

Cunliffe and the paper

by Carolan

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"When I see people revolting against the party on the ground that they've been badly treated by this terrible regime in our party - ... I always remind myself of the words of J.Pierpoint Morgan. He said: 'Everybody has at least two reasons for what he does - a good reason and the real reason'..."

James P Cannon

The Gerry Healy prize for black propaganda and distorted public relations must, I think, go to Cunliffe for his success in misrepresenting the circumstances in which he left the paper. He has presented himself as a martyr in the cause of a democratic and accountable editorial board, and many people seem to believe him.

The facts tell a different story. Hill, Joplin, Kinnell, myself and the rest of those who keep the organisation running have been too busy coping with the routine work, and with the extra problems created by Cunliffe's irresponsibility, to have had time to keep the organisation properly informed. Nor did we want to get into another session of mutual recriminations. But now we have no choice.

Cunliffe has been removed from the EC not because he resigned as editor but because of the way he resigned. He gave ultimatums to the organisation, and then, when they were rejected, proceeded to disrupt the work of the organisation.

If he had simply said that he could not stand working on the paper in bad working conditions and sub-poverty wages (he does now say that), then we would have tried to persuade him but not to coerce him into staying on.

But that is not what happened. After 18 months as joint editor, during which there was no functioning Editorial Board and during which he neither tried to convene the notionally existing EB nor to get a new one, Cunliffe suddenly declared that there had to be an EB, or else. Then when we convened an EB, he said that would not do. It must be an EB exactly to his taste or he would leave the paper. And he did leave the paper. The NC instructed him to stay, and he refused. He refused even to do technical work.

One consequence of his leaving the paper has been to throw backward our attempts to improve the functioning of the centre.

To understand what has been going on here, a number of things need to be disentangled. Cunliffe has both personal and political reasons for his decision, neither of which he is candid about. The real reasons must be disentangled from the 'good reasons' that he gives.

HOW THE PAPER FUNCTIONED

Since July 1981 there have been two editors. The co-editors have had completely equal status (except for wages: Cunliffe receiving the old WSL rate, which is about two-thirds higher than his partner's I-CL rate).

In practice a division of labour grew up between Kinnell and Cunliffe, where

Kinnell did most of the planning and commissioning and sub-editing, and Cunliffe the page design and lay-out. This continued when I replaced Kinnell in June 1983.

The division of labour was one of time and function: Cunliffe would come to London from Oxford around midday Monday, and go home on Wednesday afternoon or early evening. By the time he arrived on Monday, his partner would already have put in maybe two days' work on that issue of the paper (it varied). Many or most articles would be commissioned; the paper would be planned out, more or less; a lot of sub-editing of articles would be done, and some typesetting.

When an EB had met, ideas would have been thrown up and the paper's shape more or less agreed. (The final shape would often be seriously different. Not all would be determined at the EB, and a lot could not be: much that the paper would cover had yet to happen. The final shape would come from the editors using their own judgment, without or (usually) with consultation with others.)

DEMOCRACY?

But the EB is not, contrary to the demagogy of Cunliffe, a matter of democracy. It is perfectly democratic for the elected leadership (EC/NC) to delegate responsibility to one or two editors. That procedure is as democratic - or otherwise - as the EC/NC is.

The primary loss in not having an EB broader than two editors (informally consulting a few others) is the loss of input - of ideas, impressions, feedback, stimulation. (Though delegate meetings, etc. have never ceased to provide a certain amount of regular feedback.)

And in fact the scope for arbitrariness and waywardness in editing the paper is much less than might appear. In any week there is a given range of new items that must be covered. If they are not covered they will be missed and questions will be asked. The line on key issues will be decided by the EC/NC, and the editors will work within those guidelines.

Why did the EB cease to function about 18 months ago? Cunliffe - who never tried to call an EB though it was his joint duty with Kinnell to do so - implies that it was because we really, secretly, deep in our villainous hearts, didn't want an EB. So what about for the first 18 months after the fusion?

The EB atrophied because people stopped attending and the EC core of the EB was increasingly taken up with wrangles which people on both sides were reluctant to duplicate in yet another meeting. According to Cunliffe himself (talking to Kinnell), when he was starting his agitation about the EB, he had great difficulty persuading Smith and Jones that they should take part in an EB when convened.

For Cunliffe, under whose joint editorship the EB atrophied, to have the right to blame us, he should be able to point to some record of resistance to us as we allegedly strangled the EB. No such record exists. On the contrary. The EB stopped meeting by tacit consent on all sides and with the collusion of Cunliffe as editor. What rearguard action there was to try to keep it in life came from Kinnell.

CUNLIFFE'S WITHDRAWAL

Cunliffe presents himself as a martyr for democracy and an EB. The record of his moves to withdraw from the paper does not bear this out.

The record starts last October, I will first tell the outline of the story and then discuss the politics.

Cunliffe told us that his wife Sue, an ex-member on the sectarian side of the old WSL, was taking a part-time job in London. He said he could therefore no longer keep up the arrangement of coming to London to Mondays and going back to Oxford on Wednesdays. This would mean three nights away from his wife.

At first I thought he was talking about a problem of child-care (their son

is about 10). No. That could be taken care of, he said, but he was unwilling to be away from Sue for three evenings. He indicated that he was generally fed up. I suspected that our decision to put the full-timers on the dole had shaken him up.

The rearrangement Cunliffe suggested was that the paper should be produced in two days, Monday and Tuesday, and he would stay over Monday night. He did at this point talk about an EB (for the first time since it lapsed) and how important it was, but this was not yet an emblem on a crusading banner. What he said about an EB was reasonable.

He made an announcement: we would have to adjust to him. In any case he was going to be one night in London and no more.

Kinnell and I discussed with him at length. I was unwilling to bring publication forward by one day because going to press a day later than our competitors frequently means we are more up to date with the news for the subsequent week than they are. Besides it was impossible to produce a paper in two days. At best it would imply a mainly office-written paper, with little outside contribution. We talked about the EB, and agreed to try to activate the EC decision (on Kinnell's motion) to have an EB session in each EC. Cunliffe was satisfied with that.

For the time being we agreed that I worked as usual and for one or two (I can't remember) issues of the paper Cunliffe worked only on Tuesday and Wednesday, doing some writing at home on the Monday. Then he resumed working on Mondays, on the basis of returning to Oxford Monday night.

Did EC EB sessions happen? No, and for the same reason as before: tacit all-round agreement not to go through more (or the same) wrangles with different (EB) hats on. Occasionally someone would say at the beginning of the EC that we should have an EB session at the end, but by the time we got to that point no-one had the stomach for it. Cunliffe did not ever propose that an EB session be held. Strange behaviour indeed for the future martyr for 'EB democracy'.

SECOND STAGE

The next development was in December, when Cunliffe dispatched a letter saying that he was withdrawing unless there was an EB. Nothing personal was mentioned now.

Now he had worked his way towards his, so to speak, 'transitional demand'. This was the 'demand' for an ideal EB, an EB which he knew was unrealisable in the circumstances and which two months earlier he had agreed was unrealisable. Later he motivated his demand as an effort for conciliation - an attempt to get a framework within which the different groups in the leadership could cooperate. He must have known perfectly well that putting the same people, with the same political attitudes, into a meeting labelled 'EB' instead of 'EC' would produce no such result. The talk about democracy, cooperation etc was demagogy.

Listen for example to his idealisation of the old Socialist Press EB:

"SP was prepared every week by an Editorial Board meeting of seldom less than two hours in duration, attended by some EC members plus other leading comrades from Oxford, London and the Midlands... Through this procedure I as editor... was able to draw on the assessments of our comrades in the unions, the O., the wider movement, the assessments and information offered by a range of comrades.... And its discussions were generally of a high calibre..." (IB 78).

Kinnell attended some SP EBs before the fusion, and they were hardly the intellectual feast which Cunliffe describes. They were useful workaday meetings, not particularly better or worse than the EBs that we have had in the new WSL.

Maybe those were particular bad weeks. It is difficult to know. What can be known, by anyone who takes the trouble to read a file of SP, is that whatever the merits of the SP EBs, SP had a much narrower range of contributors, was much more a paper written in an office, and had less coherence and consistency of political line, than our paper. It was also far less likely to give space to

minority views within the organisation.

If the SP EBs had merits, they were nothing to do with democracy especially. In Kinnell's observation, they had some useful journalistic functions, but their essential political function was to provide an orderly way for the 'worker leadership' to provide Cunliffe with 'the line' to be written up.

Cunliffe writes: the "EB should meet... at such a time... that trade union comrades can attend". What trade unionists is he talking about? Jones and Smith.

IMPLICATIONS

Cunliffe, with his ideal EB, is no longer only concerned with the paper. He is stating attitudes to the organisation in general.

The argument about a large-scale EB meeting separately from the EC is about practicalities. Is it possible? We don't think so. Obviously there is room for differences of opinion and perhaps for new experiments. But Cunliffe's arguments go way beyond any of that.

He is arguing for an EB that will get away from the problems of the existing leadership bodies. Good. Where will it come from? It can't be got unless the political conditions inside the organisation are changed.

He condemns the EC as a possible EB (or core of an EB) in terms which mean condemning it as a leadership for the League.

"The EC itself has not functioned... The EC itself is sharply polarised... Even the working agreement we used to have on industrial questions appears to have collapsed... talking to the EC majority is as useful as talking to Carolan and just as useless..."

If the EC can't run the paper, then how can it run the rest of our work?

Cunliffe refers derisively to the NC demanding that he "return to the practical labour of pasting up the paper along the lines decreed by the Majority Faction". Remove the emotive words 'decreed' and 'faction', and the demand he objects to is that he should "return to the practical labour of pasting up the paper along the lines decided by the majority". Why is that more unreasonable than a demand to the minority for the "practical labour" of selling and circulating the paper "along the lines decided by the majority"? Cunliffe's rejection of majority discipline logically applies to any other area of work just as much as to the paper. His declaration is a declaration of a cold split, of internal secession.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

Above we have outlined only the personal story of how Cunliffe came to break with the paper.

We need the political dimension, too. For between Cunliffe's first moves in October, and his second in December, something dramatic happened. Relations with the faction worsened seriously, as the faction built up what is now identifiable as its split offensive.

Smith and Jones were thrown into great agitation because Smith failed to get the full star-worker treatment to which he thinks he is entitled in our reports of the September 17 conference. Then divisions emerged around the NGA dispute (IB 90). Smith and Jones became more and more wild. Cunliffe was caught in the crossfire.

In the old WSL Cunliffe seems to have functioned primarily as the literary arm of the 'worker leadership'. His job was to convey to print their perceptions, ideas, analyses, etc. It is a relationship shaped over many, many years, since Cunliffe was a young full-timer for the WRP in Oxford a decade ago serving the Cowley 'leadership'.