

CHAPTER 9

WHITLEYISM

THE Service trade unions are not the only machinery at the disposal of civil servants for the ventilation of grievances and the settlement of disputes. Whitleyism, at one time almost moribund, is, within its own special sphere and through the impact which the war has had upon the day-to-day work of the state departments, entering upon a new lease of life.

Outside the Service it is practically a dead letter; which makes it all the more interesting to recall that the Whitley system owed its existence to the industrial unrest, particularly on Clydeside, which characterized the later stages of the war of 1914-18. The government, with an eye to the post-war future, appointed a committee in 1917 under the chairmanship of J. H. Whitley, then Speaker of the House of Commons, to examine ways and means of avoiding industrial disputes.

In the final paragraph of the report made by this committee to Lloyd George, the hope was expressed "that representative men in each industry with pride in their calling and care for its place as a contributor to the national well-being, will come together in the manner here suggested and apply themselves to promoting industrial harmony and efficiency and removing the obstacles that have hitherto stood in the way". The report was adopted by the government, and trades unions and employers in each industry were recommended to set up Whitley Councils as instruments of trade union negotiation. But for some inexplicable reason the Civil Service was not included within the scope of this recommendation and the Service unions had a hard fight to persuade the government to extend the facilities provided by the Whitley machinery to the employees of the state.

This reluctance was eventually overcome and a National Whitley Council for the Civil Service was created in order "to secure the greatest measure of co-operation between the state

WHITLEYISM

in its capacity of employer and the general body of civil servants, in matters affecting the Civil Service, with a view to increased efficiency in the Public Service, combined with the wellbeing of those employed . . . and generally to bring together the experience and different points of view of representatives of the Civil Service."

In greater detail the whole aim and purpose of Whitleyism can be said to be:

1. To provide the best means for utilizing the ideas and experience of the staff.
2. To secure for the staff a greater share in and responsibility for the determination and observance of conditions under which their duties are carried out, and
3. To determine the general principles of service, e.g. recruitment, tenure, promotion, remuneration, etc.

In practice, the last of these objects is confined to matters in which there is a common interest and in which therefore action by specific unions would be inappropriate. It is in relation to the first two of these aims that there have been the biggest developments of the Whitley system, particularly during the present war. The National Whitley Council is a joint body upon which the staff and official sides are equally represented. The official-side representatives are normally heads of departments or senior officials. They are therefore administrative civil servants separated from the staff side only by virtue of their 'policy-making' function; nevertheless they sit on the other side of the table and represent the interests of the state in its capacity as employer. The appointing bodies to the staff side are the Service unions, or in some cases groups of unions. The clerical representation for instance is vested in the Civil Service Alliance which speaks, or should speak, with one voice on behalf of all the clerical organizations which comprise it. A tradition has grown up whereby most of the staff-side members are full-time officers of the Service unions. The arguments in favour of this arrangement proceed on the

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

assumption that since many of the decisions taken by the National Whitley Council will have to be implemented through the machinery of the unions, it is essential that general secretaries and other officers should be aware of those decisions. The time factor is also introduced as an additional reason for making National Whitley a more or less close preserve.

E. M. Gladden, previously quoted, has drawn attention to what he calls the dangers of professionalism inherent in this tendency. He speaks of "the artificial creation of objectives and a tendency towards dictatorship on the part of full-time officers in relation to a membership of serving civil servants". There is more than a grain of truth in that, as the present writer has had a very good opportunity to observe, but it represents a tendency which will be corrected, not by deprofessionalizing the Service unions, but by supplying certain correctives. That should be done, where the national staff side is concerned, by restricting the number of seats held by full-time officers and by taking steps to see that union executives keep a more watchful eye on the proceedings at National Whitley levels. The Joint Council meets at infrequent intervals. The staff side nowadays is in almost constant session. The range of its activity is immense and covers practically everything which can affect the life of a civil servant, from the war bonus issue in which almost the whole of the Service is involved, to the conditions of employment of part-time women cleaners.

In addition to the National Council every separate government department is authorized to set up its own Departmental Whitley Council. The functions and structure of these Councils are practically the same as those prescribed for the national body except of course that their area of operation is confined to the affairs of the department concerned.

The composition of the staff side of a Departmental Council will also be determined by the grades and classes employed within the department, and the unions catering for them. Strangely enough these Councils owe no allegiance to the National Whitley Council, the staff-side members of which take their instructions direct from constituent unions. They are regarded as of purely domestic significance, though as will

WHITLEYISM

be seen later, they can be made to become an increasingly important part of Whitleyism.

The reluctance of the government to introduce the Whitley system into the Civil Service has already been observed. It would be natural to assume therefore that the general attitude of the official side would hardly be one of excessive cordiality. There would be variations of course since the progressively minded are to be found within all walks of life and even government departments are no exception to that rule. In the long run, however, it would be no injustice to assert that in most departments and on the national body itself there was, until the beginning of the war, no marked inclination on the part of the official side "to co-operate with the staff with a view to increased efficiency, etc." Whitley was regarded as a necessary evil. Joint meetings were a formality; their purpose, to rubber-stamp decisions which in any case would for the most part have been implemented by administrative action. The staff side served the quite useful purpose of passing on these decisions to its constituents and of giving to them a semblance of joint agreement.

From time to time, attempts were made to make Whitley work as in accordance with its own constitution it was intended to, but when the main preoccupation of the staff lay rather in the direction of improvements in pay and conditions and these could be engineered more successfully through the machinery of the unions, there was very little disposition to put the Whitley house in order.

The war has ended that phase. New legislation, changes of procedure, the growth of departmental function, and a host of new regulations have created the necessity for a clearing-house, and as a result National Whitley is humming with activity. In this capacity it has become an indispensable instrument of Treasury policy, for the departmental application of which the goodwill of the staff is a paramount necessity. Normal methods of staffing have been set aside. Every process has been examined with a view to simplification. Whole staffs have found themselves evacuated to safe areas. Fireguard duties have had to be adapted to the special circumstances of

government offices housed in different types of building. These are only a few of the hundred and one matters upon which joint agreement has been sought. The Service organizations in common with the industrial unions have made big sacrifices of rights which it has taken them fifty years to secure. National Whitley is the repository for the agreements, signed or unsigned, which offer a guarantee that those rights will one day be restored.

It is within the sphere of Departmental Whitley activity, however, that the most significant developments have taken place. It has been an uphill and difficult task to persuade official-side representatives of the benefits to be obtained by taking the staff into their confidence and establishing a basis for closer co-operation to ensure the smooth working of departments in unique and rapidly changing conditions. The only fight comparable with it is that of the industrial unions to establish the principle of joint production machinery and to obtain full recognition for shop stewards' committees. In both cases it has been a struggle in which it has been necessary to overcome not only the inertia and exclusiveness of administrative heads and managements, but to persuade the union membership that this new form of activity was strictly in accordance with the declared aims and objects of trade unionism. This has not been easy. Many of those who sought to force Whitley to play the part for which it was designed have been accused, by those for whom trade union membership is only a form of insurance, of neglecting their legitimate economic interests. It was no part of their job it was said to help the departments to run the show. They should stick to their last and to mix the metaphor not go whoring after strange trade union gods.

In the long run these arguments came from those sections of the membership who had been equally vocal in their denunciation of the activities of those who had striven for a greater degree of political consciousness within the Service unions. Now that the political lesson had been driven home by the impact of a war, the true nature of which even in its fifth year was not yet entirely appreciated, there was still an

uncomfortable number of Civil Service trade unionists who thought that its conduct in terms of departmental activity could be left entirely to the official side. It was not easy to persuade them otherwise, particularly since the unions themselves were not always appreciative of the enormous advantages to be gained from operating the Whitley system to the last dot and comma of its constitution. It is understandable, too, that there would be some union officials who, having won their laurels and earned their rewards, psychological and otherwise, within the sphere of normal Civil Service negotiation, could hardly be expected to enthuse over an innovation which transferred a considerable amount of emphasis to the serving civil servant. There was a disinclination in some quarters, therefore, to challenge official-side conceptions of Whitley function as a merely endorsing body, to brush the dust and cobwebs from the machinery and to gear it to the needs of a people's war. But a big start has been made and in the process no legitimate economic interests have been sabotaged. In two departments alone, the gains from joint official and staff-side co-operation have been manifest in the considerable improvement of technique, the elimination of unessential work and a greater understanding between the civil servant and the public.

The case of the Inland Revenue Department illustrates to the full the advances made and the length of the road still to be travelled. Here is a government department with a very delicate and difficult function to perform. Until recently it has been endeavouring to apply a fiscal code which, in essentials, had not radically changed since it was introduced during the French wars. It was cluttered up with such a paraphernalia of commissioners, assessors, inspectors and collectors, and a host of archaic rules and regulations that the whole process of the assessment and collection of income tax was both frightening and wonderful to behold. Every Finance Act unloaded another set of instructions upon tax officials who were drowning under an already vast accumulation.

The taxpayer was in a state of continued bewilderment; in ignorance as to the basis upon which he was assessed and the

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

particular functionary from whom he should seek enlightenment, while between department and taxpayer there developed a mutual suspicion which the methods employed by the former could do nothing to destroy. That was practically the position at the outbreak of war when the startling increase in the number of taxpayers, particularly within the manual wage-earning community, faced the Revenue Department with a crucial situation. Speedy adaptation became necessary. But it is difficult to adapt a peace-time fiscal system devised for the balancing of budgets to a situation in which the one aim and purpose of taxation is to reduce the purchasing power of the community as speedily, effectively and painlessly as possible, particularly when more than eight millions of them have never paid tax before.

The difficulty is obviously increased when, at the same time, your experienced personnel has been depleted by transfer to the fighting forces and its place taken by temporary staff of any age between 16 and 60 and with varying degrees of inexperience. In parenthesis, the Civil Service had lost over 76,000 of its non-industrial established officers up to the end of 1942. There was within the Revenue Department therefore a fruitful field for initiative and innovation. Those qualities the staff themselves went out of their way to supply. They began with a request for a detailed examination of every single process and the introduction of every possible relaxation of existing methods. They advocated the use of broadcasting as the best means of acquainting the public with their responsibilities under the tax deduction scheme, which had been devised to simplify the accounting side of income tax by placing the onus for the deduction of tax and remission to the collector upon the employer. The General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation was in fact obliged to take on this responsibility while the department was trying to decide whether the fiscal system could stand the strain of such a modern publicity medium as the wireless.

This one might describe as the agitational phase. It at least created a stir and persuaded both press and public that the rank-and-file workers in the Taxes Service were more than

WHITLEYISM

willing, even at the expense of trade-union orthodoxy, to increase to the maximum their contribution to the war effort. Their union had already created an Advisory Bureau and placed its services unreservedly at the disposal of the T.U.C. and its constituents with the object of making things as easy as possible for the new army of taxpayers unversed in the ways of tax assessing and collecting. Then, at a later stage, the discovery was made that, apart from the effect upon the department of this abnormal growth in the number of inexperienced taxpayers, and their handling by almost equally inexperienced staff, there was the infinitely greater problem of the direct effect of the existing income-tax code upon production and morale. Millions of workers were suffering heavy deductions of tax calculated by reference to wages which had long since passed to the butcher, baker and landlord. Moreover, however wild the fluctuation of the weekly wage, the tax remained constant at this sometimes very high figure. The staff through the appropriate Whitley Committees felt that it was incumbent upon them to attempt a solution of this problem, and they went into almost permanent session to find one. The results of their labours were printed in a booklet which contained three or four variants on the theme of "pay-as-you-earn".

None of them were foolproof. All of them were capable of improvement, but they were the first by no means faint intimations of the fully worked-out scheme which the Chancellor of the Exchequer subsequently presented to the country, and as such, they created something of a furore. Somewhat daringly, the staff side, not satisfied that Whitley as then interpreted by the official side offered a genuine medium for the full and frank discussions of these new methods of taxation, gave them some wider publicity.

This drew upon them the stern rebuke of the late Chancellor, Sir Kingsley Wood, who in reply to a question put to him in the House of Commons asserted roundly that "the Whitley system provided all that was necessary to enable the staff to place its experience and knowledge at the disposal of the Department". So much is public property. What is more important in this present recital is the improvement to which

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

it led in the relations existing between staff and official sides. Official committees to review work processes were set up and on most of them a member of the staff (though not in a representative capacity) was appointed. The branch Whitley Committees acted as a clearing-house for every proposal made and over a thousand were received from members of the staff themselves. The committees made suggestions of a drastic and far-reaching character, some of them disturbingly revolutionary to the administrative mind and yet obviously in line with the needs of a modern taxation system related to changing social factors. Many of them were calculated to affect adversely the status and prospects of the staff themselves, but although vested interests were revealed and to a large extent still remain, a pledge was taken that they would not be permitted to stand in the way of reforms which would increase the efficiency of the department and confer direct benefit upon the tax-paying community. The full test of staff-side sincerity in this direction has still to be applied and its ability to pass this test will depend upon the strength of the workers' movement at the end of the war, and the unity of purpose achieved during its course.

But one thing is certain. The staff of the Revenue Department has made the Whitley machine work better than it ever worked before. It has failed to get the principle of the Joint Production Committee accepted by the official side, but short of that the staff side has been brought into co-operation on every organizational aspect of the work of the department. It would be idle to pretend that ancient prejudices have been entirely overcome on the basis of what has already been achieved. However, it is doubtful if there can ever again be a return to the complete exclusiveness which claimed for the administration a monopoly of the virtues and qualities required to run a department of state in the interests of its public. When the full story of staff relations with the official side inside the Revenue comes to be told, it will provide another clear illustration of our central thesis, that although within the confines of the system the Civil Service in its experiments with democratization can make quite a lot of headway, it will at the same

WHITLEYISM

time suffer certain frustration. It will, however, show how much can be done by a socially conscious staff with a high sense of responsibility for the adequate performance of its public function when they decide that the time has come to claim some part in the running of the state apparatus.

The record of the Assistance Board staff in connection with the revitalizing of Whitley is still more noteworthy. They have gone a long way towards establishing complete joint co-operation with their official side and this has carried them well within the sphere of organization and administration. Here, again, we have a department the members of which have learned considerably from their day-to-day contacts with the less fortunate section of the community. The experience gained through those contacts has broken down the old barriers between public servant and public and the resultant growth of social understanding has forced Whitleyism into hitherto unfamiliar channels.

As with the Revenue Department, the Assistance Board staff side very early got down to the task of reviewing wartime requirements with a view to maximum manpower releases. They were successful, however, where the Revenue staff had failed in securing the appointment of Joint Standing Economy Committees to consider every suggestion. They went on from this to make proposals for the better organization of the 500 local offices of the Assistance Board with a view to improving their effectiveness *vis-à-vis* both the general public and the staff and then placed before their official opposite numbers a scheme complete in every detail for the training of personnel to ensure the right treatment of applicants for assistance at the hands of the staff. This scheme, which is remarkable for its breadth and scope, provided for a series of staff lectures covering every possible aspect of Public Assistance work. It included also a review of the machinery of government, the interrelation of government departments, a detailed analysis of the National Insurance Acts and a session on psychology and case work. Surely if the general body of the community knew the extent to which the staff of the Assistance Board were attempting to fit themselves for their great responsibilities, it would go a long

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

way towards destroying the pernicious influence of the dreary animadversions against the Civil Service which come so regularly from people like Sir Ernest Benn and others.

But there is more to come. This particular staff side of the departmental Whitley Council felt that it had an important contribution to make even within the sphere of policy from which they and all other staff sides had hitherto been shut out. It will be recognized that in these days of innovation and change it is sometimes impossible to draw a strict dividing line between policy and organization. The way in which things are done will often have political or public repercussions equally as great as those which arise directly from the thing itself. In the case, for instance, of the Assistance Board, no one would be in a better position to know where the shoe pinched than the staff who made the direct and intimate contact with those who come to them for assistance and advice.

Naturally, therefore, when the Beveridge Committee was given its task of surveying the whole field of social insurance, the staff side knew at once that they had something worth while to say. They decided therefore to emulate their Revenue colleagues and thereupon produced a printed booklet containing recommendations covering the entire field of social service which they submitted as evidence to the Beveridge Committee.

In this booklet they drew attention to certain gaps in the social services and to the way in which people in need were transferred from one authority to another and back again. They urged a complete reorganization of the social services under a Department of Maintenance and Welfare and with an enlightened and sympathetic administration. The aim of this new department should be, they declared, "to provide a unified maintenance service, to pay adequate allowances to support a reasonable standard of life and to promote the welfare of those who needed something more than cash". The staff side went on to tabulate the multiplicity of departments and other agencies concerned under the existing dispensation with different aspects of social service and insurance and put in a powerful plea for complete co-ordination under a Minister of Social Service. To quote again from the booklet, they

WHITLEYISM

emphasized that "the confusion engendered by a multiplication of services . . . could only be avoided by abolishing the unnecessary boundaries between the various schemes". These boundaries, they said, "came into existence because the public mind was not yet ready for a comprehensive social service but now these boundaries are anachronisms and should be abolished". Finally, they argued that "it should no longer be necessary to decide the cause of distress before the distress may be alleviated".

All this was, of course, highly unorthodox. It transcended all previous conceptions of Civil Service trade-union and staff-side function and it caused the usual fluttering within administrative circles. Can it be denied, however, that this sort of approach by civil servants to their official duties and the acknowledgment of their great responsibility towards the community which it suggests give the lie to the carping critics who accuse the Service of unimaginativeness and lack of vision? We have demonstrated clearly that the qualities are there in very large measure. It may be, however, that it will be necessary to descend a little in the Civil Service hierarchy in order to find them.

This is Whitleyism in action. Its drive and dynamic can come initially only from the constituent unions which give it form and provide its personnel. They must add this to their normal trade union function and thus assist in the process of Civil Service democratization, which it is the object of Whitley, rightly conceived, to bring about.