

FOCUS

Speaking For Scotland

'A broad-based delegation of Scottish opinion, led by the STUC, will today meet ministers to discuss . . .' It trips easily, almost unbidden, from the keyboards of Scots journalists. Scottish ships, Scottish steel, Scottish coal; whatever the crisis, you can be sure of an early visit south from a muscular cross-section of the Scottish body politic, and you can be sure that at its head will be the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC).

It is a phenomenon that is not at all Thatcherite, not at all 1980s, but very Scottish. A typical lobby will include such cussed elements as the churches, the local authorities, the legal establishment, the political parties and the unions - a potent brew indeed. In many respects, it is the Scottish Assembly in exile, bound together in the belief that it is representing Caledonia to an uncomprehending London. What binds it is the STUC.

How odd that it should still be so. The TUC, recent health protests notwithstanding, can achieve little of the sort. Faced with the steady erosion of tripartism, Congress House has been left looking (however unjustly) more and more like a fringe pressure group that is lucky to make it past the police officer at the door of number 10.

The STUC, by contrast, appears undeterred and undiminished by the prejudice that organised labour exists only as an anachronistic barrier to the holy grail of the fast buck; unintimidated too by Malcolm Rifkind's post-election assertion that the way to enamour Scotland of the Thatcher miracle is to apply Thatcherism more rigorously.

For all that, it would be false to pretend that this is a golden age for the STUC. Aside from a few formally tripartite outlets, like the Scottish Development Agency, its role is largely one of press-

ure rather than participation, markedly shrunken from the heady days of the early 1960s when it could bring back strategic industrial developments from its trips to London.

To a certain degree, the influence of the STUC can be plotted alongside the graph of the Scottish Office's influence within government. Its principal point of pressure remains the secretary of state for Scotland, and if there is a Scottish Secretary who is either unwilling or unable to fight to protect Scottish industrial interests, the STUC's scope for success is correspondingly reduced.

Yet the presumption to speak for all of Scotland remains the STUC's unique hallmark, a theme that has guided it since its founding congress at Glasgow's Berkeley Hall in March 1897. The justification for STUC independence advanced then by its first president, Duncan McPherson of the tinplate workers, holds good today: 'There are many questions which affect Scotland particularly to which our English fellow trade unionists cannot be expected to devote the necessary amount of time and attention they deserve'.

A case in point was the post-war nationalisation programme. For the TUC it was an unblemished good. But for the STUC it was a very mixed blessing, since a consequence was the centralisation of decision-making away from Scotland. It was partly in response to that that the initiatives of the 1960s to bring strategic industrial bases to Scotland were launched. That few of these bases have survived the Thatcher years partly explains the vigorous STUC of the 1980s.

But a more central factor lies in a political flexibility that has not always been a conspicuous virtue of the STUC's elder cousin in Great Russell Street. The STUC recovered from the post-devolution doldrums faster than did Scottish politics generally, somewhat ironically given its less than sure-footed performance in the run-up to 1979.

What the STUC realised

FOCUS



Steve McTaggart

Christie: STUC innovator

was that the shattering of the assembly dream left a void which it was well placed to fill. Someone had to speak for Scotland when the assembly on which so many hopes had been pinned evaporated. That Scotland was now to be governed by a party which it had not elected gave added impetus.

There is a peculiar synthesis of nationalism and socialism which runs

through much of Scottish politics, and which has never been satisfactorily or comfortably expressed through any one part. Over the past decade the STUC has managed to give voice to that instinct on a loose enough, issue-by-issue basis to carry a broad consensus with it.

Like the TUC, the STUC has suffered from the decline of the heavy industries that were the powerhouse of trade unionism, but unlike the TUC it has emerged with a convincing and distinctive role to play. It is perhaps significant that some of the STUC's most innovative modern leaders - Jimmy Jack, Campbell Christie - have come from white-collar trade unionism.

Its cocky independence is sometimes the envy, sometimes the despair of trade unionists south of the border, who weary of the cantankerous rostrum lectures from their Scots colleagues about the glories of the broad campaign. And at the end of the day it must remain open to question how much of the STUC lesson can be learned elsewhere; because the most distinctive of all the STUC's characteristics is its Scottishness.#

Keith Aitken