

KEN CAMERON INTERVIEW

What will we do

Vicky Knight, Secretary of the National Women's Committee of the Fire Brigades Union, at Congress for the first time, talks to former FBU General Secretary Ken Cameron as he retires from the TUC General Council

VK: Ken, first of all, I'm honoured to have been asked to do this interview. How did you first get involved with the Trades Union Movement?

KC: Both my parents were very active in the Labour Party, particularly my mother who was an Irish woman, she came across to Scotland when she was 14 and worked as a skivvy, if you like, in the big houses. She was a little firebrand and she was very much involved in the Labour Movement; I think my first ideas and inclinations to be a socialist sprang from her, purely in the way that she brought me up and what she taught me. The first union I was a member of was the National Union of Journalists when I worked for the Aberdeen Press and Journal in Inverness as a junior reporter, which I got the sack from.

VK: Why did you get the sack?

KC: I was sent to cover the Drumnadrochit highland games, would you believe, which was the highlight of the year for people in that area. I spent the day in the beer tent. I was only 17, and working with journalists who had been around for years. As a result I got extremely merry so someone else wrote out the results for me. Subsequently the 'phones never stopped ringing because Marie Macdonald hadn't won the tossing of the caber, she'd won the egg and spoon race, and so on and so forth. I got a warning for that one! And then there was an international swimming competition between England and Wales and myself and a guy by the name of Ian McCaskell were covering it for the paper. He went off to the hospitality room upstairs supposedly for half an hour; an hour and a half later he still hadn't come back. They started to play a water polo match so I went to get him out of the hospitality room in order that I could have a dram!. We met halfway at the edge of the swimming pool, he clapped me on the back, apologised and we both fell in the swimming pool. We were fished out and while I got the sack Ian went on to be the editor of the News of the World.

VK: Can you remember when you made your first political speech?

KC: The first speech I ever made was at the FBU Conference in

1964 in Southport when I was 23. We had been issued with helmets which were on trial in my watch and which were like German Nazi helmets. They were impracticable because when you bent your head they fell off but also the local kids, in a rough old area where I worked, were giving us Nazi salutes and I nearly got the sack for refusing, on behalf of the watch, to wear the bloody things. There was a paragraph in the EC Report and when it came up, Para 34, my delegation was right at the back of the hall and I indicated that I wanted to speak on paragraph 34. Enoch Humphries, who was the President, went on to 35,36 and I'm shouting 34, and he got to 40 or whatever and people started saying there was a young lad who wanted to speak. When I got to the rostrum, having marched all the way from the back of the hall, Enoch asked what paragraph I was speaking on. I said 34; he said we're on 42, 43, 44, 45. So the delegates started a slow hand clap and said let him speak. Enoch said O.K. but make it quick. I froze and couldn't say a word so I had the additional embarrassment of coming down from the rostrum and walking all the way back to my seat. This story is something I've always used at union schools. I've told people not to be frightened; we all do things like that and it is a terrifying experience but that shouldn't stop you from getting up and making your point.

VK: Whose political ideals and principles have moulded you during your Trades Union involvement and why, first internationally and secondly, nationally?

KC: Internationally, Nelson Mandela, who has such tremendous courage. Black South Africans, particularly members of the ANC, lived in the knowledge that they could be thrown into prison for life or indeed, lose their lives for their beliefs. Despite 27 years in prison and coming out into a world which had changed considerably he gave superb interviews, did all the things he has done, showed himself to be a true statesman. He was also able to forgive the white oppressors who had kept him in prison for all of those years - I think he is absolutely phenomenal. Second to him would be Fidel Castro for what he has done in Cuba, despite all the pressure from the United States. Thirdly, Arafat because the Palestinian people have put up with tremendous

without him?

oppression and he has been there as a figurehead who kept them going despite having to make difficult decisions in difficult situations.

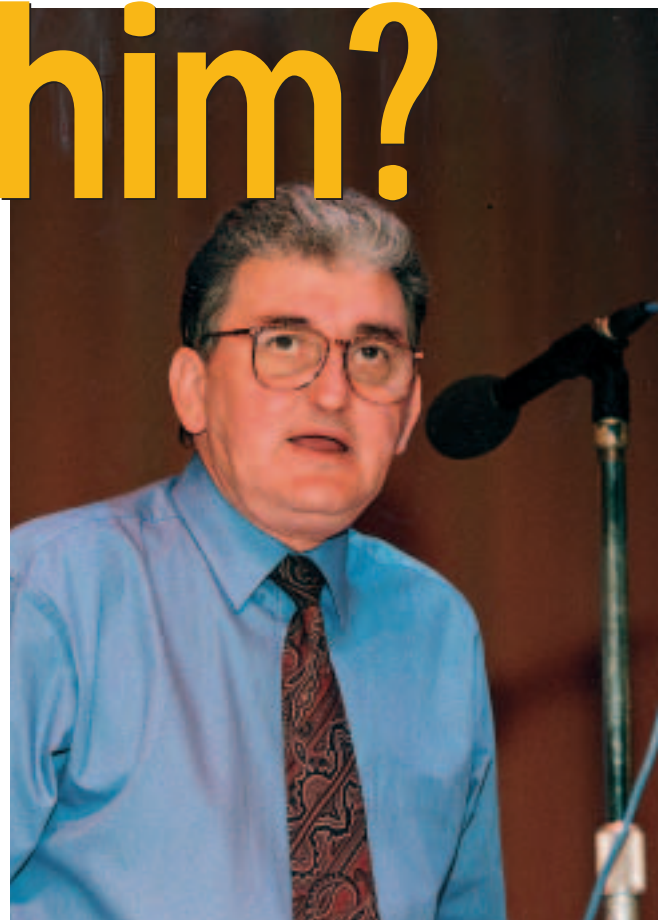
VK: And in Britain?

KC: The person in Britain who influenced me most would be Mick McGahey who was the Vice President of the NUM Scottish miners, a tremendously principled old communist who never wavered in any way in his beliefs, not just for miners but about society as a whole. Also, although seeming to be a very hard sort of person in the eyes of those who didn't know him, he was extremely compassionate. He cared deeply about people -he was like a father to me.

VK: Going back to talking about speeches, I remember that when I made my first speech at the FBU Annual Conference, as part of a minority group within the FBU, you gave me great support and encouragement. I know changes have taken place within the TUC over the years on equality structures and issues. Why did you take the positive stance that you did when so many people's opinions within the FBU and the TUC sometimes differed so much, and why did you fight so hard for representation of women, black and ethnic minority, gay and lesbian members and those with disabilities?

KC: I think people go into denial about the fact that women, for example, make up 52% of the population and yet are completely and utterly under-represented in most areas of our society, including the Trades Union Movement. Even to this day when you look at leaders of trades unions, there are very few women. Opportunities are not given to women, and certainly not given to black and ethnic minority members of our society. I feel this to be very wrong. Intolerance towards gay and lesbian comrades, again the homophobic attitudes that too many people have got is something we have to fight against. We've come a long way in the FBU in a reasonably short period of time.

My regret is that it took us so long to understand the problems, the abuse and the harassment being suffered by some of our members - I take the blame for that as well. We should have grasped this a lot earlier than we did and it wasn't until some of the most horrendous cases came to light that we reacted. We should have been proactive rather than reactive. Having said that, we've moved a long way in the last 10 years and I look forward to seeing representatives on the Executive from our



women members, from the black and ethnic minorities and eventually, when they wish it, from our gay and lesbian comrades as well.

VK How do you think that the sections and sectional conferences have improved the Fire Brigades Union and indeed, Congress?

KC: I think in terms of the FBU it's brought into the Union a large number of people who are now active in the union and who've enhanced the FBU with their contributions, which have, in my opinion, been quite phenomenal. Their commitment is tremendous in trying to get around the country and convince their fellow firefighters and control staff of their case, of their need to be treated properly at work and also for them to be represented on all decision making committees. I am not a woman. I don't have a black skin. I'm not gay or lesbian. Therefore, I don't think I'm the best person to express what their feelings are or what affects them in their daily life; I think the people best able to do that are the people themselves and they've done it extremely eloquently and extremely efficiently within the structures of the Union. Thank God they're now doing it within the structure of the Union because they could have moved in a different direction, thinking that the FBU, indeed the trade union movement has nothing to offer so therefore let's do it in some different way. In terms of the TUC, one of the things that disappoints me most is that although we've pushed and

KEN CAMERON INTERVIEW

pushed, starting with establishing the committees, then the conferences, then (and only this year) getting representation on the TUC General Council for gay and lesbian members! – it has all taken so long. Even though experience shows us this is the right way to go! This really does annoy me, the fact that we have to continually battle to re-invent the wheel! Thank God we're almost there this year.

VK: Right, going on now to the Trades Union Movement, it has reduced by about half since 1979, how do you perceive these changes?

KC: Two things: one was that when Thatcher came in she was determined that she was going to take the miners on; she saw this as the strongest union in the TUC. Having done that she then took on the whole of the Trades Union Movement. These issues obviously had an effect upon the level of membership but 4 million unemployed also had a big impact. She preached the philosophy that people should stand up for themselves, never mind their neighbours or fellow workers, and it took a long time for people to understand that this is a flawed philosophy. The landslide we saw in the 1997 election reflected that at last people had woken up to the fact that we can only take steps forward if we do it in a collective way and not as individuals looking after themselves in a very selfish way.

VK: Are you a member of the Labour Party?

KC: I am

VK: What do you think of the new Labour Government?

KC: Well, I cried with joy along with my partner, when on the night of the 1st May 1997 they were elected, and also for the fact that at last, after a horrendous 17 years, we had seen the end of the Tories. As I said to Gordon Brown, I've cried real tears since then – at the fact that we talked about two more years of the Tories' economic policies, which is not what people voted for, and that Labour has moved away from socialist ideals. While we have to be inclusive in terms of the whole of the country, and in terms of all sections of society; including business, what we ought not to be doing, is throwing out our good principles in order to reach out to people who, at the end of the day, if push came to shove, would make sure that their business and self interests, would come before the interests of the community; particularly the worst off in that community. I find that extremely disappointing, but I don't believe the Labour Party is Tony Blair's party. I believe the Labour Party is our party and that we have to stay within, to fight to try to

change the Labour Party and get it back to the ideals that look after the worst off in our community. I think if we don't believe in that we believe in nothing! I think too, people are seeing through some of the faults. The only thing of which Labour can be sure is that because the Tories have not got their act together and that Hague is not seen as a credible opponent, they've got it easy at this moment in time. What they ought not to do is take for granted the grass roots people in the heartlands of Labour because if they do that it will be only a matter of time before they slip back into opposition again and I sincerely don't want to see the Tories coming back. What I do want to see is a caring, Socialist government which does care about the unemployed, does care about abuse of people, does care about a decent minimum wage. The attacking of asylum seekers and "squeegee" merchants and all the rest of it is certainly not a Labour Party that I want to be associated with and that's why I want to continue to fight to change that.

We have to stay within, to fight to try to change the Labour Party and get it back to the ideals that look after the worst off in our community. I think if we don't believe in that we believe in nothing!

VK: Who do you see as leading us back into that party you want so much to see in the future?

KC: Well, quite frankly! Within the leadership of the Labour Party at this moment, there is no-one to come forward as an alternative. Because everyone in my opinion (and that is one of the things I have against the party) is frightened and

people shouldn't be frightened to express an alternative opinion as to how we go forward. I think we need somebody who understands the Trades Union Movement. Among the leadership of the Labour Party at the moment, Gordon Brown would probably be that person. But I don't think even Gordon, as much as he is a friend of mine, would lead the party as far in the direction I would want it to go. But at least he would have an understanding of the Trades Union Movement, the workers and the feeling of traditional Labour, which Tony Blair certainly does not have.

VK: What are your plans for the future, Ken?

KC: I was appointed, much to my surprise, onto the Central Arbitration Committee, which thankfully has not yet met which I hope means that people are reaching voluntary agreements about recognition of trades unions. I think what is really important is that we do use the legislation in order to ensure that people are protected at work through a trade union, that they have the right to that protection and to have their voice heard. On the one hand I'm glad to be on it and on the other I'm glad that it never meets because if we can get collective

CONTINUED PAGE 22

KEN CAMERON INTERVIEW

FROM PAGE 12

agreements voluntarily then obviously that's got to be the best way forward. I also sit on industrial tribunals because I also believe in trying to do something for people who are unfairly dismissed at work. I also believe it is an absolute disgrace, that workers must have a year in employment before they can claim for unfair dismissal. People who are abused should have the right to redress through an industrial tribunal from day one. I want to continue to work to keep the Morning Star alive, which I think is extremely important for the Movement, and to try to improve sales. I will involve myself, as I have done for years, in the International Solidarity Movement on behalf of the Palestinian and the Cuban people which I will enjoy doing.

VK: When you handed over to Andy Gilchrist, the new General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, did you give him any words of advice?

KC: Not really, no. I deliberately retired early in order that I could plan, hopefully, for the membership to elect the right person. I believe they have done this in electing Andy. I believe that with his leadership the FBU will continue to be a progressive force and we will continue to punch above our weight in the TUC and wider Trade Union Movement. I think that was extremely important and therefore I retired without any inhibitions and worries about the

future of the FBU. I know it's in the good hands of Andy and others – Mick Harper as President and Ruth Winters our first woman Vice President who I want to see as the next President when Mick retires. The Union is extremely male dominated and I think to have a woman, such as Ruth, with her good politics and ability, as the President would be phenomenal for us. I'm also pleased that at my last TUC we've got yourself representing our women in the Fire Service, we've got Garrett Brooks representing our black workers and we've got Stewart Brown representing our FBU gay and lesbian members at Congress. Ten years ago nobody would have believed that this could happen. The fact that it has happened in my last year, gives me great delight and is something the Union can be very proud of.

VK: Finally, can I ask if you had three words to describe how you would most like to be remembered. What would they be?

KC: Four words.

VK: Go on then, you can have four.

KC: He was "a Socialist and a comrade".

VK: Excellent. Thanks a lot for that, Ken. I'd like to wish you all the best for the future and to thank you for all the hard work you have done for the Fire Brigades Union in the past – Thank you.