

Rodney Bickerstaffe: Leader, Activist, Encourager

By Dan O'Neill

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Rodney Bickerstaff led the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) from 1982-1993 before it merged with the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) and National & Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) to create UNISON.¹ Bickerstaffe was UNISON General Secretary, 1996-2001; a former President, Trades Union Congress (TUC), 1992-1993; President, UK National Pensioners Convention (NPC), 2001-2005; and President, War on Want, 2006-2017.

This writer's interest in Bickerstaffe was heightened in September 2013 when, in the company of a young UNISON National Officer Colm Porter from Wexford, I shared a conversation with Bickerstaffe in a café across from UNISON's London offices on Euston Road. He was charismatic and an overwhelmingly friendly man. He spoke about his labour activism; getting his first trade union job; trips to Liberty Hall; and his close relationship with Tony Benn. He spoke about Ireland, his sense of profound connection only becoming fully comprehended in middle age when he met his Irish family for the first time.



Dan O'Neill with Rodney Bickerstaffe's Brother Tommy Simpson at the launch of *Left Lives in Twentieth Century Ireland: Volume 2*

Early Life & Elizabeth Bickerstaffe

Paul Routledge said Bickerstaffe would often tell the curious claim that 'I'm a bastard'. When listeners were shocked at his frankness, believing it to relate to his no-prisoners leadership style, he would add: 'No, I mean a real bastard'.² For almost half a century, Bickerstaffe had wondered who his real father was. Bickerstaffe was born on 6 April 1945 to a single working-class mother, Elizabeth 'Pearl' Bickerstaffe (later Topham). Born in 1920, she was the eldest of ten children. Her grandfather's ironmonger's business was ended when the premises were destroyed by fire, driving the family into poverty. For a brief period, Elizabeth Bickerstaffe's childhood 'family was so poor that they lived in a railway carriage in a gypsy field'.³ She

became a nurse and subsequently a Child Care Officer and served over forty years as a rank-and-file member of NUPE.⁴ When she was twenty-four years old and training as a nurse in Whipps Cross Hospital, East London during World War Two, a carpenter from Dublin called Tommy Simpson was admitted complaining of stomach pains. A war-time romance sparked between them. Elizabeth found herself pregnant but, like many war-time romances, it was short lived. Simpson returned to Dublin and they never spoke again.⁵ As in Ireland, single motherhood had an associated social stigma in 1940s Britain. According to Bickerstaffe's own account, when Elizabeth told her parents she was expecting a child, her father 'hit the roof'. Charles Alexander Edmund John 'Jack' Bickerstaffe was a mechanic, strong union man, Labour Party member, and chaired the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) in South Yorkshire. Though never a declared Communist Party member, his activism in the party-dominated NUWM and his readership of the *Daily Worker* suggested shared ideological leanings.⁶ He was, however, a man of his time, and unable to come to terms with his daughter's situation, asked her to leave her family home. Within two months of Bickerstaffe's birth, Elizabeth was a Residential Nurse caring for other people's children so she could keep her son with her. After two years, however, her father relented, and she and her son moved back in with her parents, sisters and brother in the Doncaster home Bickerstaffe described as phenomenally happy.⁷ In 1956 Elizabeth married Norman Topham, a local man whose marriage had ended in divorce and who Bickerstaffe considered 'as good as gold. He was a wonderful guy.'⁸ Although Elizabeth and Norman had no children of their own, he had custody of a son, Peter, from his first marriage. Peter and Bickerstaffe were good school friends.

Elizabeth was political. When sixteen, she began keeping newspaper cuttings about the Spanish Civil War and Japan's invasion of China. She amassed hundreds of cuttings, filling more than 170 pages of her scrapbook during the eighteen months leading up to February 1939 when, with the fall of Catalonia, the Spanish Republic disintegrated.⁹ According to Bickerstaffe's friend, colleague and archivist James Sutherland, Elizabeth was a massive influence on her son's political formation.

Bickerstaffe recalled how his mother took him on NUPE marches or brought him to her workplace and introduced him to colleagues. She was a very committed NUPE member, providing her son with a left apprenticeship. Among Bickerstaffe's papers were handwritten letters between his mother and then NUPE General Secretary Sydney Hill.¹⁰ They clearly indicate that his mother saw a trade union career for her son. When Bickerstaffe went to college and graduated at twenty-one years of age, Elizabeth wrote her first letter to Hill wondering if there was any possibility of there being some kind of a job in NUPE for him. Ultimately, he was invited along for an interview and appointed.¹¹

Employed by NUPE

In 1966, after education at Doncaster Grammar School and graduation with a sociology degree from Rutherford College of Technology, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bickerstaffe was appointed NUPE Area Officer in Yorkshire. He had found his calling. He soon discovered the movement's unusual workings. According to his Press Secretary for many years, Mary Maguire, 'Bickerstaffe told of how he had to travel the region by bus, until a colleague died and he was told 'you can have a car now'. 'So, that's the way of the union', he replied taking the car'.¹² In 1974, Bickerstaffe became Deputy Divisional Officer, North East Division, and

then Divisional Officer in the newly-created Northern Division a year later. In 1977, with his wife Pat (née Bennett) and a young family, Bickerstaffe moved to London to take up the National Officer's role at age thirty-six.¹³

Universally known as 'Bick', Bickerstaffe was instantly recognisable by his black, heavy-framed NHS spectacles and a haircut that many compared to Buddy Holly's. Self-deprecating and humorous, he mocked his own hairstyle. On BBC's *Question Time*, when asked to respond to the question 'Does the panel tip, and if so whom and how much?', he responded, 'I don't like the concept of tipping because I believe that people should be paid a reasonable, living wage. But yes. I do tip. I tip my barber (pointing at his head) and that's the result'. Mark Seddon, writing in the *Guardian*, observed:

'His tough, uncompromising oratory often held Labour and trade union conferences spellbound, but behind these rhetorical masterpieces, ferociously denouncing inequality and poverty wages, was a highly thoughtful, pragmatic and strategic union leader who could be mixing it with Arthur Scargill one day and Tony Blair the next.'¹⁴

UNISON North West Regional Secretary Kevan Nelson noted the respect Bickerstaffe garnered across the political spectrum 'for his consistency, principles, decency, sense of humour and oratory skills. He had integrity. He had been consistent over many decades as a leader on the left.'¹⁵ Nelson said he had a 'division of labour around internal Labour Party affairs that enabled him to not get too hands on in the internal machinations of that era when Labour moved to the right'. He had 'people like Tom Sawyer' who represented NUPE within the Labour Party 'so he kind of kept out of that'. Bickerstaffe was 'consistently there at all the major disputes ... prominently supporting workers'. He was 'a big presence at the Durham Miner's Gala' where his 'magnificent oratory ... brought respect because he could convey the movement's message very well'. He impressed on programmes like *Question Time* where 'he championed the low paid' and 'won the Minimum Wage': 'He wouldn't settle for half'.¹⁶

For Bickerstaffe, many of NUPE's achievements were 'often only achieved after years of struggle, frequently including many setbacks and disappointments along the way'.¹⁷ NUPE had one of the fastest continuous histories of membership growth amongst contemporary British unions; organised more women workers than any other, including substantial numbers from the black and ethnic minority communities, dedicating organisation, resources and representative facilities to such members.¹⁸ Bickerstaffe's office as leader of NUPE, coincided with Thatcherism in full swing. It was a challenging environment for trade unions. For some, 'defeat in the 1982 health dispute 'acted as a curtain-raiser for the miner's humiliation less than three years later and gave the Government the green light to introduce competitive tendering in the NHS'.¹⁹ However Bickerstaffe's leadership ensured that NUPE remained a strong fighting force, eventually merging with other public sector unions to create a synergy capable of defending that sector, its services and workers.

UNISON

Bickerstaffe was integral to the merger between NUPE, NALGO and COHSE which created UNISON in 1993.²⁰ According former UNISON North West Regional Secretary Frank Hont, he

was not solely responsible for the merger but was one of the main catalysts. There had been innate distrust between some members in the various unions and Bickerstaffe's helped overcome the division as he 'was able to instil confidence between officials and create personal relationships between senior lay activists.

'There was suspicion because, say for instance you were a dinner lady, your boss was a NALGO member. If you were a cleaner in a hospital, your boss might be an administrator in the hospital who was in NALGO, so there was a natural suspicion between white and blue-collar workers. It's hard to imagine now in some ways but at that time, twenty-eight years ago, that's where the suspicion came from, I think. We also negotiated separately, so NALGO would do a deal in a local authority and then NUPE would do their own deal with the same employer. There was quite often a suspicion that one side was getting a better deal than the other. So, there was a real need to bring unity and to bring solidarity.'²¹

Kevan Nelson identified key factors that led to the mergers, referencing Thatcherism and the need to build unity to respond to it more effectively:

'What drove the merger forward ... was the impact of privatisation in the public services and the general decline that set in during the Thatcher Government with cuts and anti-union laws. The unions were on the back foot and there was significant membership decline. That's often a key factor in mergers and it has to be acknowledged as a fact in the UNISON merger. COHSE's base was affected by policy changes. A lot of their members were in mental health services which were being decentralised and closed, so their industrial base was changing. NUPE's membership was ravaged by collective tendering and privatisation. NALGO had more continuity at that time, but the changes would affect them later.'²²

It was generally seen as a successful merger and Bickerstaffe was proud of it. Having achieved his mission, however, he served only one term as General Secretary. This disappointed many activists and Officials because it was felt that he had a lot more to offer and he was only fifty-five years of age. He had his own reasons.²³ Perhaps, to paraphrase his friend Tony Benn, Bickerstaffe left to 'dedicate more time to politics, as stepping down certainly did not represent the end of his political and social activism.'²⁴ Looking back on UNISON's formation, Bickerstaffe observed that it markedly strengthened union democracy, not least by pioneering the special representation of women members at all levels.²⁵

Minimum Wage & the Labour Party

One of Bickerstaffe's most notable UNISON campaigns, was his uncompromising battle for the introduction of a Minimum Wage. Although the concept is now accepted, before it was introduced by the New Labour Government, there were quite a lot of objections to it from all sides of the political spectrum. According to Jim Sutherland, although the Conservative Party was 'its most vociferous opponent, most of the large trade unions' also opposed 'believing it would undermine the process of collective bargaining if Government was involved in setting pay levels. As well as this, some wanted to protect the wage differentials between skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers'.²⁶

Frank Hont remembers 'a difficult battle' because many other trade unions representing craft and skilled workers

'opposed it because they saw it as reducing the differential between their grade and the manual workers grade. So it wasn't a popular cause inside the trade union movement or inside the TUC. It was seen as levelling out something that had existed for many, many years, going back to the guilds. It took a bit of impetus when Labour took power in '97.'²⁷

From the early 1980s, Bickerstaffe made waves in the Labour Party, pushing it to support the cause. His first breakthrough came in 1985 when he successfully moved a composite motion calling for the introduction of a Statutory Minimum Wage. Speaking on the motion, Bickerstaffe proclaimed:

'It has been a historic, long march to get to today. We have been trying for 20 years to get this Labour Party Conference to pass by a two thirds majority a resolution that commits our party to set up when in power a statutory, national, minimum wage. I shall not be long this morning, because I think that we have got it in the bag. I think that you all know that although we have had trade unionism for these past 150 years, we have never been able to do what we should have done for the low paid of our nation, have we? Of course we have not.'²⁸

The following year, he moved a similar motion at the TUC Annual Congress which was carried overwhelmingly, although opposed by the TGWU (Transport & General Workers' Union) and Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications & Plumbing Union.²⁹ In early 1991, future Labour Leader John Smith met Bickerstaffe to discuss the Minimum Wage, acknowledging the fact that Labour, although supportive of the concept, had to consider the formula. Bickerstaffe wanted it to be set at two thirds of male median earnings. Smith thought it wise to view this as a medium-term goal as opposed to an immediate objective.³⁰

According to Bickerstaffe, Smith 'said this in the most supportive and friendly basis believing the Tories would try to rip us apart during the election period. John asked whether it might be possible for us to meet for a long evening to discuss the matter thoroughly on a private basis'.³¹ The meeting that followed involved Bickerstaffe and Peter Morris, UNISON Senior Research Officer on one side of the table, and Smith and Shadow Employment Secretary Tony Blair on the other. Bickerstaffe recalled how the formula was abandoned after Smith's death.

'In the wee small hours, we concluded with an understanding that to help the return of a Labour Government, I would discuss the possibilities within my own union, NUPE, and then with others, but that we could not guarantee anything. After many discussions within the movement ... all were agreed on a form of wording accepted by NUPE's Executive which was a formula of 50% of male median earnings rising over time to two thirds. When John Smith died on 12 May 1994, everything changed, of course. Tony Blair decided that although he knew well of the bargain struck, firstly at Oxford, and then in the various meetings between trade unions and the Labour Party leadership, he did not want to have

any formula at all put before the British electorate during the next General Election campaign. So, the formula was murdered before it could do any good in the land.³²

Despite this, progress was made on the issue when New Labour came to power due to the influence of the trade unions. Bickerstaffe thought that

‘what was achieved in 1998, and what we still have in 2015, is a Low Pay Commission, with good, intelligent and good-intentioned people, but who are not totally independent. Thus, the previously agreed level of a ‘Plimsoll Line for labour’, below which workers would not sink was replaced by a series of small pay rises from a very low beginning now challenged by many as being nowhere near the Living Wage that we had been envisaging for a hundred years.’

Although Bickerstaffe was a lifelong Labour supporter and fostered a working relationship with the New Labour Government, relations were often fraught. According to Alistair Campbell, on 1 May 1995 Bickerstaffe warned him that Blair would need the unions once in power: ‘I reported back to TB who said they can just fuck off’. Indeed, Campbell notes the difficulty Blair had disguising his ‘contempt’ for the unions.³³ According to Nelson, when the diary came out, Bickerstaffe made a virtue of the quote, using it in his speeches: ‘During the New Labour era there was some antagonism towards Rodney but nobody would go out of their way to be seen to be his enemy because of his stature and his decency. So, whilst Blair would have resented his persistence and his support to retain Clause 4, Rodney thrived on the resentment. He made a virtue of it’.³⁴ Bickerstaffe was, however, a pragmatist and understood that he had to work with New Labour. He believed that there were people in Cabinet who could advance progressive policies and get things done.³⁵

When in 2012 the Minimum Wage was named as the most successful Government policy of the past thirty years in a survey of British political experts, Bickerstaffe referenced the fact that the Irish Government had reduced the minimum wage, claiming it was as an emergency measure in response to the financial crisis, making an 11% cut from €8.65 to €7.65 per hour.³⁶

‘From self-made men and women who worship their creators, to the jawless wonders who can barely hold in their mouths the silver spoons planted there at birth, once more the old game is afoot,” proclaimed Bickerstaffe. “Whether it is natural greed or genuine fear of the economic times and the globalised “need” to race down wages to the bottom, the new and old right wing are saying the same things. “A job at any price is better than no job at all.’³⁷

Bickerstaffe fought for decent, living wages for workers of all backgrounds until his final days. His association with the cause of the Minimum Wage can be evidenced in a tweet posted by former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott on hearing of Bickerstaffe’s death: ‘Without Rodney Bickerstaffe there'd be no minimum wage, which improved the lives of millions. When you met Rodney, you made a friend for life’.³⁸ Mary Maguire said Bickerstaffe could be

‘downright awkward at times. He’d never give up. He’d keep coming back to the argument and worry away at his opponents, like a dog to a bone ... It was that

tenacity that gave millions of workers a pay rise in 1998 with the introduction of the statutory National Minimum Wage. It was no easy achievement. But, Bick, as he was known, knew he was right – all he had to do was convince the rest of the world.’³⁹

The Union in Ireland

Through NUPE and UNISON, Bickerstaffe had a direct link with Ireland as both organised in Northern Ireland. Although the union’s Irish membership was never numerically significant, reaching 2.2% at its highest in 1992, what was remarkable was how the Irish tail often wagged the national NUPE/UNISON dog on equality issues.⁴⁰ UNISON Irish Regional Secretary Patricia McKeown remembers that Bickerstaffe was ‘always tremendously supportive of us and the membership in Northern Ireland’. While ‘the smallest part of the union’ could ‘be regarded as the most insignificant part’, it was ‘never the case with him’. He provided ‘tremendous support during all of the conflict and supported the kind of work we were trying to do, like the early work around equality, human rights and trying to move towards some kind of a peace process’. He had a ‘particular passion for the lowest paid women workers, and that is one of the reasons he was such a champion of the Minimum Wage, before it was an accepted policy’ across the movement. He ‘backed us when we started off pushing for the minimum wage inside the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)’ and the ‘ICTU took that position in advance of the TUC and Rodney was delighted about that’.⁴¹

Writing in the *Morning Star*, TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady echoed Bickerstaffe’s special hunger for women’s rights: ‘Rodney will be remembered as a great champion for equality and social justice, especially for low-paid women’.⁴² On UNISON’s creation, the union adopted green white and purple, the colours of Emmeline Pankhurst’s Women’s Social & Political Union, as their own at the suggestion of NUPE President Anna McGonigle from Omagh.⁴³ McGonigle was full of trepidation when becoming President in 1992. On the advice of Regional Officer Inez McCormack, McGonigle, approached Bickerstaffe during a delegation at Westminster and he immediately produced his diary and gave her his home and private telephone numbers. According to McGonigle, the day after he became General Secretary, he came into a School Meals Working Party in London, introduced himself and ‘promised the dedicated, encouraging leadership that followed’. McGonigle thought ‘he did not like anyone who was there for the wrong reasons’ and ‘demanded the same selflessness from others’.⁴⁴

In the battle for equality and low paid women, Bickerstaffe’s ally was Inez McCormack.⁴⁵ She campaigned to organise and re-value the contribution of the ‘forgotten’, predominantly women, young workers and immigrants in low-paid jobs’.⁴⁶ Under her stewardship from the mid-1980s, NUPE successfully fought for equal pay and in-house contracts to supply cleaning and catering services in Northern Ireland hospitals at a time when, under Tory pressure, services were being outsourced.⁴⁷ During The Troubles, union organisers worked in a highly challenging environment. Under McCormack and Bickerstaffe, NUPE Northern Ireland rejected attempts by others to impose policies based on false dichotomies of religion, opting instead to support members in workplaces and communities grappling with issues identified as important to them.⁴⁸ Unlike some other British leaders, Bickerstaffe was respectful of the nuances of the Irish situation, and never tried to push his own ideology onto those who had to live within the day-to-day reality of conflict. The contradictions of attempting to separate

trade union issues from the political situation in Northern Ireland met Rodney face on during an industrial dispute in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast in 1986 when, in Rodney's own words, the workers were treated like 'enemies of the state.' According to Rodney,

'the strikers, joined by 100 women workers, were confronted by a convoy of 17 police and military Land Rovers complete with personnel carrying machine guns. In another terrifying scene, the divisional Mobile Support Unit was drafted in...Such provocation and intimidation...must be condemned by all who share civilised values, regardless of their views in Northern Ireland. Ancillary workers at the Royal Victoria do not want to be dragged into a political battlefield.'⁴⁹

According to McKeown, 'when it came to The Troubles, Rodney took his lead from Inez and the lay structures in Northern Ireland. He listened to what we had to say and supported us. There was never any question of imposing a view. He took a very democratic approach to it and he trusted us'.⁵⁰

Travellers

Bickerstaffe's respect for Ireland did not stop there. According to McKeown, he had 'a particular passion for the rights of Irish Travellers'. Irish travellers 'had supported him through a difficult period and he paid that support back in spades by becoming a champion for their rights'. NUPE Northern Ireland were 'the one part of the union' that ran 'a campaign that was trying to get a real voice out there for Travellers'. There was 'real and deep racism on this island'. NUPE worked 'with Traveller organisations' and 'tried to get the issue onto the trade union agenda and backed by ICTU' finally succeeding 'in making that a very visible cause'.⁵¹

According to Andrew Ryder, former Policy Officer, Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition, Bickerstaffe was one of the few public figures to stand in solidarity with the Travelling Community. This commitment sprang from his Doncaster childhood where he grew up with and befriended local gypsies and Travellers. He had vivid childhood memories of 'Gypsy friends being evicted and moved on'.⁵² In the 1980s and 1990s, Bickerstaffe was President, Labour Campaign for Travellers' Rights (LCTR), which fought to reverse the Conservatives' Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994 which abolished the statutory duty on local authorities to provide halting sites. When Labour were in Government, Bickerstaffe was instrumental in getting them to include Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs in regional spatial strategies, later dismantled by the Coalition Government, weakening the drive for more sites.⁵³

Bickerstaffe recalled then Conservative Leader Michael Howard – who had been seeking to cash in on anti-Traveller sentiment in the tabloids – while addressing the National Federation of Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Group in 2006.

'Just before he stepped down as leader of the Conservative Party, I and Irish Traveller activist Kathleen McCarthy met Michael Howard. Michael had been good enough to call on the Dale Farm Travellers' Site to canvass during the

General Election. Well, what I should say is that he stood in the garden of someone opposed to the site and forgot to speak to the Travellers. We attempted to put that right by seeking a meeting with him to which he graciously agreed. He was a lawyer specialising in planning law before becoming an MP, so we offered him a job for when he retires from parliament.⁵⁴

Finding His Irish Father

In 1997, Bickerstaffe began searching to find his father. His mother had told him who his father was from a very young age and provided him with an address in Cabra where his father had lived with his parents.⁵⁵ That autumn, while visiting Dublin, he knocked on the door of that address. There was nobody in, but an elderly neighbour told him of another member of the family who occupied the house who lived a few kilometres away. The man, Bob Hartigan, told Bickerstaffe that he thought they might be related and put his daughter Ann in contact with him by telephone. Ann Hartigan proved to be Bickerstaffe's first cousin. Bob Hartigan was married to Bickerstaffe's father's deceased sister. Ann told him that his father had three other children in Ireland, Liam, Francis and Tommy Simpson.⁵⁶

Bickerstaffe's brother Tommy Simpson was a trade union and political activist; long-time SIPTU FÁS Branch member; President, Dublin Council of Trade Unions, 2014-2016; and Green Party candidate in a number of Local and General Elections. Simpson recounts first finding out that he had a half-brother:

'My aunt Maureen called me and invited me over to her house. She told me 'a man has come from England and he says that he's your brother'. I asked her what his name was, and she said, 'Well his name is Rodney and he's a Union Official'. I thought to myself, there must be a thousand Rodneys in the trade union movement, then she said, 'he's on *Question Time* with David Dimbleby next week'. I asked if he was in the audience or on the panel because that makes a big difference and she told me that she thought he was on the panel. I said that there was one Trade Union Official in England by the name of Rodney Bickerstaffe that I've been following for years. That he was a really radical guy and a good trade union leader. Of course, I went out and I bought a copy of the *Radio Times* in the first shop I came to. I looked at *Question Time* for the following week. It said 'Rodney Bickerstaffe, leader of Britain's largest trade union UNISON'. At ten or eleven the following Monday night, Rodney rang me and he said who he was. He was calling from the Labour Party Conference in England, but he said he wanted to come over to meet me and his other two brothers. He knew at this stage that his father was dead and that he had three half-brothers. He arranged for himself, his wife Pat and his son Phillip to come over the following Sunday and we all got on like a house on fire.'⁵⁷

Regarding his newly found family, the *Daily Mirror* reported "It's wonderful", declared a Bick holding back the tears. 'I've got a whole new family and they're such lovely, friendly people'.⁵⁸ The story received widespread press coverage and Bickerstaffe was invited to announce the National Lottery winners on television, making the most of his thirty-nine seconds by talking about a living wage.⁵⁹ His mother Elizabeth died in January 1999 during the

making of the short film the BBC made for the National Lottery. Ironically, she died in London at the precise time Bickerstaffe entered his father's Dublin house for the first time.⁶⁰ He never had the chance to meet his father, Thomas 'Tommy' Simpson in person as, unaware to Bickerstaffe, he had died in a nursing home in Lemington Spa in 1989 and was buried in Oscott Cemetery, Sutton Coldfield, near Birmingham. Bickerstaffe later visited the nursing home and spoke to those who cared for his father.⁶¹

Retirement & Death

Bickerstaffe remained an activist long into his retirement, most notably as President, NPC, 2001-2005. Hont recounted that Barbara Castle rang him up to ask, 'Would you fancy being the President of the NPC?'⁶² Bickerstaffe replied,

"Oh yeah? I wouldn't mind that'. She said, 'the thing is, Jack Jones doesn't want you to do it'. Then a couple of hours later he got a phone call from Jack Jones saying, 'How do you fancy being President of the NPC? I'm pushing for you, but Barbara Castle doesn't want you'. That's the old shit you get in any movement. The 'I'm the one who's promoting you mate, no one else' attitude.'⁶³

From 2005, Bickerstaffe focused more on global matters. He chaired the Global Network working with organisations in Asia, Africa and Latin America; was President of War on Want; and chaired the Ken Gill Memorial Fund.⁶⁴ He was Patron of the Dalit Solidarity Network UK, campaigning against the oppression of India's caste system.⁶⁵ He was awarded Honorary Doctorates from Keele University, University of Hertfordshire and Sheffield Hallam University, and the Freedom of the Borough from Doncaster Metropolitan Borough.⁶⁶

Bickerstaffe's death in October 2017 caused shock and grief. Hont recalled being with him the previous February.

'We went to an exhibition about the International Brigade together ... We knew he was really ill, but he wasn't taking visitors towards the end, so it was still a shock when he died. I tweeted immediately and the way I described him was 'mentor, comrade, and friend', because for me, that's what he was. He mentored me. He convinced me that I should be a Regional Secretary ... the best ten years of my life. It was a dream job and it was him who said, 'of course you've got to go for it!' So he was encouraging ... supportive. He'd ring you up at seven o'clock in the morning, that was the only other bloody thing about him. The phone would go and you'd know it was him making four or five calls to people at the start of his day. You'd never forget that! But they were always helpful phone calls.'⁶⁷

Hont described Bickerstaffe's extensive personal network

'One day I was down in London having a drink outside a pub just off Euston Road. He'd long retired but he walked past the pub so we called him over ... 'Come and have a drink with us!' we said. He wasn't a big drinker, but we were ... So he had a glass of red wine and sat down. 'What are you up to?' asked Rodney, so I said, 'Well we're putting a play on at the Labour Party Conference about Paul Robeson'.

He said, 'That's interesting. I just spoke to Paul Robeson Junior'. I said I didn't know there was anyone called Paul Robeson Junior. He said, 'Oh, it's his son. He lives in Manhattan. I'll ring him'. This is like ten o'clock at night ... So he gets his little mobile phone out. He never had an iPhone. He had one of these little Nokia things. And he rings Paul Robeson Junior in Manhattan and passes me the phone. I said 'Hello Paul, I'm sitting with Rodney Bickerstaffe'. I told him about the play. I gave Rodney the phone back and said, 'Who the fucking hell would have Paul Robeson Junior's number in his phone?' It's surreal isn't it! It didn't stop there. He probably had the Prime Minister of Denmark's phone number in his phone book.'⁶⁸

Bickerstaffe contracted cancer of the oesophagus. In his final days, he was cared for by members of the union he helped create. On 3 October 2017 Rodney Bickerstaffe died, aged seventy-two. Paying tribute to Bickerstaffe, British Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn said, 'He was a warm, decent and principled man, an outstanding trade unionist and socialist, and a great friend and support to me over many years ... Rodney was always global in his views and perspectives, a real internationalist'.⁶⁹

His brother Tommy Simpson echoed this sentiment saying,

'He was immensely admired by his members...He was one of the most humble people you could meet. No pretentiousness at all. He was completely committed to equality and getting rid of discrimination. He fought tirelessly for the minimum wage even when it wasn't popular to do so.'⁷⁰

To paraphrase Nelson Mandela, Bickerstaffe was a campaigner for the poor, fighting oppression and exploitation throughout the world.⁷¹ He was a warm spirited man who took a genuine interest in the lives of those he met. He was husband, father, brother, son and to many, a working class hero. Speaking on his retirement from UNISON, Bickerstaffe reflected:

'It all goes so quickly doesn't it. It doesn't seem like a few months ago that I was in a little Anglia car. It was January 1967. I had a little Perdio Radio on the back seat. It was playing 'Penny Lane is in my eyes'. I thought the world was my oyster. What I wasn't going to do ... The trade union movement, the labour movement, the world, the cosmos didn't know what I was going to do! Then suddenly you realise that they never found out because although you try, you can only do a little. And that little you have to do as a collective. The collective, our collective, is called the trade union movement.'⁷²

Bickerstaffe was regarded as 'one of the most important trade union leaders of the 1980s and 1990s in Britain.'⁷³ He held to his working class values, was inspired by his mother's sacrifices on his behalf and her struggle with low pay and continuous under-valuation of her and other women's work, and determined in his desire to involve members and communities in campaigns to resist attacks on public services. His discovery, late in life, of his Irish family enriched his understanding of who he was, and although his life's work may not have felt complete while austerity and Toryism diminished working class existence, global migration and exploitation spiralled, and intolerance and injustice denied so many the basic necessities.

However dissatisfied Bickerstaffe may have felt, those observing his efforts to change things for the better could only conclude that it was a full life lived to great purpose on behalf of the many rather than the few.

Notes

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- ¹ Dan O'Neill, 'A Warm and Principled Man': *Liberty*, vol. 16. no. 4, October 2017
- ² Paul Routledge, *The Bumper Book of British Lefties*, (Politicos, London, 2003), p. 19.
- ³ Routledge, 'Bickerstaffe hunts for father and uncovers a family', *op. cit.*
- ⁴ Stephen Williams & R.H. Fryer, *Leadership & Democracy: The History of the National Union of Public Employees, Volume 2, 1928-1993*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2011), p. 392.
- ⁵ Routledge, 'Bickerstaffe hunts for father and uncovers a family', *op. cit.*
- ⁶ Jim Jump, *A Spanish Civil War Scrapbook: Elizabeth Pearl Bickerstaffe's Newspaper Cuttings of the Wars in Spain and China from August 1937 to May 1939*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2015), p. 7.
- ⁷ Pat Thane & Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013), p. 94.
- ⁸ John Boy, Blog Post entitled 'Britain is a country which once made and has now lost and says 'Goodbye' to an old giant of the Trade Union Movement called Rodney Bickerstaffe,' <http://britainisnocountryforoldmen.blogspot.com/2017/10/britain-is-country-which-once-made-and.html> [retrieved 4 January 2019].
- ⁹ J. Jump, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Hill, 29 October 1902-17 August 1968, grew up in Dudley in the English Black Country. He left school at fourteen; completed an engineering apprenticeship; and was President, Dudley & District Trades Council, 1928-1935, and Labour Councillor in Tipton, 1937-1947. He became NUPW Midlands Organiser in 1935; National Officer, 1945; Chief National Officer, 1960 and Assistant General Secretary, 1962. He served on the TUC General Council, 1963-1967
- ¹¹ James Sutherland interview with Dan O'Neill, 2 August 2018.
- ¹² Mary Maguire, 'One of the Greats', *Union Active! The Magazine for Members in Yorkshire and Humberside*, Winter 2017.
- ¹³ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p. 392.
- ¹⁴ Mark, Seddon, 'Rodney Bickerstaffe Obituary', *Guardian*, 3 October 2017, www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/03/rodney-bickerstaffe-obituary [retrieved 15 December 2018].
- ¹⁵ Kevan Nelson interview with Dan O' Neill, 3 August 2018.
- ¹⁶ Kevan Nelson, *op cit.*
- ¹⁷ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p7.
- ¹⁸ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p7.
- ¹⁹ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p15.
- ²⁰ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p392.
- ²¹ Frank Hont interview with Dan O' Neill, 5 August 2018.
- ²² Nelson, *op. cit.*
- ²³ Nelson, *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ Tony Benn signalled the end of his parliamentary career in 1999, when he announced he would not be standing for re-election at the next General Election so that he would have 'more time to devote to politics and more freedom to do it'.
- ²⁵ Williams and Fryer, *op. cit.*, p6.
- ²⁶ Jim Sutherland, e-mail to Dan O'Neill, National Minimum Wage/Living Wage, 2016.
- ²⁷ Hont, *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Rodney Bickerstaffe, Speech to the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth, 1985.
- ²⁹ Sutherland, *op. cit.*
- ³⁰ Sutherland, *op. cit.* Smith, 13 September 1938-12 May 1994, was born at Baddarroch, Dalmally, Argyll, eldest of Sarah Cameron [Scott] and schoolteacher Archibald Leitch Smith's three children. He was MP Monklands East, 1970-1983; Minister of State for Energy, 1975-1976; Minister of State for the Privy Council Office, 1976-1977; and Secretary of State for Trade and President of the Board of Trade, 1978-1979, in Jim Callaghan's Government. After Neil Kinnock resigned following Labour's loss in the 1992 General Election, Smith was elected Labour Leader in July 1992. In 1993, he abolished the trade union block vote at Labour Party Conferences, replacing it with 'one member, one vote'. After Smith's sudden death, he was succeeded by Blair. Gordon Brown & James Naughtie, *John Smith, Life and Soul of the Party*, (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1994); Christopher Bryant (ed), *John Smith, An Appreciation*, (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1994); Andy McSmith, *John Smith: A Life 1938-1994*, (Mandarin Publishing, e-book, 1994); Mark Stuart, *John Smith - A Life*, (Politico's Publishing, London, 2005).

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- ³¹ Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ³² Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ³³ Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years: Extracts from Alastair Campbell Diaries*, (Hutchinson, London, 2007), p. 58.
- ³⁴ Nelson, *op. cit.* Clause 4 was a part of the 1918 text of the Labour Party constitution which set out the aims and values of the party. It was revised in 1995 by Blair.
- ³⁵ Tommy Simpson interview with Dan O' Neill, 11 July 2018.
- ³⁶ BBC, 'Minimum Wage 'most successful government policy'', 10 September 2018, www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-11896971 [retrieved 15 December 2018].
- ³⁷ Rodney Bickerstaffe, 'Minimum wage should be a living wage – Bick', <http://unisonactive.blogspot.com/2010/12/minimum-wage-should-be-living-wage-bick.html> [retrieved 22 September 2018].
- ³⁸ John Prescott, Twitter post, 3 October 2017 [retrieved 12 July 2018].
- ³⁹ Maguire, 'One of the Greats', *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁰ Frances Devine, 'Mistress of her own history: UNISON's Anna McGonigle of Omagh' in Seán Byers & Francis Devine, *William Walker, 1871-1918, Belfast Labour Unionist Centenary Essays*, (Umiskin Press, Dublin, 2018), pp. 151-152.
- ⁴¹ Patricia McKeown, interview with Dan O'Neill, 8 August 2018.
- ⁴² Frances O'Grady, 'Rodney Bickerstaffe: in tribute to a legend', *Morning Star*: 4 October 2017, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/rodney-bickerstaffe-tribute-legend> [retrieved 4 January 2019]
- ⁴³ Devine, *op. cit.* p. 159.
- ⁴⁴ Devine, *op. cit.* p. 159.
- ⁴⁵ Tommy Simpson, e-mail to Dan O'Neill, 16 January 2019
- ⁴⁶ Frances Devine, 'Changing everything: Inez McCormack, 1943-2013' in Francis Devine & Kieran Jack McGinley, *Left Lives in Twentieth Century Ireland*, (Umiskin Press, Dublin, 2018), pp. 211-234.
- ⁴⁷ Devine, 'McGonigle', *op. cit.*, p. 2
- ⁴⁸ Williams & Fryer, *op. cit.*, p. 528.
- ⁴⁹ Rodeny Bickerstaffe, as quoted in Rosemary Sales, *Women Divided: Gender, Religion and Politics in Northern Ireland*, (Routledge, New York, 2002)
- ⁵⁰ Patricia McKeown interview with Dan O'Neill, 8 August 2018.
- ⁵¹ McKeown, *op. cit.*
- ⁵² Andrew Ryder, 'Tributes to Rodney Bickerstaffe', *Travellers Times*: 11 October 2017, www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2017/10/tributes-rodney-bickerstaff [retrieved 11 September 2018].
- ⁵³ Ryder, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁴ Sutherland, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁵ Tommy Simpson, e-mail to Dan O' Neill, 16 January 2019.
- ⁵⁶ Tommy was born in 1949, Liam in 1951 and Francis in 1953.
- ⁵⁷ Tommy Simpson interview with Dan O'Neill in SIPTU College, Dublin, 11 July 2018.
- ⁵⁸ Kevin Maguire, 'Remembering Rodney Bickerstaffe: A trade union titan who changed our lives for the better', *Daily Mirror*, 3 October 2017.
- ⁵⁹ Maguire, 'One of the Greats', *op. cit.*
- ⁶⁰ Simpson, e-mail to Dan O'Neill, 16 January 2019.
- ⁶¹ Simpson, e-mail to Dan O'Neill, 16 January 2019.
- ⁶² Castle, 6 October 1910-3 May 2002, was born Barbara Anne Betts in Chesterfield, youngest of three children to Frank Betts, a Tax Inspector, and his wife Annie (Ferrand). She grew up in in an Independent Labour Party household. Although prohibited from formal political activity as a Civil Servant, her father edited the *Bradford Pioneer*, the city's socialist newspaper, and Annie was elected a Labour Councillor. Castle was MP for Blackburn, 1945-1979; MEP, Greater Manchester, 1979-1989; and, as Baroness Castle, sat in the Lords from 1990. She was Minister for Overseas Development, 1964-1965; Minister of Transport, 1965-1968; Secretary of State for Employment and First Secretary of State, 1968-1970; and Secretary of State for Health and Social Services, 1974-1976.
- ⁶³ Hont, *op. cit.* James Larkin (J.L. or 'Jack') Jones, 29 March 1913-21 April 2009, was born in Garston, Liverpool. He left school at fourteen and became a docker. He was converted to socialism by reading Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and joined the TGWU becoming Shop Steward and Delegate, National Docks Group Committee. In 1936 he served with the British Battalion, XV International Brigade as Political Commissar, Major Attlee Company. He was seriously wounded at the Battle of the Ebro in 1938. After the war, he became a full-time TGWU Official in Coventry as Midlands Secretary. As a Labour Party Executive member, he chaired the policy group on Industrial Democracy. He was elected TGWU General Secretary, 1968-1978; strongly opposed

the 1966-1979 Labour Government's Prices & Income Policy; and, within the TUC, was instrumental in creating the Social Contract, ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) in 1975, and campaigned for Britain to leave the EEC in the 1975 Referendum. He was President of the NPC and International Brigade Memorial Trust. See Jack Jones, *Union Man: An Autobiography*, (Harper Collins, London, 1986).

⁶⁴ Gill, 30 August 1927-23 May 2009, born in Melksham, Wiltshire, became a draughtsman and Merseyside/Northern Ireland Official for DATA (Draughtsmen's and Allied Technicians' Association). He was General Secretary, Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), 1974-1988, until it merged with ASTMS (Association of Scientific, Technical & Managerial Staffs) to form the Manufacturing, Science & Finance Union (MSF). He was MSF General Secretary, 1988-1992. He maintained a strong interest in Irish affairs and expanded DATA/TASS/MSF membership in Ireland considerably.

⁶⁵ David Haslam, 'Caste discrimination law would be a fitting tribute to Rodney Bickerstaffe', *Guardian*, 9 October 2017, www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/09/caste-discrimination-law-would-be-a-fitting-tribute-to-rodney-bickerstaffe [retrieved 22 September 2018].

⁶⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Bickerstaffe [retrieved 1 October 2017].

⁶⁷ Hont, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Hont, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Tributes paid to Bickerstaffe: *Daily Mail*, 1 June 2018, www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-4944172/Tributes-paid-death-former-trade-union-leader-Rodney-Bickerstaffe.html; Paul Routledge, 'Bickerstaffe hunts for father and uncovers a family', *The Independent*, 16 December 1998. www.independent.co.uk/news/bickerstaffe-hunts-for-a-father-and-uncovers-a-family-1191663.html [retrieved 1 June 2018].

⁷⁰ Tommy Simpson interview with Dan O'Neill in SIPTU College, Dublin, 11 July 2018.

⁷¹ Nelson Mandela, video message recorded for the 2001 UNISON Conference, supplied to O'Neill via email by James Sutherland. 8 August 2018.

⁷² Rodney Bickerstaffe, 'Retirement Speech to UNISON Conference as featured in the Rodney Bickerstaffe Tribute Film, 2001, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP_zuVKe3p4 [retrieved 1 June 2018].

⁷³ www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/03/rodney-bickerstaffe-obituary [retrieved 1 June 2018].