

SPEECH OF THE NEW DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE ECONOMIC LEAGUE,
MR MICHAEL NOAR, AT A LUNCH FOR INDUSTRIALISTS HELD AT THE
MERCHANT TAYLORS' HALL, THREADNEEDLE STREET, LONDON EC2
ON THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 1986

When I told my friends I would be joining the Economic League, I received a somewhat mixed reaction. At least eight out of every ten of them had never heard of the League and from those who had I received comments like 'isn't that the reds under the beds outfit' or alternatively 'isn't that a bit right wing'.

I do very much hope that, if nothing else, by the time that my successor comes to be appointed, he will find that many more people have heard of the League and in particular that they have a much more accurate perception of what it is about.

In that task I suggest that we are getting a little help at the moment, from a perhaps somewhat unlikely source, namely the current goings on in the Labour Party.

Clearly Neil Kinnock feels that there are some reds under his bed and equally clearly he feels that it is perfectly right and proper to find them and boot them out. I am sure we all welcome that move and support him in it. Indeed if he wants any help he may like to get in touch.

Equally clearly, if it is right for the Labour Party to adopt such a policy, it must be right and perfectly acceptable for other organisations to take a similar view without being branded as particularly extreme or indeed right wing.

The fact is of course that the League are strong supporters of the democratic centre, as much opposed to the extreme and

undemocratic right as to the extreme and undemocratic left.

The extremist parties, of both right and left, know perfectly well that in this country they are never likely to succeed through the ordinary processes of the democratic ballot. Their strategy is therefore to undermine and discredit our free democratic institutions to the point where they themselves might appear an attractive alternative.

That strategy embraces what is now the very well understood process of entryism - the process of feeding your supporters into key positions in other organisations in order either to undermine those organisations or at least to use those positions for your own political purposes and objectives. The organisations who find themselves under attack in this way include not just the political parties and major commercial and industrial concerns, but also many charities, voluntary associations and campaign groups.

It must be common sense that any organisation subjected to entryism has not only a right but a positive duty to try to defend itself, just as the Labour Party is doing at the moment. I am sure that is something the vast majority of people would support.

Of course I accept that it is all too easy, particularly, perhaps, for organisations like the League, to over-estimate or exaggerate the real power and real effectiveness of these extremist organisations and perhaps even by doing so to give further encouragement to them. But surely the dangers of complacency and of just hoping that the problem will go away by itself are far and away greater.

I believe that the right answer must therefore be to maintain and if possible to enhance the League's traditional approach in this area, to monitor carefully and accurately the activities of the extremist and subversive groups and to expose these activities wherever we can, not so much to the harsh glare of publicity as to as much honest day light as we

can let in, so that they are seen in their true colours.

Furthermore, if particular individuals or particular companies or organisations are under specific threat, then it seems to me to be perfectly proper for us to give them appropriate warning, not in any exaggerated or over hysterical way but carefully and accurately as the League has always done. It is our proud boast that we have never been successfully challenged on any statement we have made.

If it is right for Mr. Kinnock to say that he doesn't want subversives or extremists in the Labour Party then surely it is just as right and just as legitimate for other organisations and companies to say that they don't want them either. Nor is this just a "bosses' view". One thing I suggest that workers have made abundantly clear in recent years is that while they want and support honest and indeed militant trade unions in support of their rights and interests, what they do not want is to be used as pawns in anyone else's political games. Anyone who can keep the political warmongers out of their firms will have their support.

Certainly, as far as I am concerned, I do not feel under any obligation to be either hesitant, apologetic or defensive about saying that that is a part and an important part of what the League is about.

Important though it is however, it is only one side of the League. If there is one tendency that worries me at the moment it is the ITWA Tendency. Now, those of you who are my age or more know that ITWA stands for It's That Woman Again.

The ITWA Tendency is therefore the urge to blame Mrs Thatcher for absolutely any and every problem that occurs anywhere in the country, whether remotely to do with the government or not.

If there is a problem in our schools at the moment apparently no blame at all attaches to the teachers, to the head teachers, to the school governors or to the local education

authorities. The buck seems not even to hesitate as it flies past all of these people unerringly to Downing Street.

If there is a problem in the health service, and at least Victor Paige would agree that there is, again that is apparently nothing at all to do with the nurses, doctors, the hospital managers, or the health authorities. It's that woman again!

If companies fail it is not the fault of the workers, the unions, the managers, the directors or the shareholders, it is nothing to do with economic recession or technological change; once again 'Thatcherism' is to blame.

The latest manifestation in this trend is that apparently the prime minister is also to blame for the litter in our streets. Now if I had to bet on one person who has never thrown so much as a toffee paper on the pavement in their life, I would pick Mrs. Thatcher and think it easy money.

Never in the field of political conflict has so much been blamed by so many on one woman.

I must stress straight away that I am not here seeking to defend the current government or the current prime minister. This process has applied increasingly to successive governments. The opposition of the day seeks to blame the government of the day for every problem that they can identify, and of course they then go on to say 'vote for us, we have all the answers'. Time of course proves that they have not, and the process repeats itself.

This does seem to me to contain major dangers for democracy itself, because if people consistently expect too much of politicians they will be just as consistently disappointed. If party succeeds party in failure it breeds disillusion.

The extreme political parties obviously have an interest in encouraging this trend; first of all it is their declared strategy to politicise every possible aspect of our lives and

secondly, by blaming every failure on the main democratic parties, they can encourage a degree of cynicism in democratic politics which they hope will make their own all-embracing philosophies more attractive.

One thing that universal franchise democracy needs in the long term is a well informed and in particular economically literate electorate. It does matter that politicians are subjected to reasoned challenge and that their overblown claims are taken with a pinch of salt. There must be a clear understanding of the limits of political action and of those things which we must do for ourselves.

If the simplistic solutions of one political party are challenged only by the equally simplistic solutions of their opponents, it will not produce either a proper public debate or in the long term good government.

The Economic League was called the Economic League precisely because it was intended to have a major role in the field of public economic education. That positive role seems to me to be at least as important as the more defensive role to which I referred earlier. The best way to attack a bad philosophy is to promote a better one.

I do not, of course, wish to either underestimate the size of the problem or to overstate the contribution which the League can make to solving it.

The main thing to remember however is that a good idea has legs of its own and it is remarkable just how far it will run once you have set it free. With a little help from our members and friends we may surprise even ourselves with the number of ideas that, working through industry, we can set loose on our unsuspecting politicians and indeed perhaps on the captains of industry as well.

I particularly hope that the League will come to be known not just for the things that we are against but very much more for

the things that we are for. Very simply put, I take those things to be a free and democratic society within which industry and commerce can flourish for the benefit of everyone.

Obviously the more people we have supporting us, the better the job that we will be able to do.

One or two of the companies to whom I have spoken have begun by saying that they have no problems and therefore do not need the League's services. There are two answers to that.

First, the fact that you have not had a fire is generally reckoned a poor reason for not having insurance.

Secondly, and more importantly, companies which think like that have missed the point. Those undemocratic groups to whom we are opposed are not targetting particular organisations or sections because they have a specific vendetta against them. Their long term aims involve us all. If the bell is tolling for the company down the street, it is tolling for yours too.

Without getting over excited about it a modest investment in defending the sort of society and the sort of economy in which we all believe must be worthwhile.

It is clearly an exciting new start for me. I hope I shall have your advice and guidance and support to make it a great success.