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STOP THE UNION-BASHING

Robert Halfon MP

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DEMOS

*Labour are our friends and often disappoint us.
The Conservatives are our enemies and often pleasantly surprise us.*

John Monks¹

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Finally, I would like to thank the millions of moderate trade union members who are not political activists. This pamphlet is dedicated to them.

Robert Halfon MP
March 2012

The author

Robert has lived and worked in Harlow for over 12 years, and was elected to be its Member of Parliament in 2010. He is on the executive of the 1922 Committee, sits on the Public Administration Select Committee, and is a member of the trade union Prospect.

In his earlier career, he was chief of staff to Oliver Letwin from 2001 to 2005. Thereafter he worked for the Conservative Friends of Israel, and was self-employed. Away from politics, Rob loves football, and like many local residents goes to Harlow Town FC. But he is a staunch Chelsea supporter.

Foreword

What do modern, compassionate and progressive conservatives believe in? At heart, surely, it is in the overwhelming superiority (both morally and practically) of solutions to social ills through civil society rather than through the mechanism and machinery of the state. This philosophy — embodied if not adequately explained by the Big Society — is the root of myriad reforms undertaken by the coalition, from free schools to the Work Programme to Andrew Lansley's attempt to localise and diversify supply in the health service. It is the guiding prejudice of progressive conservatism and it is being delivered across public services.

All of these reforms lead to a similar outcome: strong, civil institutions acting for social justice. Perhaps they will have public money. Perhaps they will have some level of democratic oversight. But they will all be independent (or at least more independent than their predecessors) of central government control. They will be there, fighting for and delivering what is right, but they will not be managed. Independence and autonomy — more catchwords of the progressive conservative — are central to the difference between a progressive conservative and a 'progressive'. Yes, we believe in change for the better. But we also know that change is a constant not a fixed destination — and for that to happen, for our public services to improve every day not just the once, we need competition, innovation and risk. We can create the infrastructure to enable social justice but we are not so naïve as to believe that we can, once and for all, create social justice.

This certainty — that civil society, independence and innovation are central to social justice — has led the modern Conservative party to embrace the role of charities,

businesses and social enterprises in delivering public goods. Free schools are run by communities and charities. Back to work interventions will be devised and developed by social action entrepreneurs and the private sector. Health services will be delivered by any willing provider — from businesses to local community groups.

But it is not only public services within which we must look to civil society, rather than to the state, to intervene, and to promote and deliver social justice. Just as important is to ensure that we support civil society in other spheres of life — if for no other reason than that the state can withdraw.

That is why this essay — from one of the 2010 Conservative intake's most active and thoughtful members — is so important. It lays out precisely why conservatives and members of the Conservative party should embrace civil society in one of the few areas where we have failed for so long to appreciate the importance of autonomous, independent and competitive non-governmental institutions. This essay lays out why and how trade unions can be friends of the Conservative party's vision for Britain.

Robert Halfon outlines a series of ways in which the Conservative party and the trade union movement may have more in common than we sometimes imagine. But most essential, for me, is the potential for a less political and more focused trade unionism to push back the need for the state in the area of our lives that touches most of us most often — that of work. The encroachment of state intervention into the workplace has sometimes been necessary and right, but sometimes it has been foolishly and counter-productively inhibitive. It has caused some industries to die at the same time as it has protected many from abuse. Of course we must hope for social justice in the workplace but — as progressive conservatives know in other areas — we cannot assume that this is best delivered through state control. Instead we need civil society and strong, robust institutions to protect workers.

That's what trade unions do. Yes, they also carry too much political baggage and are too focused on combative, partisan action — as Len McCluskey's recent call for civil

disobedience during the Olympics highlights. But on the more mundane, day-to-day level they are a service and a friend to workers, able to resolve many disputes and difficulties long before the state ever need become involved. That is indispensable, necessary and right.

The battle between the Conservative party and trade unionism — which began in the late 1970s and has rolled on ever since — is the product of trade unions deviating from their essential purpose, not that of an existential conflict. Not only can trade unionism — the effective and institutional representation of workers to employers — lessen the intervention of the state in day-to-day employment disputes, but it also holds the potential for the rolling back of much blanket legislation already in existence. If every worker in this country was a member of a union the need for micro-managed, uniform employment rights would be much reduced. Social justice could be delivered through negotiation and autonomous dialogue. And more union members might also serve to reduce the capture — evident in some unions — of a once mass movement by a small elite of partisan extremists. It might serve not to bolster support of one party or another but to diversify the views and arguments of the trade union movement and to reduce their focus on political point scoring.

It is for this reason — as well as the political advantages that Robert Halfon outlines — that the Conservative party should take trade unionism seriously. Conservatives should see the potential of the trade union as an autonomous vehicle to social justice, as a counter to the need for ever more legislation and regulation, and as a potential ally rather than a permanent enemy. As for trade unions themselves, it is clear from the evidence presented here that at the very least a significant minority of their members are conservatives as well as sub-payers. These people feel the need for representation and yet are frustrated when their representatives veer into political agendas unaligned to their needs as employees. The smart unions are those that have already moved their position closer to the centre — the next step is to make that positioning real by engaging with the Conservative party not as the old

enemy but as a new friend. There is much to be gained for both sides from forging a new, more positive, progressive conservative relationship.

Max Wind-Cowie
Head of the Progressive Conservatism Project, Demos

1 Why bother?

With Community union branch in Rotherham. Decent men and women in touch with problems in the workplace. Shame Tories despise union folk.

Denis McShane MP, on Twitter, 23 Feb 2012

Union membership is in long-term decline. Some union leaders are outspoken critics of Conservative ministers. The richest unions of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) give the Labour party over 75 per cent of its funding.² A small number of trade union officials have been caught misusing their taxpayer subsidy. Why should the Conservative party talk to the unions? Why bother? Aren't they the enemy?

I admit: I was not always convinced. I am a tribal Conservative. My earliest political memories are of the 1980s, when strikes threatened Britain. At the time, I would probably have signed up to the hardened anti-union view, now expressed in parliament by groups like the Trade Union Reform Campaign. This includes Conservative MPs such as Jesse Norman, Aiden Burley and Dominic Raab, who take a principled view that trade unions should not receive taxpayer subsidy.

To an extent, they make a fair point. There have been abuses that cannot be swept under the carpet. But equally, I believe, Conservatives should recognise the following:

- More British workers — many millions more — have joined a trade union than have ever joined a political party.
- A third of trade union members are Conservative voters.
- Trade unions are part of the community, and help to build social capital.

- Trade unions and Conservatives can agree on policy, especially on boosting the number of apprenticeships, and encouraging social action.
- Margaret Thatcher was herself a proud trade union member. She worked with Norman Tebbit, Peter Bottomley and others after 1975 to build up a movement called the Conservative Trade Unionists (CTU)—a force for moderation, and workers' rights, that was allied with the Conservative party.
- Behind the occasional abuse of taxpayer funds, and the rhetoric of 'cuts', many unions are in reality capitalist institutions, which exist to offer private medical insurance, work training and legal advice to their members.

On 11 January 2011, I was the only Conservative MP to vote against the Private Members Bill tabled by Jesse Norman. Its short title was Trade Union Officials (Refund of Pay to Employers). The bill sought 'to provide that pay for hours worked on behalf of trade unions by trade union officials during hours when they are paid by an employer should be refunded to the employer by the trade union'.

In essence, the underlying premise of the bill was to curtail abuse on facility time (time spent by union officials on union business, and paid by their employer to do so). However, after listening to the short debate, I decided to vote against the proposals for a number of reasons:

- I believe in localism, and free enterprise. I do not believe it should be the duty of Whitehall to dictate to intermediate, independent institutions, whether trade unions or charities, in this way. It should be up to employers to decide whether or not to fund trade union activities—especially those in the private sector.
- Some facility time is useful. It means that union representatives have the time and ability to look after their members and offer constructive advice when there are disputes between workers and management. Again, employers should decide if they want to pay for this and judge for themselves whether there is a cost or benefit.

- As I have just explained, I strongly believe that Conservatives should move away from 'union bashing' and work more constructively with moderate unions. Behind the noise and the air war of the militants, so often unions on the ground embody the Big Society, are community institutions, and offer invaluable services to their members.

I will set out this case in more detail in chapter 2.

2 The status quo

In this chapter I will substantiate the case I set out very briefly in chapter 1. In chapter 3 I will look at practical next steps. The conclusions may be surprising to some. That is why it is crucial to look at the facts as they are: not to retreat into ingrained orthodoxies, where the left blames City bankers or ‘predators’ for every economic evil, and the right does the same with the trade unions.

These are the two major conclusions of my research:

- Trade unions are still important institutions in 2012. They matter first and foremost to British workers as a source of services and collective bargaining, but they matter also to the Conservative party as a source of electoral support.
- Conservatives and trade unionists can be soulmates, and indeed have been in the past, including under Margaret Thatcher.

I will substantiate these points in turn.

Trade unions are still important

Critics often point to the declining membership of trade unions, which has fallen since the peak of the 1970s. But even accounting for this steady decline, trade unions are still the largest membership associations in Britain, and have far more members than all the political parties combined. As the TUC website says: ‘TUC membership now stands at 58 unions, representing nearly six and a half million people.’²³

Overall trade union members come from all walks of life, and from all geographic regions of the British Isles. They are estimated at being somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the British workforce. This level has held steady throughout the last century, as can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1 Trade union membership levels in the UK from 1892 to 2010

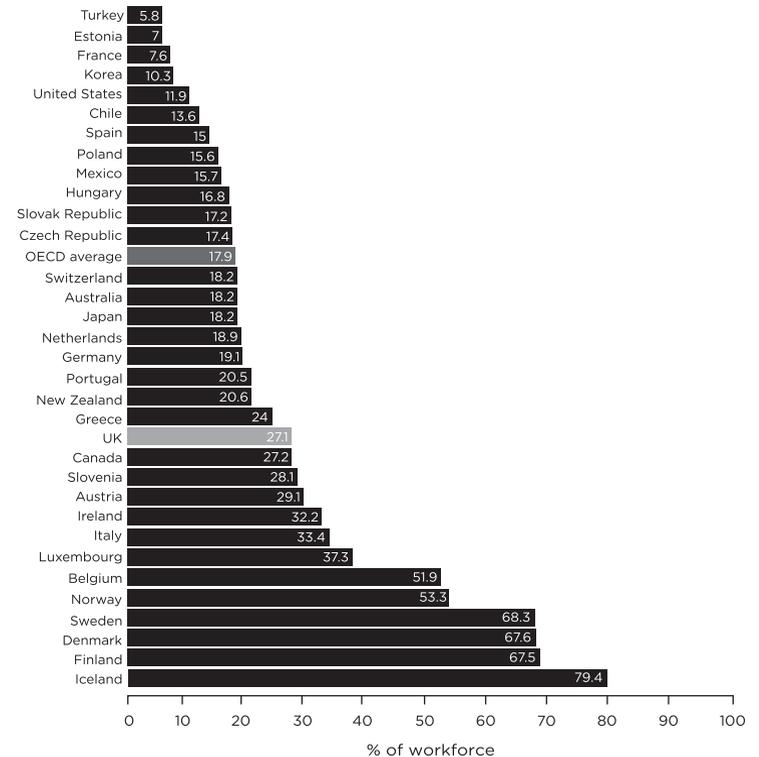


Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics; Department for Employment (1892-1974); Certification Office (1974-2008/09)

The UK is not as unionised as some Scandinavian countries, but Britain still has a significantly higher rate of union membership than key economic competitors, such as the USA, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Japan and Australia. Figure 2 shows the percentage of workers who were members of a trade union (or the trade union density) in OECD countries, in 2008.

As figure 2 shows, the density of Britain's trade union membership is comfortably above the OECD average. It is higher than that for Greece and Spain, for example, which both have strong socialist or social democratic traditions.

Figure 2 Percentage of workers who were members of a trade union in OECD countries, 2008



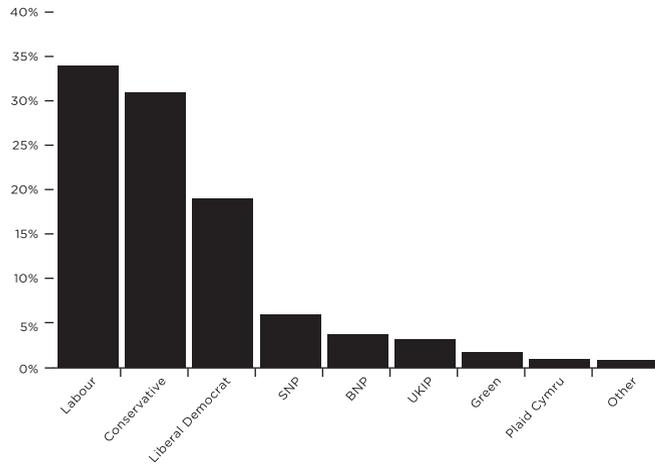
Source: OECD⁴

The next logical question to ask is: 'How many trade unionists are Conservative voters?' The answer is: 'About a third.' A 2009 Populus poll showed that approximately a third of Unite members intended to vote Conservative in the 2010 election (figure 3). Unite is the UK's largest union, with 1.5 million members. It is affiliated with Labour.

Labour is ahead among Unite members, but only marginally so.

Another Ipsos MORI poll in 2009, commissioned by Unison, showed that the Conservative party was actually leading among public sector workers—many of whom are Unison members. Similar to Unite, Unison is affiliated with the Labour party. It has 1.3 million members, mostly drawn from the public sector. The voting intentions of public sector workers who were absolutely certain to vote in the 2010 election is shown in figure 4.

Figure 3 Results of a Populus poll in 2009 showing voting intentions of Unite members in the 2010 election

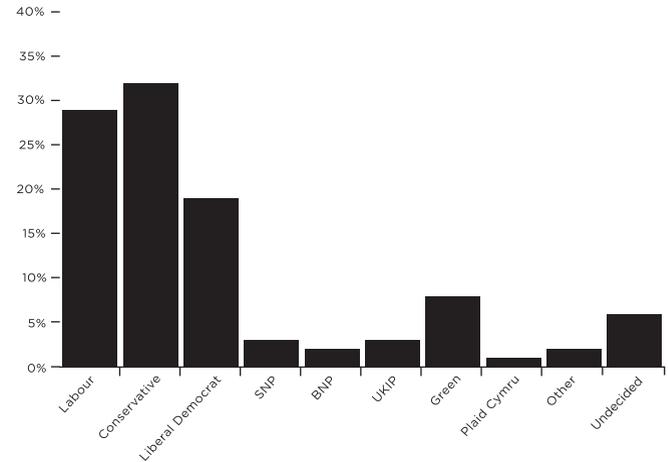


Source: Populus poll in 2009⁶

Conservatives are ahead significantly in public sector workers, with 32 per cent of the vote. Labour are behind on 29 per cent. It is therefore a misapprehension that public sector, unionised workers will not vote for the Conservative party. It may therefore be in the Conservative party’s electoral interests to encourage people to join the Unison trade union.

However, it is worth noting that the majority of unions are politically neutral, and do not supply funds to any political party.

Figure 4 Results of an Ipsos MORI poll in 2009 showing voting intentions of public sector workers who were certain to vote in the 2010 election



Source: Ipsos MORI poll for Unison⁷

Of the 58 unions that are currently members of the TUC, just 15 are Labour-affiliated. That leaves 43 non-affiliated unions in Britain, plus many hundreds of smaller staff associations and employee groups.

Evidence shows that political affiliation of a union does not correlate well—or at all—with the voting intention of its grassroots members. If the Ipsos MORI figures from 2009 continue to be a reasonable benchmark, then the Conservative party should actively seek for votes among trade unionists in 2015.

Conservatives and trade unions can be soulmates

My first conclusion leads to my second. It follows that if a significant minority of trade unionists vote for the Conservative party, then under the right conditions

Conservatives and trade unionists can be soulmates. There is a variety of supporting evidence for this:

- Trade unions are voluntary bodies, which are the very essence of the Big Society.
- Conservatives and unions agree on some areas of coalition policy, in particular on boosting apprenticeships, and social action.
- Trade unions are capitalist institutions. They offer membership services that directly seek to replace government.
- The Conservative party has a long history of cooperation with unions, beginning in 1867—before the Labour party even existed.

I will focus on each of these in turn. For the avoidance of doubt, I do not expect Bob Crow and other union barons to become Conservative voters. My point is that these leaders do not always speak well for their 6.5 million members—partly because they hold positions of essentially unchecked power. That is why Conservatives should try to speak directly with the grassroots of the trade union movement, as well as with general secretaries.

Trade unions and the Big Society

David Cameron has made one of his central priorities a form of communitarianism: a message of strengthening civil society, through social action and community-led services. Trade unions are the largest voluntary organisations in the UK.⁸ They are also highly active in this role. For example, TUC research has shown that trade union officers are ‘eight times more likely to engage in voluntary work’ than the average.⁹

This culture of voluntarism appears to be driven by the social demographic of trade unionists, as well as their commitment to community work per se. Government figures show that the people who join unions tend to come from ordinary households, on average incomes. They are strivers, often from Middle England. They are neither the well-paid, nor the welfare-dependent.¹⁰ Interestingly, this is precisely the same demographic that also is the most generous in giving to charity.

To quote *The Rational Optimist*, by Matt Ridley:

The working poor give a much higher proportion of their income to good causes than the rich do, and crucially they give three times as much as people on welfare do. As Michael Shermer comments, ‘poverty is not a barrier to charity, but welfare is.’¹¹

Community Conservatives should find these aspects of trade unionism appealing. Of course, there is more to the Big Society reforms than volunteering, and giving money to good causes, but they represent common ground, where both the party and trade unions could work together.

Agreement on policy

As with the Big Society, there is some agreement and active cooperation between Conservative ministers and trade unions. This is not always highlighted by the media. One recent example that deserves more attention, I believe, is that given by Apprentice Minister John Hayes. In a recent speech to the 2011 UnionLearn conference, he said explicitly that it remains an important task for the Conservative party to

acknowledge in public the importance of UnionLearn, and the union movement, to our skills landscape... Although there are some issues on which the Government and trade unions don’t always see eye to eye, that makes it all the more important to celebrate the issues on which we do share common ground.¹²

He went on to say that Conservatives and unions were in genuine agreement, that ‘a high-quality further education system can be a vital asset in meeting our shared ambition: to help more people out of unemployment and into a job’.

Trade unions are capitalist institutions

In order to understand the kind of organisations that trade unions are in reality, it is important to focus on their behaviour, rather than just the smokescreen of press releases and TV interviews by their political officers.

When trading activities are examined, it is clear that behind the rhetoric of railing against ‘cuts’ many unions are in fact dynamic adverts for capitalism. In private healthcare, for example, their trading activities are significantly more committed to laissez-faire principles than the Conservative party. This is because part of the appeal of modern union membership these days is eligibility for discounts on services such as private healthcare and other insurance products. As appendix A shows, private healthcare is widely advertised in union magazines, websites and other circulars.

According to the market comparison website for Private Medical Insurance, the Labour-affiliated union Unison has recently encouraged its members to join private healthcare schemes such as Medicash. It also reports that the left-wing Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) now ‘encourages members to join private healthcare schemes provided by companies such as Benenden’.¹³

Private Medical Insurance concludes its sales pitch by emphasising that trade union members — especially civil servants — can access better services if they are willing to opt out of general NHS provision:

*The benefits are tempting and a large number of public sector workers do take advantage of union-led private healthcare policies... Private healthcare policies can also include priority treatments and consultant appointments. This can save members from having to wait months for routine tests or to be referred to specialist departments within the NHS.*¹⁴

This kind of cross-selling is significantly more advanced than anything undertaken by the Conservative party or its network of sympathetic think-tanks. Indeed, in earlier times, private healthcare was strictly against TUC policy. It could result in the expulsion of a union from the TUC.¹⁵ But this has changed utterly, as unions have diversified their income streams towards the private sector. For example, in 2001, the Telegraph reported: ‘Three and a half million trade unionists — more than half the TUC membership — now

have some form of private health cover.’¹⁶ That was ten years ago. Since then, the trade union movement has considerably professionalised and strengthened its private healthcare offer.

A history of cooperation

For much of its history since the late nineteenth century the Conservative party has had a constructive relationship with unions (see the detailed history in appendix B). It was a Conservative prime minister, the Earl of Derby, who first sought to legalise trade unions for the first time in 1867 — before the Labour party even existed. In the House of Lords, the Earl of Derby argued that a failure of the British constitution in the past had been that ‘the voices of Manchester, of Birmingham, of Leeds, and of all the other important centres of manufacturing industry were absolutely unheard’.¹⁷

In the same year, he praised a trade union march in London, insisting to a hostile Liberal opposition that the procession was entirely legal, and that all the workers involved should be given ‘the advantage of being allowed to display in the streets their immense organisation, with marshals and sub-marshals, with stars, scarves, banners, and an exhibition of the most perfect military discipline’.¹⁸

Almost a century later, Margaret Thatcher was an active trade unionist, along with her contemporaries such as Norman Tebbit. In 1950 she landed her first political job after being elected president of the Dartford branch of the Conservative Trade Unionists (CTU).¹⁹ As the Dartford Chronicle then reported:

*In her presidential address, Miss Roberts — herself a trade unionist — paid tribute to the work done by the branch and emphasised the necessity for every Conservative trade unionist to come forward and help. Particularly was it necessary for trade unionists to attend their branch meetings.*²⁰

When she was elected Leader of the Conservative party in 1975, one of Thatcher’s first public engagements was to address her alma mater, the CTU. In March 1975, she said:

As you well know, for over 100 years, ever since Disraeli's day, since before the Labour Party existed, it has been the belief of the Conservative Party that the law should not only permit, but that it should assist, the trades unions to carry out their legitimate function of protecting their members.

But, of course, alongside that belief, we have always held that the rights of the individual — even in relation to his trades union — must be protected too.

So too must the rights of the community at large be protected.

Just as it is right that the immense power and influence of the trade union movement should be recognised, so it is right that such powers and influence should be used in the interests of the whole community.

You, as Conservative trade unionists, are part of the force for reason and responsibility in the movement. You are part of the majority which is both reasonable and moderate... It is not just for the benefit of this Party — it is for the benefit of the trades union movement, and of the whole country, that those of reason and moderation should be as active and determined in union affairs as are the extremists.²¹

Perhaps I should repeat one part of that quote. Margaret Thatcher insisted that 'the law should not only permit, but it should assist [my emphasis], the trade unions to carry out their legitimate function of protecting their members'.

A later development of this thinking was seen in Thatcher's approach to the internal operations of the Conservative party, at Central Office. Under Margaret Thatcher's leadership there was a strong drive for recruitment in the CTU. In 1975, for example, a series of new full-time CTU staff were appointed under a new head, John Bowis. Leading the movement, they established:

- a national CTU structure
- full-time campaigners in each of the major UK regions

- a CTU branch offered to every constituency and Conservative Association
- a CTU branch offered to every TUC-affiliated trade union.

Altogether, by 1977, the annual conference of the CTU was attended by over 1,200 people.²² A year later, there were 250 CTU branches with between 20 and 200 members each.²³

By 1979, during the general election, trade union members even held a mass rally at Wembley Stadium, under the banner: 'Trade Unions for a Conservative Victory'.²⁴ But even more crucially, Thatcher recruited some trade union officials who were sympathetic to her cause. Two famous examples are Norman Tebbit and Peter Bottomley. Both went on to become Conservative MPs.

Over time, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the CTU even held fringe events at the TUC conference. The archives in the Bodleian Library show that under Thatcher's leadership, the CTU became a campaigning force for promoting the voices of moderate (not militant) working people. For example, it provided media training to its grassroots union members, if they wished to go on television, especially in regions of Britain like London, or the North, which had traditionally returned Labour MPs.

There is a circular memo from the CTU HQ, which stated, in the 1980s:

Our broadcast department has agreed to provide two hours of training... A very good opportunity for those in preparation for a possible call to represent the Party's Trade Unionist organisation on television... Quite a number of our members over recent years have become involved with television networks in the North East, in Yorkshire, Lancashire, and London.²⁵

Whatever the tensions that existed between Conservatives and some trade unions in the 1980s, there are also numerous examples of Thatcher's willingness to work constructively with moderate trade unions and their members.

For example, she was a strong supporter of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, when they campaigned openly for the right to work, and refused to strike with Arthur Scargill.

3 How can Conservatives embrace the trade union movement?

If Conservatives can accept the two conclusions of chapter 2 (that trade unions are still important institutions in 2012, and that they can be soulmates with the Conservative party), then the logical question is: 'How can Conservatives embrace the trade union movement?' Chapter 3 sets out some possible answers, in the areas of language, policy and campaigning. I will examine each area in turn.

Language

The trade union movement has a simple, powerful message that the Conservative party can learn from. For example, the 2011 autumn conference of the TUC was branded with the slogan 'JOBS GROWTH JUSTICE'.

This is language that speaks to the common man. Simple. Bold. Ambitious. By contrast, it is harder to say who the slogans from the latest three Conservative party conferences have spoken to:

- 'Leadership for a Better Future'
- 'Building a Better Future'
- 'Together in the National Interest'

This vocabulary is more opaque and more technocratic. It is a small example, but such details matter.

In politics, language is everything. When Conservatives bash the trade unions, the effect is to demonise not just militancy, but every trade union member, and numerous public sector workers too.

Too often our criticism, which is aimed at extremists, makes no distinction between the undeserving and the

deserving. The Conservative party's language is seen not just as anti-Bob Crow et al, but anti-trade unions as a whole. Recent debates in the House of Commons on facility time, for example, have become an excuse for blood lust against the trade union movement. We Conservatives have become a pastiche of ourselves. If I were the Labour party, I would use these debates in party political broadcasts to show 'the nasty party' at work once again.

Inevitably some Conservatives will disagree with this analysis. But let's look at how Labour falls into the same trap and it might be easier to comprehend. While we attack trade unions, Labour attacks bankers and business. Ed Miliband's 'predator' speech was hugely damaging to the aspirational wing of the working classes for precisely this reason. It implied that every business owner was a 'predator', rather than a job creator. It doesn't matter that this may not have been the intention. Labour is now seen as the anti-business party, and that means anti-small businesses too. In politics, language counts.

So, a huge part of rebuilding our party's relations with the trade unions must be to change our language. Conservatives should not be afraid to praise the union movement, to encourage people to become trade unionists, and even perhaps to have the occasional beer and sandwich with trade union members. In our language the party should distinguish between militants and those simply fighting for better pay and conditions. After all, what is wrong with that? Why shouldn't trade unions represent the interests of members in this way?

Senior Conservatives should not be afraid to express their belief in trade unionism, even if policies and activities do not always coincide. When disagreeing with trade unions, it should be more in sorrow than in anger. Conservatives should appeal over the heads of militants to grassroots union members. A stronger Conservative trade union movement could play a major part in this. To quote Lord Ashcroft in 2011:

For those who considered voting Tory in 2010 but thought better of it, the biggest barrier (which Tories are sick of hearing about but is real nonetheless) was the continuing impression that the party is for the rich, not people like them.²⁶

That is the challenge that Conservatives face.

Policy

On policy, there is a balance to be struck. Conservatives are right to challenge the genuine abuses, especially where taxpayers' money is involved. But there is sometimes a Pavlov's dog view on the right, almost a conspiracy theory, which says that all union officials must be 'pilgrims', secretly campaigning for the Labour party.

Partly, this comes from 13 years of suspicion and disappointment in opposition, where it genuinely did seem as if Labour was fiddling the system (eg through Gordon Brown's Union Modernisation Fund, which indirectly funded Labour coffers). But now that Conservatives are in power, there is a duty to be fair-minded. Things are not black and white. I would even argue that in some cases facility time can be sensible, and give good value for money. I know from my work as a constituency MP that the Arriva bus company in Harlow, a private sector firm, pays an employee part-time to do union work. The company finds this to be hugely beneficial for industrial relations.

In the public sector, there is the politically neutral First Division Association, with nearly 20,000 members. Some of its officers use their facility time to help relocate the families of civil servants who are serving overseas (this union represents the Secret Service, as well as the Foreign Office). This is an important job, which must be done by someone experienced and loyal to the British Government. In these kinds of cases, facility time may be a more effective and cheaper solution than outsourcing. Union officials also play a valuable role in resolving workplace disputes. The fact

that they provide this service, rather than relying on private solicitors who charge expensive fees, is often welcome.

Whatever the balance is, the party should pursue policies that recognise the genuine contribution that some unions make. Much of the ‘union bashing’ on the right is in essence a tactical argument about finance. It stems from the view that trade unions are a proxy for the Labour party, and that Conservatives should press their advantage in government to deny the Labour party resources. Perhaps there is a fair case for pushing against vested interests. But if Conservatives want to reform party election finances, why not do it directly? Why alienate 6.5 million union members in the process? This is especially true, given that some unions like the GMB are now threatening to disaffiliate from Labour.²⁷ The best position for the Conservative party at present may be to reach out to trade unions that are disaffected with Ed Miliband — rather than to attack them.

Campaigning

Between now and 2015, there is scope for expanding the work begun by Richard Balfe, the ex-Labour MEP, who is David Cameron’s envoy to the unions. If agreed by the party, there are a number of practical steps Conservatives could take to become more union-friendly:

- provide a better membership offer
- encourage more Conservatives to be trade unionists
- encourage full affiliation
- encourage more direct communication
- encourage Conservatives to be trade union officials.

A better membership offer

The party could recraft its membership offer, to compete with the larger unions. Party members could get cheaper car insurance, legal support in the event of a grievance at work, and access to professional training. As chapter 2 set out, more than a million British workers actually vote

for the Conservative party and yet are also members of Labour-affiliated Unite and Unison. It is worth asking: if the Conservative party was more like a trade union, would they join us? As *The Times* has recently suggested, there is a gap in the market for a moderate, modern union, in the political centre ground.²⁸ What better than the Conservative party?

More trade unionists as Conservative members

Following on from the last point, it may make sense to offer some trade union members a more attractive, reduced rate for joining the party. This could be as low as 50p per month.

Full affiliation

The Conservative party could explore affiliating with friendly unions or trade associations. This could lead to them working together on social action projects and community events. It could involve running joint campaigns on jobs, wages and apprenticeships, and sharing membership services or even a political levy. Of the 58 unions that are currently members of the TUC, just 15 are formally affiliated with Labour. That leaves 43 non-affiliated unions. On top of this, there are of course other groups that are effectively trade unions for entrepreneurs and the self-employed, such as the Federation of Small Businesses.

More direct communication

More Conservative ministers and backbench MPs could communicate directly with the 6.5 million union members across the country. Conservatives should not abandon these people to get their news only from the Labour party — especially in the North of England. In practical terms, they could hold stalls at union conferences, speak at events, write articles for trade union magazines and websites, and so forth.

Conservative trade union officials

The party could once again campaign actively in the union movement — standing for election as trade union officials — as they did under Margaret Thatcher. This would involve

refounding the central unit in Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ), which helped to run the CTU. This unit would have five tasks:

- to find, select and support Conservative or moderate candidates for union elections
- to back up candidates with proper best practice guides and support from CCHQ, as currently happens for councillors and parliamentary candidates
- to connect existing MPs, councillors and Conservative activists with local trade union branches
- to appoint and manage Conservative trade union organisers at regional and area level, especially in London, Wales, the Midlands and the North
- just as Walter Green MBE wrote in his internal memo to the staff of Conservative Central Office in 1975, Conservative members of a trade union must ‘make their voice heard on every possible occasion’, with letters, events, publicity campaigns, conferences, suggesting legislation and helping to arrange visits by government ministers.²⁹

The conclusions of my research are clear. In 2012, trade unions are still important institutions, and they can be soulmates with the Conservative party. There are at least three practical steps that can be taken—in language, policy and campaigning—to help Conservatives to embrace the trade union movement.

You can argue about militancy, and oppose the last Government’s subsidy to the trade unions (indirectly providing funds to the Labour party). You can campaign for tougher strike laws—particularly when essential public services are involved. All of which I agree with. But Conservatives should also recognise that good trade unionism very much embodies the little platoons that we all love talking about. We should face the facts that some unions are capitalist enterprises, a third of whose members vote Conservative. We should acknowledge the long tradition of the Conservative party working together with unions, and admit that some trade

unions are already providing the social capital, people power and social entrepreneurship that are three primary strands of the Big Society—and even work with those unions which are prepared to further its aims.

Appendix A

TUC unions supplying private medical insurance

Name	Number of members	Labour-affiliated?	Offer private medical insurance?
Accord	31,022	No	No, but offers discounts
Advance	7,645	No	No
AEGIS	2,357	No	No
AEP	3,386	No	No
AFA-CWA		Not applicable - US-based union	Not applicable - US-based union
Aslef	18,532	Yes	No
Aspect	4,161	No	No
ATL	125,778	No	Yes
BACM-TEAM	2,537	No	Yes
Balpa	8,400	Yes	Yes?
BDA	6,540	No	No
Bectu	25,045	Yes	No
BFAWU	22,786	No	Through Irvine Insurance Brokers Ltd
BOS TU	869	No	No
BSU	3,492	No	No
Community	67,488	No	Advice but not offers
CSP	36,101	No	No
CWU	217,807	Yes	Yes
EIS	60,170	No	No
Equity	36,525	No	No, but discount schemes of 10% for BUPA and others; liability insurance
FBU	43,896	No	No

Name	Number of members	Labour-affiliated?	Offer private medical insurance?
FDA	17,466	No	No
GMB	601,730	Yes	HSA offers discounts
HCSA	3,336	No	Yes
MU	29,540	No	BAPAM—charity that delivers support to musicians, divided into different regions
NACO	2,120	No	No
NACODS	350	Yes	No
NAPO	9,501	No	Yes—cooperative, Benenden, discount
NASS	1,954	No	No
NASUWT	279,145	No	No
Nautilus International	16,759	No	No
NGSU	13,080	No	Yes
NUJ	29,930	No	No
NUM	1,695	Yes	No
NUT	295,124	No	No
OURS	697	Information unavailable	Information unavailable
PCS	301,562	No	Yes
PFA	2,713	No	No
POA	35,972	No	Discount from BHSF
Prospect	123,409	No	No
RMT	79,499	No	No
SCP	8,888	No	No
SoR	19,690	No	No
SURGE	1,302	No	No—offered by company itself, which doesn't want to create conflict of interest
TSSA	28,298	No	No

Name	Number of members	Labour-affiliated?	Offer private medical insurance?
UCAC	3,946	No	No
UCATT	127,433	No	No
UCU	119,401	No	No
Unison	1,374,500	Yes	No
Unite	1,474,564	Yes	No
Unity	4,953	No	Offers advice
Urtu	12,250	No	No
Usdaw	386,572	Yes	No
WGGB	1,333	No	No, idea was discussed but deemed inappropriate
YISA	1,344	No	Advice and discount

Appendix B: A history of the Conservative Trade Unionists

Before Thatcher: a history of beer and sandwiches

In 1867, it was a Conservative prime minister (the Earl of Derby) who set out to legalise trade unions, appointing a Royal Commission to make it happen. This was rather like the suggestion made in chapter 3 that Conservatives should have the occasional beer and sandwich with trade union members as it included voices from the shop floor, such as worker representative Frederic Harrison, and Robert Applegarth of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners.

At the time, the Earl of Derby praised the trade union movement, and defended the rights of trade unions to peaceful protest and collective bargaining. In the House of Lords, the Earl of Derby argued that a failure of the British constitution in the past had been ‘that the voices of Manchester, of Birmingham, of Leeds, and of all the other important centres of manufacturing industry were absolutely unheard’.³⁰

In the same year, on 8 February 1867, he praised a trade union march in London, insisting to a hostile Liberal opposition that the procession was entirely legal, and that all the workers involved should be given:

*the advantage of being allowed to display in the streets their immense organisation, with marshals and sub-marshals, with stars, scarves, banners, and an exhibition of the most perfect military discipline... I entirely believe that they desire, as far as they can, that their procession may be perfectly peaceable and orderly.*³¹

Despite early opposition, including from some factions of the Conservative party, the Early of Derby’s Royal Commission was the genesis of a lawful trade union movement.

Relations with the trade unions were sometimes fraught in the early twentieth century, but they were not always about confrontation. After the Second World War, for example, the Labour party won a landslide election victory, and an intense debate about the future of the Conservative party followed. This culminated in 1947, with a pamphlet called *The Industrial Charter*, which set out a radical and positive plan for Conservative party relations with trade unions, in the post-war period. It sold 2.5 million copies, at a shilling each, on the promise that the Conservative party would protect workers' rights and oppose protectionism, among other measures.³² At the time, it was denounced by Conservative backbencher Sir Waldron Smithers as 'milk-and-water Socialism' but it won firm support from Conservative Central Office, and Winston Churchill praised it at the 1947 party conference. As the historian Peter Dorey put it:

*Such was the optimism which The Industrial Charter fostered among 'progressive' Conservatives that one of its authors, James Hutchinson, predicted that: 'Far-sighted Trade Unions will, in the near future, realise the Conservative Party to be their best friends.'*³³

Notes taken in a private session of the Conservative party's Trade Union Advisory Committee in June 1947 show that Conservative party officials believed that *The Industrial Charter* would 'have a definite effect on the man sitting on the fence' and would 'supply something that has been lacking in the Conservative Party for a long time'.³⁴

By 1949, *The Industrial Charter* had been absorbed into the Conservative party's manifesto. One of its victories was its success at broadening the party's appeal. It was a big, bold statement of reform, and helped to prove that Conservatives were not hostile to trade unions, or to working people.³⁵ To use a modern phrase, it detoxified the Conservative brand, and helped Winston Churchill back into Number 10 Downing Street after the 1951 election, where he governed in coalition with the National Liberals.

After winning the 1951 election, Winston Churchill appointed the ultra-conciliatory Walter Monkton MP as

his minister of labour, with the instruction to befriend the trade unions, and 'do my best to preserve industrial peace'.³⁶ This reflected the fact that Churchill was 'determined that there should be no industrial strikes during his term as Prime Minister'.³⁷

Another victory of *The Industrial Charter* was bringing a new generation of Conservatives into the trade union movement. In 1950, Margaret Thatcher (née Roberts) was elected President of the Dartford branch of the Conservative Trade Unionists (CTU).³⁸ The Dartford Chronicle reported:

*In her presidential address, Miss Roberts — herself a trade unionist — paid tribute to the work done by the branch and emphasised the necessity for every Conservative trade unionist to come forward and help. Particularly was it necessary for trade unionists to attend their branch meetings.*³⁹

In 1962, as prime minister, Harold Macmillan formalised cooperation with the trade union movement, by creating the National Economic Development Council (NEDC). The NEDC was a Whitehall body, which brought trade unions, management and ministers together to tackle key economic problems, by jointly determining the investment levels, profits and wages of the British economy. Macmillan hoped that regular contact between the trade unions and Conservative ministers 'would at least lead to a greater understanding of the real problems with which the nation was confronted'.⁴⁰

After Macmillan's nearly seven years as prime minister there was such a consensus on economic planning and cooperation with the unions that the Conservative manifesto in 1964 said: 'In contemporary politics the argument is not for or against planning. The question is: how is the planning to be done?'⁴¹ Just as the Earl of Derby had done in 1867, the Conservative manifesto in 1964 pledged to review trade union law in a sympathetic and constructive way. Referring to the trade unions, it said: 'We shall continue to seek their co-operation in matters of common interest and to work in partnership with them through the NEDC.'⁴²

Some of this goodwill was lost, however, after Edward Heath's battle with striking unions in the early 1970s. In the months immediately before Heath's defeat in the 1975 election, this was picked up by Walter Green MBE, who was North-Western Area chairman of the CTU.

In January 1975, he wrote a memo to other key members of the CTU, which is worth reading:

The statement by Mr James Prior that Conservatives should join their trade union, take an active part in its activities, and support the election of moderates is not before time...

In many constituencies there appears to be outright opposition towards us, in others the attitude is one of apathy, or calculated indifference, and those in which there is any degree of support are pitifully few...

Most of the literature issued by the [Conservative] Party on subjects of interest to us is considered too dry for distribution and lies in agents' offices, gathering dust... I could continue on this theme or the saga of missed opportunities, but the real question is: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?⁴³

His memo then set out a ten-point plan for reform. He aimed to heal relations between the Conservative party and the trade unions, and to give the Conservative party some hope of a future election victory at the ballot box. This was his ten-point plan:

BY THE PARTY:

- 1 *Existing Trade Union Advisory Committees (TUACs) should be helped and encouraged, publicity given wherever possible. Consulted by other sections of a constituency, e.g. the local government group.*
- 2 *New TUACs should be encouraged. Agents have a big part to play here especially by publicity in the clubs.*

- 3 *There should be a co-ordinated national drive and agents should be asked to report progress.*
 - 4 *Industrial organisers should be reappointed at Area level.*
- BY OURSELVES:**
- 5 *We should make our voice heard on every possible occasion, e.g. by submitting resolutions to constituency F & GP Committees, to Area and national bodies, as appropriate.*
 - 6 *Better liaison with other sections of the Party, e.g. Local Government, Education, Conservative Political Centre, Young Conservatives, etc. and with other outside bodies, e.g. British Safety Council, E.E.C. etc.*
 - 7 *Writing letters to the Press, BBC, etc.*
 - 8 *Carrying out some imaginative activity with associated publicity e.g. the lack of co-ordination between the social services available for the elderly person living alone.*
 - 9 *Organising some form of mini conferences at various places throughout the country to include an agenda of the most topical items.*
 - 10 *Visits to the areas of the Shadow Minister and members of the Labour Committee should always be accompanied by a brief discussion with the members of local TUACs.⁴⁴*

Margaret Thatcher, the trade unionist

Only a few months later, the new leader of the Conservative party took his advice. Margaret Thatcher was an active trade unionist, along with her contemporaries such as Norman Tebbit. In 1950, she landed her first political job after being elected President of the Dartford branch of the CTU.⁴⁵ As the Dartford Chronicle then reported:

In her presidential address, Miss Roberts — herself a trade unionist — paid tribute to the work done by the branch and emphasised the necessity for every Conservative trade unionist to come forward and help. Particularly was it necessary for trade unionists to attend their branch meetings.⁴⁶

When she was elected Leader of the Conservative party in 1975, one of Thatcher's first public engagements was to address her alma mater, the CTU:

As you well know, for over 100 years, ever since Disraeli's day, since before the Labour Party existed, it has been the belief of the Conservative Party that the law should not only permit, but that it should assist, the trades unions to carry out their legitimate function of protecting their members.

But, of course, alongside that belief, we have always held that the rights of the individual — even in relation to his trades union — must be protected too.

So too must the rights of the community at large be protected.

Just as it is right that the immense power and influence of the trade union movement should be recognised, so it is right that such powers and influence should be used in the interests of the whole community.

You, as Conservative trade unionists, are part of the force for reason and responsibility in the movement. You are part of the majority which is both reasonable and moderate... It is not just for the benefit of this Party — it is for the benefit of the trades union movement, and of the whole country, that those of reason and moderation should be as active and determined in union affairs as are the extremists.⁴⁷

Let me repeat one part of that quote. Margaret Thatcher insisted that 'the law should not only permit, but it should assist [my emphasis], the trade unions to carry out their legitimate function of protecting their members'. This thinking was seen also in Thatcher's approach to the internal operations of the

Conservative party. For example, under Margaret Thatcher's leadership there was a strong drive for recruitment in the CTU. In 1975, a handful of new full-time CTU staff were appointed under a new head, John Bowis. Together, they established:

- a national CTU structure
- full-time campaigners in each of the major UK regions
- a CTU branch offered to every constituency and Conservative Association
- a CTU branch offered to every TUC-affiliated trade union.

By 1977, the annual conference of the CTU was attended by over 1,200 people.⁴⁸ A year later, there were 250 CTU branches with between 20 and 200 members each.⁴⁹ In 1979 during the general election, trade union members even held a mass rally at Wembley Stadium, under the banner: 'Trade Unions for a Conservative Victory'.⁵⁰ Thatcher recruited trade union officials who were sympathetic to her cause, such as Norman Tebbit and Peter Bottomley. Both went on to become Conservative MPs.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the CTU movement even held fringe events at the TUC conference. Minutes taken at the CTU General Purposes Committee, 22 September 1979, note:

The CTU had a successful presence [at the TUC conference], and the Committee expressed its thanks to the team of members and staff who had organised this. The Chairman felt that the Fringe Meeting had not altogether been satisfactory but it was agreed that the precedent for attendance by a Minister at this event should be followed.

Margaret Thatcher put money into the CTU, and it was permitted by the wider Conservative party to campaign for changes in legislation passing through the House. In 1980, for example, the annual conference of the CTU tabled a motion proposing 'that Trades Union members be given the mandatory right to demand a secret ballot'.⁵¹ This put pressure on the Government to support an amendment to the 1980 Employment Bill, which had been tabled by Conservative

MP John Browne. The amendment was eventually backed by at least 102 other Conservative MPs.⁵²

Archives in the Bodleian Library show that under Thatcher's leadership the CTU became a campaigning force for promoting the voices of moderate (not militant) working people. For example, it provided media training to its grassroots union members, if they wished to go on television, especially in regions of Britain like London, or the North, which had traditionally returned Labour MPs.

A circular memo from the CTU HQ in the 1980s stated:

*Our broadcast department has agreed to provide two hours of training... A very good opportunity for those in preparation for a possible call to represent the Party's Trade Unionist organisation on television... Quite a number of our members over recent years have become involved with television networks in the North East, in Yorkshire, Lancashire, and London.*⁵³

Whatever the tensions that existed between Conservatives and some trade unions in the 1980s, there are also numerous examples of Thatcher's willingness to work constructively with moderate trade unions and their members. For example, she was a strong supporter of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, when they campaigned openly for the right to work, and refused to strike with Arthur Scargill.

After Thatcher: decline of the Conservative trade unionists

The CTU gradually declined in the 1990s, because of cutbacks at Conservative Central Office. In 1992, the National Economic Development Council was finally shut down.

After the Labour landslide in 1997, the CTU was largely abandoned. However, parts of it continued to live on under the new name Conservatives at Work (CaW). Its current chairman is Lord Taylor of Holbeach. At a recent meeting in Winchester, CaW members voted unanimously that they wished 'to continue as a specialist group in the Conservative party'.⁵⁴

Whatever the achievements of the CTU under Thatcher, relations between trade unions and the Conservative party had reached a very dark period by 2005. Cameron's appointment of the ex-Labour MEP Richard Balfe as his envoy to the trade union and cooperative movement was therefore an important signal. In 2007, it showed that the Conservative party was serious about reform, and being more outward-looking. As an ex-union official, Balfe's role was principally to ensure that the shadow cabinet built a solid working relationship with the upper echelons of the TUC. It is largely thanks to his ongoing efforts that some Conservative MPs now attend the annual TUC Conference.

From the beginning, Balfe reported directly to David Cameron and his chief of staff. He was given unfettered access to senior Conservatives, a desk in CCHQ, and a Parliamentary pass. At the time, Cameron told the Independent on Sunday:

*I am delighted that Richard Balfe is going to help develop our relations with the trade union and co-operative movement. I have always said that free enterprise and the co-operative principle are partners, not adversaries, and co-operatives have an important role to play in public service reform by bringing dynamism without the loss of public ethos.*⁵⁵

No Conservative leader has addressed the TUC in its 144-year history, but Cameron made it clear, in 2007, that he would be happy to speak, if invited. Balfe explained the reasoning behind this, and his appointment, in a letter to Tribune Magazine in 2008:

Since leaving Labour, I have been reinvigorated politically. I am now intent on convincing the unions that, once the Conservatives take power, they want a constructive relationship with them. It may be worth noting that some 30 per cent of trade union members vote Tory.

British politics has changed enormously in recent years. Labour has become a rich persons' party and the Conservatives are reaching out to groups that in the past would not have been natural allies.

We do not expect to convert the leadership of the trade union movement, but we do offer respect for the achievements of the movement and the possibility of a mutually beneficial dialogue.⁵⁶

Notes

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