

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

One of the advantages of listening to politicians in debate at a Party Conference is the greater likelihood that the words are their own. About set pieces which they give on other occasions - in formal deliverances to conferences or in Party political broadcasts or in rallying calls to the faithful, I often feel that while the voice is the voice of the speaker, the writing hand may have been that of the civil servant or the Party headquarters or, perhaps worst of all, the advertising agent. This is more true of present politicians than of their predecessors. What Gladstone said in 1879 was rather more likely to be what Gladstone himself wrote. It is also more true of a contemporary politician in a fully prepared speech than when he is replying to a debate and to some extent has to attempt to respond in his own words to the challenges of the moment.

I was particularly interested at the Labour Party Conference in Tony Benn: he will not mind, indeed he encourages I believe, the familiar title. I would guess that he is very much his own man and his speeches very much his own speeches at any time, but there he was replying to the discussion on the future policy of the Party - not only articulate but even elegant in a well-structured argument. And my reactions interested me (at least me) though I can quote only one or two of them.

First, he illustrated the power of faith and doctrine. There is apparently an intensity of conviction that is moving whether you agree with it or not (often I don't). He is committed in the sense, if he will forgive the comparison, that Mr. Enoch Powell is committed: both tend to depart from the pragmatic ways of most British politicians and insist on the question, "It may work in practice but is it all right in theory?"

The lament is commonplace nowadays:-

"Whither is fled the visionary gleam,
Where is it now the glory and the dream?"

Well - it is still there with Mr. Benn, however limited, even however unconvincing it may be, and beliefs which have been developed into some coherent framework and which are passionately held have considerable power.

One other reaction was that his particular vision had strong elements of romance in it. All visions, of course, have that in the sense of looking beyond the current reality. However, his had romance also in the other sense of failing to acknowledge or examine some parts of that reality. I suspect he has such a view of the "working man". I am certain that he has such a view of the institutions, particularly the trade unions, which have been built up for service to "the working men", in the sense of not examining them critically enough. This impression from what he had to say

was not contradicted by what he has written in his recent book "Arguments for Socialism". There is an urgent task for democratic socialists to turn their critical capacities to the record and role of trade unions, and his speeches and essays could have done with more of that. "Let the Arguments continue" I felt - but with more of that critical analysis.

Meriden Co-op

It is not a complete change of subject to turn for the moment to the television programme on the Meriden Co-operative, for it belongs to an area in which Mr. Benn, as a Minister, gave invaluable support.

The programme sympathetically traced the origins of this workers' co-operative, its struggles - including the personal effort of the workers far beyond the letter of any contractual requirement - and at the end the uncertainty of the future. It did so largely by taking us into the boardroom - an agreeably simple room - and on to the factory floor discussions, and Co-operative characteristics were there, rich and familiar in their variety. There was stamina and confidence and courage in taking hard decisions and also occasional resentment of these decisions and the dreary insistence in some quarters to seeing the problem to every solution.

It was an invigorating experience. It was also another good example of what valuable service for adult education can be

found in programmes not primarily designed for that purpose. It was a case study round which any group interested in Co-operative principles and practice could very constructively gather.

There was also, I may perhaps add, and indeed confess incidentally, a personal interest for me in the motor bicycles which featured in the programme. My only close engagement with Triumph was on a distant Army course in despatch riding, and I can think of nothing that frightened or defeated me more than that machine. It had not only a power but a will of its own which I never mastered or came close to doing so. But I still hope Meriden has the survival and success it deserves.

R.L.M.

PS. As I look over the piece above it seems to me to fit too exactly a definition I saw recently of columnists - people "allowed ... to take their egos for slightly surprising walks" in a public park. It is a pleasant but self-indulgent exercise.