

BRENDA DEAN: PRESSING MATTERS

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At the height of the violent Wapping dispute between print workers and Rupert Murdoch, Brenda Dean got a letter from a wellwisher saying, ‘You seem such a sensible person. How did you get mixed up with that lot?’ ‘I do love a challenge!’ she says merrily. One might imagine that her role as the first woman to head a major industrial trade union (SOGAT 82) was challenge enough, but Dean is still full of beans, with a girlish laugh and hint of mischief at odds with her demure image. Now 64 and Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde, she confesses she’s always wanted to switch on the Blackpool Illuminations.

Twenty years ago Dean confounded the traditional image of union leaders. Although tough, she was cool, calm and reasonable - and female, young and pretty. The Wapping dispute made her famous and popular: she was a TV natural, but hadn’t bargained for that. ‘I never, ever estimated the attention I would get during Wapping, and I had no media training. When I had to go to those first press conferences, with a hundred people there, I had to take a deep breath. I was nervous – I still am before I speak in public – but just got on with it.’ She took herself very seriously and she had to, being centre-stage at the height of the Women’s Lib movement. The strong contingent of women’s libbers in her home city, Manchester, wanted her to be ‘part of all that, but I was representing factory women. Going without your bra was a load of nonsense in a factory!’

Instead, Dean was a feminine feminist, her blonde hair always groomed and her clothes neat. She once told a reporter: ‘have to do my nails and wash my hair if I’ve got a meeting, otherwise I feel I’m not giving my best.’ Her desire to be well presented goes back to childhood, when her mother’s Sunday evening ritual involved pressing the pleats of her daughter’s black school gymslip.

Her mother worked in a carpet factory, her father was a railway signalman, and Brenda and her brother were ‘latchkey kids’, but the family was close. ‘I just knew they would be there for me. It’s stood me in good stead all my life.’ As with many successful women, the influence of a strong father was crucial. Hugh Dean was a loyal union member, known locally as ‘the bacon butty man’ because he took food to workers on demos. He encouraged her to stay on at Stretford High School until she was 16 because she was always in the top five in the class, and was in hot water at home when one term’s report wasn’t up to scratch. University was no an option then for working-class girls, but Dean has no regrets or bitterness. ‘If I’d gone to university I wouldn’t have ended up leading a trade union.’

She became a union official almost by chance. 'My first job was as a poorly paid secretary in a printing factory laboratory. I complained I didn't have enough work to do, and was offered a job by the firm's union rep. I eventually organised all the office workers in the factory and got them a decent pay rise. I never thought about my career prospects. It was much against the advice of all my friends who said, "Brenda, you'll never meet a decent guy with any money in the union!"' She eventually married in her mid-forties.

Sexism was rife when she began her career, with wolf whistles on the shop floor and paternalism from her male colleagues, but it was her boss in Manchester who encouraged her to stand for office. She worked her way up through the ranks and when she faced sexism she simply ignored it. 'I decided that was *their* problem. I always tried to be businesslike and I was always well prepared. I read my paperwork.' By the time of Wapping, Dean was secure, with strong support in her home base. In the year of the dispute, she was sent flowers with the message, 'We're With You, Manchester'. 'I would have done anything for my members but I wouldn't lose my own integrity. It's like virginity; once you've lost it, you never get it back.'

When she was eventually elected General Secretary of SOGAT, the print industry was facing crisis: a technological revolution and the end of Fleet Street. There was scant public sympathy for the London print workers because of their corrupt practices and grotesque over-manning, often underpinned by weak management. But Dean's union also represented poorly paid women, office staff, cleaners and packers, and one of her aims was to improve their health conditions as well as their pay.

She was only weeks into the job when she first confronted Rupert Murdoch. She found him ruthless, controlling and uncharismatic, but 'if you did a deal with him, he delivered, and you didn't need to have it in writing...When I first met him as a brand-new General Secretary, he asked me if I could deliver. I had to answer him honestly and say, "I don't know. I've just arrived in London from Manchester. Give me three months and I'll give you an answer." But in those months everything moved on so fast.'

Dean tried to get her members to face reality, taking union officials to America and Japan to see the dramatic changes in the print industry for themselves. She was a skilled negotiator and Murdoch respected her. 'I like to think if I'd negotiated with him earlier maybe we could have had a deal.' But ultimately the dispute was unwinnable because of Thatcher's trade union legislation.

She found the conflict traumatic and brutalising. What kept her sane was escaping with her partner Keith McDowall to their boat for a weekend's sailing. She met McDowall at a TUC conference in Blackpool, and they've been together thirty years. In a way she was sleeping with the enemy while she was a union official, as her lover worked with Tory ministers in the Department of Employment, and later for the employers' organisation, the CBI.

Nominatee as a Baroness by John Smith in 1993, Brenda Dean has always been regarded as a key Labour establishment figure, a link between the party and the unions. She was once a trustee of Labour's much derided 'blind trust', whereby the party collected big donations whilst supposedly keeping donors' identities secret from the leadership to prevent accusations of buying influence. She is perfectly at ease in the Lords, but the Commons wasn't for her. In the 1980s some tipped her as 'Labour's Thatcher', but although she was asked twice to stand as an MP, she 'had no aspirations to go into politics'.

Instead, she's had numerous business and public service posts, including on the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, the Press Complaints Commission, the Freedom to Fly Coalition and the Housing Corporation. As a Labour peer, she is once more in the hot seat, vetting new peerages as a member of the Lords Appointments Commission. Ever loyal to her party, she refuses to comment on the cash for honours scandal.

So what next? As well as sailing, she likes cooking, cricket and 'thinking', and has embraced new technology at work. 'At one time it was thought nobody in the Lords would want computers. Absolute nonsense!' Ageism, she says, is 'nutty, like all discrimination...I'm not ready to retire and, bless the House of Lords, I don't have to! I get my energy from a good night's sleep and the joy of doing something I really like.'

Although normally extremely discreet, she confesses to an oldie streak of devilment. 'I don't know why, but I'd love to throw a brick through Harrods' windows. You're not supposed to say those things if you're in a responsible position!' Her soon-to-be-published autobiography is called *Hot Mettle*. Maybe feelings of class war still burn beneath her breastplate?