

The Bristol Distinguished Executive Address

Frances O'Grady, General Secretary, TUC



On 30 October 2013 Frances, O'Grady, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) spoke at the Council Chamber in Bristol as part of the Bristol Distinguished Executive Address Series. The series is delivered by the Bristol Business School in partnership with [Bristol City Council](#), [Bristol Post](#), [Business West](#), [Confederation of British Industry](#), [Chartered Management Institute](#), [Institute of Directors](#) and [West of England Local Enterprise Partnership](#). It provides a unique opportunity to hear about the challenges, issues and decisions being made at the highest level of strategic leadership. Prior to the address Frances, the first woman General Secretary of the TUC, discussed the organisation's pivotal role in society, the value of apprenticeships and the current economic climate in the Southwest in an interview with Ian Mean, Content Director at Local World Media.

“*Frances O'Grady, you're General Secretary of the TUC. What does it feel like to be ranked the 11th most influential woman in the country by Radio 4's Woman's Hour?*”

I've got a lot of siblings and their first question was why wasn't I in the top ten! Or more positively, as one of them said, 'you're only ten places behind the Queen!' I think the important thing is that the power that I have is drawn from our six million members and the more than fifty unions they belong to, in every walk of life. Clearly we're not as strong in membership terms as we were thirty years ago, but, nevertheless we've still got thousands of agreements with employers up and down the country. We still stand up for working people to win fair pay, safe workplaces, decent working patterns and hours and we make a big difference in terms of peoples' opportunities to learn new skills through Unionlearn, the TUC's training arm; nearly one quarter of a million working people get access to learning each and every year.

What sort of woman are you? Are you a powerful woman?

You'd have to ask my children about whether I'm a powerful woman; sometimes it doesn't always feel like it, but I'm very proud to be leading the TUC. When I went for election everybody said it would be a very difficult time and that's true, but it's very difficult for working people not just in Britain but around Europe and I want to make a difference.

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You're the daughter of a Cowley shop steward [the Cowley car factory in Oxford] - did that breed inside you a feeling that you needed to represent people, being the daughter of a shop steward at Cowley?

Well it wasn't just my dad. There are plenty of women in the family who are active trade unionists too, but I think what I learned from his experiences was that here was a firm that was in big trouble, everybody knew it. There hadn't been proper investment, there hadn't been investment in Research and Development (R&D) to develop new lines, quality standards on some products were patchy to say the least and it takes two to tango, industrial relations were not good. But at the very same time that all this was happening, workers, through their unions from across the industry, drew up a workers plan where they wanted to see real investment, get industrial relations onto a sensible footing and, fascinating from my point of view, were also arguing for the development of electric and hybrid vehicles. They'd seen the prototypes in Japan, the unions had worked with academics, they also believed that it was important to start cutting carbon emissions and in many ways they were visionaries and nobody listened. I think that is one very big important priority for me, which is to see working people have a seat alongside employers to develop a serious industrial strategy to get this country back on its feet and to ensure that ordinary people have some kind of democratic voice, not just in their terms and conditions, but in the direction that their industries take.

At that time I was Chief News Editor of the Birmingham Mail, I remember writing a headline one day about Red Robbo [Derek Robinson, trade union convenor at the Longbridge car plant in Birmingham in the 1970s, part of the partially nationalised British Leyland vehicle manufacturing company]. It was appalling, wasn't it? The company was brought to its knees by a relatively small number of people, Cowley was quite bad as well. What's changed?

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Well I think a lot of people felt that Michael Edwardes [Managing Director of British Leyland] played a big role in taking that company to its knees. Where leadership is concerned, I think business leaders who are mature and recognise that wealth creation depends on their workforce look for a very different kind of relationship in the long term.

But you also need to remember, as I'm sure you do, that some of the conditions that people were working in frankly did not befit the dignity that they deserved. People get frustrated when they're not respected at work, when they're not given dignity, and that's why many people join unions in the first place.

It is a shame though, isn't it, that it took thirty years or more before we saw green Minis running off the production line at Cowley, but I think it is a good news story for Britain.

But isn't that really due to some investment from the Far East? All the money that's going into the car industry in this country tends to come from people who are behind BMW, behind Jaguar?

Well investment is absolutely critical and that's why unions are very keen to see this £425 billion cash pile that corporate Britain is currently sitting on invested in R&D, decent wages for sure, but R&D, skills, new plant and equipment for the future. So investment, you're right, is absolutely vital to any serious industrial strategy for the future. I think people would like to see some more domestic investment going into British industry, too. The TUC has identified, along with many others, a whole range of areas where Britain has natural strengths, whether that's in renewables, certainly in this part of the country wave, tidal power, whether it's in some of our

traditional areas, like aerospace or highly advanced manufacturing and of course the creative industries, this isn't just all about production in the traditional sense, it's also about our many strengths on the creative industry side too. So there's a whole range of areas where if we all pull together – government, unions and business – I think we could start accelerating some of our growth and working to our collective strengths.

Are you comfortable about working with a Tory government?

Our aim is to represent working people whoever is in power. Now for sure we're more likely to share values with Ed Miliband than David Cameron, but it's important to me that we retain an open door, that we have constructive relationships and that we have the opportunity to put our case. I feel disappointed that the government is taking a direction in economic and social policy that I don't think is good for the long term future of this country, but it's important that we continue to make that case and keep trying to persuade the government to change course.

The time was when the TUC sent shivers down the spine of a Prime Minister or a Trade Secretary. It doesn't seem to happen these days, does it? I remember covering TUC conferences - it was big news.

Well we can talk about news values; I think leading the biggest democratic movement of people in this country is still pretty important for those in positions of power to listen to. Like I say, I think people sometimes forget that wealth is created by the workforce, not just in boardrooms. I think the trade union movement still has a really important role to play, not just in the economy, but in wider society. It's important that working people have the right to a political voice - you still make a huge difference. If you look at the pensions dispute in 2011 when millions of workers regrettably felt they were left with no option but to withdraw their labour; they won huge public support and they won some important concessions from the government, too. Clearly our aim is always to try and persuade people by the strength of our argument, but if necessary we have to do it through the strength of our organisation, too.

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We saw last week a terrible situation in Scotland with Grangemouth [the oil refinery and petrochemical plant where the Swiss owner, Ineos, stated it would have to close the plant with the loss of 1,400 jobs unless Unite the union accepted cuts in pension provision and a pay freeze] where the union there backed down. That seemed to be a complete U-turn by a union in that situation?

Well I don't think anybody, in the current climate of 2.5 million people unemployed or real wage cuts ever since this government took power and stagnating wages beforehand, would blame workers themselves, members of that union, for taking the decision that their priority was to keep the plant open.

You seem a very calm, measured person. How can you control some of your colleagues who are perhaps rather wilder and more expansive in their thoughts?

Well I think that's a bit of a value judgement there. I think that our trade union leaders are very experienced, we've often seen it all, been through it all; what makes us strong is the fact that we work together, we share our experience, we always try to find a fair resolution. But I don't think it would be wise for employers or politicians to ignore the very real frustration and anger that there is out there, still out there, that because of a financial crisis caused by greed and reckless

decision-making by some very, very rich individuals and a very dysfunctional banking system; ordinary people in their millions are being forced to sacrifice and pay a very high price. Frankly I think there's growing public concern that, although any signs of recovery in the economy are welcome, it's looking pretty thin and that the idea that cutting the life out of, not just public services but capital investment, is proving to be counterproductive. You can't take money out of people's pockets and expect them to keep buying goods and services in their local communities and it's places like Bristol that are suffering as a result of those very deep cuts.

Can you talk about Bristol and the economy in the South West, particularly how you see growth in this area and your views on apprenticeships and skills?

Well the South West and the cities within it, including Bristol, are very, very important to the national economy. In many ways it sums up some of the challenges that we face. There's huge potential in this region, real traditions of strong advanced manufacturing, of great creative industries, real strengths and potential around the renewables, new green industries, too. But it faces some very, very big challenges. There's huge inequality within this region. It can be very different being a wealthy person living in the centre of Bristol compared to the very large numbers of people who aren't even getting the living wage in this region and real problems, I think particularly in places like Cornwall, about the cost of housing. Of course that's proof again that you can't disentangle the economy from your social infrastructure, because if people can't find affordable housing how can they move to the jobs and the industries that are there? So there are some big, big challenges, but I think and would hope that there are real opportunities

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for local political leaders, unions and employers to start carving out a different way of doing things based on the idea that if you're going to build a successful economy, then you need a strong society, too. Communities need to stick together, we need to start lifting people's living standards and that's one of the best ways to kick-start economic recovery.

What about skills, young people, apprenticeships?

Well of course nationwide we've got around a million young unemployed and the really worrying fact is that the long-term young unemployed figure is growing. I'm a great believer and a great fan of apprenticeships, but I'm also very protective of the apprenticeship brand. I think most people understand in real life what a good apprenticeship is...

What is it?

Everybody understands that there's a trade-off, if you like; apprentices won't get rich on the money that they start off on, but if it's a high quality apprenticeship that's leading to, no absolute guarantees, but a very strong chance that if you do well you'll get a good job ... that's the kind of apprenticeship that we want to see. Of course we've got agreements between TUC Unionlearn and our unions and many decent employers on doing precisely that; taking young people, supporting them, mentoring them, giving them the chance to show what they're made of and getting a good, decent job at the end of it with a decent wage, too. I'm concerned, and I know many others are concerned, about the three in ten apprentices who are not even getting paid the apprentice National Minimum Wage and that's not just because that's unfair in terms of the money. What we've found is that where a boss isn't paying the national minimum wage, they're probably not looking after that young person's safety, or treating them fairly either. In areas like construction, where some of the worst offenders are, that's a real worry and I certainly

don't want to wait for some kind of tragedy until we tackle that problem. What's great is I know many employers feel exactly the same way and so we need a crackdown on those who are abusing apprenticeships to displace, or undercut, or substitute for real jobs and apprenticeships and we need to get together and really have a big drive to boost the quality as well as the numbers of decent apprenticeships in the future.

Now in around a year's time we're going to have a General Election. What's your manifesto? What's the TUC manifesto going to be going into that election?

It's very simple. It's what we've always stood for. We want decent jobs, we want decent homes for people, including a mass house building programme, a council house building programme so people get council houses and affordable homes, not just another housing bubble. We want fair pay, not just a minimum wage, not even just a living wage, but fair pay, fair rewards for the work that people do. And I think on top of that, of course we want decent public services.

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The next [Distinguished Executive Address](#) will be given by Rosemary Squire OBE, Ambassador Theatre Group Ltd at 6pm on 12th February at City Hall

