

Self Interest Without Thoughtlessness

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How can we be an enduring force for good? In every way, by participating with others, by individual action and by resisting the reasons to walk by on the other side.

We cannot help unless we help ourselves when we can. We do not help others if we do not make the best of ourselves, limited by what is reasonable and what does not harm others.

Some parliamentary colleagues in other counties seem able to give without notice a firm comment on every issue that the media decide is important. I duck the issue of how and why Cristiano Ronaldo is paid over £400,000 a week by his club, and possibly as much again in sponsorships.

Footballers, music makers, the greatest actors and authors are in categories apart from the rest of us, at least the most successful may be. Most in each occupation do not earn much. Many are part-time by choice or necessity.

When employment pay negotiations turn into industrial disputes, there are dilemmas for each major political party. Mine, the Conservatives, should resist appearing anti-union; our main alternative, Labour and Coop, have to choose when to stand on picket lines when trade union action interferes with the lives of ordinary people. Note that not all unions are affiliated politically, even if they have a political fund from which members can opt out.

In cases of unfair treatment, I have worked closely with the Police Federation, the British Medical Association, and unions for civil servants, teachers and social workers. Shop stewards and regional officers, with their legal advisers, week by week deliver results for my constituents.

Industrial inaction should always be the last resort and often it is – but not always. The RMT dispute over who could shut doors at train stations was never justifiable. The refuse collectors' strikes along the south coast are now being copied in Scotland.

Meantime, we all have to consider how to manage the answers to questions how to protect the living standards of people severely affected by rising prices. There is not one answer. We know that prices and incomes policies broke down in the past when recession and unemployment made matters worse.

My friends included trade union activists whose selfless dedication caused their fellow members to elect them as general secretaries. They included Tony Christopher who, after war service in the RAF, worked for the Inland Revenue and led the Inland Revenue Staff Federation. We were helpfully on talking terms during Arthur Scargill's mining disputes.

Bill Morris, former leader of my old T&GWU union, kindly spoke at one of my birthday parties. I never suspected him or successive general secretaries of the Trade Union Congress of letting party preference get in the way of negotiations towards a mutually agreed result.

Things are not perfect. It is absurd that with so many Conservative members of trade unions that political strand is not reflected on national executives. It is some years since Tory union activists have come to the House of Commons as MPs.

Thoughtlessness? My battling for residential leaseholders included the fight against fast-doubling ground rents. The news this week is that thousands who paid doubled annual payments will receive refunds and that growing numbers of developers will remove costly terms from leasehold contracts.

I should restate that my Worthing home is leasehold, without problems, and I now have an interest in a London home without difficulties, My campaigning started because a constituent came on behalf of elderly fellow leaseholders who did not have the strength, the knowledge or the funds to fight for justice. With the campaigning charity Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, we have been at least partially successful.