
The North-South Dialogue: the Report of the Brandt Commission¹

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The outlook for working people in most of the countries of the Commonwealth can rarely have been less promising than at present. We are confronted with crises at all sides—recession, the highest unemployment for years, rampant inflation, serious uncertainty about energy resources and their price, and an exceptionally tense international political situation—and the governments which could take action to remedy the situation refuse to do so. In fact in many cases they are taking precisely the opposite action. In Britain the Government is wedded to an outdated and discredited system of economic theory which leads it to abstain from the traditional interventionist role of government to promote expansion and employment. It involves ministers in cutting public expenditure, reducing social provision, and deterring investment. It increases spending on yet more nuclear weapons at the same time as it reduces aid to developing countries.

The leaders of the seven major Western industrialised countries will meet in a week's time² and it is to be hoped that the representations to be made to them on behalf of the international trade union movement will spur them to set in motion the wheels of economic recovery. But the people at the summit table represent only a part of the world and they cannot on their own have any confidence that their policies would succeed unless they have the constructive support of other governments and the free consent of the working people of the world in those policies.

As trade unionists, our aim in our dealings with employers and with governments is to strike a bargain, a bargain which will be acceptable to the people we represent and which in any set of circumstances is the best that we can achieve. That is why I believe we have a professional expertise to contribute in discussing the Report of the Brandt Commission since its recommendations amount to a global bargain and because they invite governments and international organisations to participate in global negotiations for mutual benefit.

The appeal to mutuality of interests strikes a chord with us and would perhaps be enough to command trade union interest. Add to that the knowledge that our good friend Joe Morris, a veteran of these annual

Commonwealth trade union gatherings, was one of the small band of commissioners which drew together the recommendations and we have compelling reasons to take notice.

How should the trade union movement react to the recommendations of the Commission? First the Commission has performed a great service in asserting the social objectives must be an integral part of world development aims. That comes out of the Report in many ways—in the basic call for a redistribution of income towards the developing countries; in the importance given to conquering hunger and disease; in the recognition of employment in all countries as the means of meeting both physical and psychological needs and of promoting a more even distribution of income; and in securing wide participation of working people in putting economic and social reforms into effect.

Apart from the recognition that the social objectives are desirable in themselves there is also the welcome acknowledgement that economic advances will not be possible without accompanying social reform. That comes out clearly in the consideration of avoidance of protectionism and fair labour standards. It is said that trade unions have in most instances resisted the temptation to demand protection from competition from developing countries. Tribute is paid to the free trade union movement and to its progressive attitude to the liberalisation of trade and cooperation for development. But when standards are held down not by lack of development but by repression of trade unions and by exploitation, trade unions raise questions. Internationally, failure to achieve basic social standards can be an obstacle to the opening of new trade opportunities for the countries of the South.

The Commonwealth Trade Union Conference discussed related issues in some detail last year in the context of the social clause in trade agreements. There was general agreement with the view that the linking of trade with social progress should not be imposed from the outside by international organisations but must come from national trade union pressure. The Brandt Commission recognises that social progress must come nationally, and that may be one of the reasons why it does not specifically endorse the idea of a social clause. The introduction of social clauses into trade and aid agreements would assist trade unions in

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²ie in late June 1980.

developing countries in pressing for social progress and economic advancement. Without the possibility of international sanctions under social clauses, trade unions in the South will continue to find difficulties in establishing their organisations and in achieving social progress.

International agencies, particularly the ILO, must play an increasing part in securing the adoption of fair standards around the world and national development planning must be consistent with international order, at the same time as promoting economic progress at home. The trade union movement internationally must be conscious of the conflicting considerations, yet never lose sight of major objectives of which the need to redistribute incomes towards the less developed areas of the world is by far the most important. Brandt serves as a salutary reminder of that and of the concomitant obligation to the world community.

But what of national situations where the sharpest conflicts will arise? The Brandt Commission refers to the need for wide involvement in putting economic and social reforms into effect, but there are relatively few references to the role of trade unions in developing countries or to the essential part they can play in achieving development. There is a tendency in most international discussions to fail to give due recognition to the trade union role. That is perhaps understandable, for in most developing countries—though by no means all—the major impetus towards progress must come from the government, which has to provide—by taxation, by borrowing or by obtaining grants from abroad—the financial means of progress, and which for political as well as practical reasons must oversee and co-ordinate development activities.

The planning process itself can promote a rather simplified, technical, and detached view of development in which the productive means of a society are regarded in mechanical terms and in which it becomes natural for governments to concentrate on financial, physical, and higher management aspects of development and to relegate other aspects to a lesser priority. With those blinkers on, governments tend to overlook the trade union contribution to planning, and the trade unions' need to equip themselves with the skills to enhance their contribution. But trade unions in almost every Commonwealth country now have wide membership and wide interests. They cannot be neglected by governments if development is to be by discussion, agreement and consent—and they provide the only means by which balanced development, responding to real human needs, will be achieved. The unions are democratic organisations and respond to the demands made of them by their members.

It would serve no purpose for them automatically to endorse government development plans. Their value to a government lies in their pointing out the practical difficulties which have to be overcome and sometimes the difficulties which, with the best will in the world, cannot be overcome. If development programmes are to work they have to enlist broad popular support and trade unions provide the means for winning that support.

The Brandt Commission might have spelt these points out in greater detail. It might then have given attention to the removal of all restrictions on basic trade union functions. That is an urgent need because the trends in many countries, even in the Commonwealth, point in the opposite direction as governments see unions either as actual or potential threats to their all-pervading power, as obstacles to achievement of their policies. Secondly, there is the need to ensure that trade unions have a recognised role in the formulation of policy and that, having achieved it, trade unions are able to make themselves competent to make their specific contribution and thus advance the interests of their members. While keeping their essential representative character, they must be able to make use of expertise to take full part in national development planning. In most developing countries that will require assistance from outside, from national and international trade union organisations based in the industrialised countries.

There are some other respects in which trade union criticism of the report may be justified. The target for aid flows amounting to one per cent of GNP by the year 2000 seems conservative against the call of national and international trade union organisations for the target to be achieved by 1985. The Brandt Commission might have used the basic terminology of the ILO in recognising the complementary role of social policy to industrialisation. In welcoming the industrialisation of developing countries the TUC and perhaps other national centres would draw attention to the danger that industrialisation will continue to be concentrated on a relatively small number of newly industrialised countries producing a narrow range of goods, yielding little benefit to the countries of the South and disrupting some markets to the detriment of working people in the North. The impact will be more disruptive in some countries and in some sectors than in others and the Commission should perhaps have been less enthusiastic in presenting free trade as a purely beneficent force against which the problems of adaptation fall into insignificance. Finally, the Commission might have put forward specific recommendations for controlling the investment and pricing policies of multinational companies.

But, these points aside, the report of the Brandt Commission must be welcomed by trade unionists as an imaginative and compelling strategy for recovery which is well in line with trade union aims, and trade union methods. The Commission make out an unanswerable case for pursuing common interests in social justice, peace, and economic development. They are recommendations primarily directed at governments, and Commonwealth trade union organisations will no doubt want to discuss them with their governments. The national trade union organisations of the Commonwealth countries may find it valuable, in cooperating approaches to governments, to pool information on official reactions to the Commission's recommendations in each country, so that the trade union contribution to the North-South dialogue can be reinforced by an informed dialogue within the Commonwealth trade union movement itself through the Commonwealth Trade Union Council.

The detailed points we might report on, as appropriate in each set of national circumstances, would be levels of aid expenditure, the forms aid takes, and the terms on which it is made available. It would be valuable to learn of the reactions of governments in the South to trade union approaches regarding development planning and programme implementation. We should also exchange information about our own trade union policies—our approach to trade liberalisation proposals, to adjustment policies, about particular problems which we face nationally, and in regions and sectors within our countries and how they might bear on the strategy of the Brandt Commission.

Trade union organisation must also urge governments to give urgent and serious consideration to the Report's recommendations. Through TUAC and representations to the UK Government, the TUC has sought to place the Brandt Report on the agenda of the world economic summit in Venice. I am very glad to note that the West German Government has itself undertaken to do the same thing. This is a positive step which must be repeated elsewhere. Every effort must be made to ensure that attention is drawn to the Report. I hope that you will join the TUC in encouraging discussion of the Brandt Report at international meetings in the UN and elsewhere. The TUC also supports the idea that a special summit should be convened to discuss the Brandt Report.

Looking ahead, there will be a continuing need for further discussion between us about reconciling interests.

That would not be something new to any of us and we should not be afraid of entering into a dialogue. Instead we should be encouraged by the same spirit which prevailed in the Brandt Commission. The trade union movement has never accepted that there is any iron law which condemns people to hunger and penury, to unemployment and to war. Neither does the Brandt Commission—it offers hope to a world which badly needs that virtue. It is now up to the world community, our governments and our trade union organisations included, to build on that hope the foundations of a just and peaceful world order in which basic human needs can be satisfied.

Postscript

Since June 1980, Trade Unions in Britain and overseas have actively been seeking the implementation of the main Brandt proposals. The Commonwealth Trade Union Conference, to which this address was given, did for example, urge all member organisations to approach their governments urging support for the Report's implementation. We now need to redouble our efforts because we now read that President Reagan is casting doubt on the desirability of the proposed Mexico summit which many of us in our own fields have been endeavouring to encourage. The international trade union movement is itself holding a major conference on Brandt in New Delhi in March 1981 organised by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions with the aim of giving further impetus to the North-South dialogue. Finally, we are continuing to edge forward in the building of bridges between North and South in the forum of the United Nations Commission on Transnational Corporations to which I am one of the expert advisers; the right of workers' representatives in different parts of the world to come together in information and consultation bodies at the global headquarters of the TNC has the great moral authority of the Brandt Report behind it and we can take modest encouragement from the fact that this principle for which many of us have been working very hard now seems likely to get the approval of the UN and be written in the Code of Conduct. I am quite sure that trade union developments in the past year, whether in South Africa or Poland, Bolivia or Brazil, will increasingly be seen to demonstrate that democratic trade unionism and democratic development itself are inseparable, and I hope that this is a message which will become more generally accepted by those concerned with development problems than has perhaps been the case hitherto.