times as many unions as our continental competitors.

The challenge which faces us is to change, to be adaptable at all times, to new ideas for improving efficiency, and to the changing requirements of the market place.

Terry Beckett

Sir Terence Beckett CBE
Director – General of the
Confederation of British Industry



Foreword by Barrie Sherman

This report is letting the world know that industrial relations in Britain are not only good, they are getting better still. It is not before time.

One of the mysteries of British life has been why so many people continued to belong to trade unions when they were supposed to be negative, untrustworthy, Luddite and continually out on strike. Surely not all the British people were like this or indeed so easily led? The PA Report has done us the valuable service of explaining this paradox. British unions are less likely to call their members out on strike than those in many other countries; they are co-operative in the main and they allow for more flexibility than many of their European colleagues. In short they are reasonable bodies staffed by reasonable people, including the shop stewards.

The report however digs deeper than this. It covers two topics, the second of which is the changing world and unions' responses to it. It is clear from their research amongst unions, managements and academics that unions' attitudes are starting to change. Whether it is the General Secretary of the NGA taking a 'more realistic' view about the introduction of newer technologies or the changes that are taking place in the forms of agreements and union representation the trade union responses are different from those that are usually publicised.

There are pressures on trade unions coming from all quarters. As the report details they are having to cope with these whilst at the same they are co-operating with managements in an attempt to make British industry and commerce competitive once again. This has ever been the rule; the highly publicised disputes have always been the exception. Unions and managements have always recognised the areas of mutual interest, let us hope that both take the opportunities offered in this changing era to provide a better life for all, including those who have been left by the wayside, the unemployed.

Barrie

Barrie Sherman



Ex-Research Director of ASTMS and author of 'The State of the Unions' to be published by John Wiley and Sons in 1986.

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