

The Trade Union Crisis of 1976–1979

Abstract Drawing upon the social contract and the Winter of Discontent as case studies, this chapter demonstrates how the media reporting of events, along with narratives of over powerful trade unions from politicians facilitated notions of blame. It asks how trade unions came to be blamed for growing (or perceived) economic problems of the 1970s. It also traces key popular narratives which emerged within the decade and became synonymous with excessive trade union power, such as the famous headline “Crisis? What Crisis?” Finally, the analysis demonstrates how media’s narration of events over emphasised the power of trade unions to create industrial disruption.

Keywords 1970s · Social contract · Trade union · Winter of Discontent

The previous chapter has introduced the concept of crisis and shown how it holds inherent political connotations. It also explored notions of agenda setting, blame, framing (of debates) and power (relative to the concept of crisis), demonstrating their interdependence. It further suggested that within crises, different groups or agents may have different levels of power. This chapter, using the research questions outlined above, will explore how the trade unions were blamed (and who they were blamed by) for an economic crisis in the late 1970s, how and why such crisis narrative occurred and what measures were taken against the trade union movement, in order to “resolve” the crisis. Such questions will

focus this chapter and further be used, in Chap. 5, relative to the banking sector post-2007 to explore the different powers of agents in times of crisis. These questions will also be used throughout this chapter and Chap. 4, to test the hypotheses set out in the previous chapter and explore any similarities and ask why and how differences in the crisis formation, framing or blaming of the “guilty party” or crisis resolution occurred.

INTRODUCTION TO TRADE UNIONS

This chapter introduces the first case study, the trade unions (1976–1979). Before any analysis or typology of the unions can be established, the caveats of homogeneity expressed in Chap. 1 need to be repeated and extended. The term “the unions” does not refer to a single group with a concrete ideology or philosophy but a broad coalition of groups. Whilst these groups share similar characteristics and may broadly agree on macroeconomic policy, they differ for several reasons (Booth 1984; Parker 2003). This chapter will emphasise two key periods in industrial relations in the period 1976–1979 the Social Contract of 1976–1978 (in particular Phase IV of the policy); a period of industrial relations which was not characterised by high-profile strikes, but nonetheless had a profound impact upon industrial relations and the Winter of Discontent 1978–1979, which occurred just before the 1979 election and can be seen as a catalysts for both the timing and incumbent defeat within the election (Butler and Kavanagh 1980). These were not the only periods or times whereby the trade unions were involved in government policy making, but the importance of these periods is that they were central to narratives which blamed the trade unions for wider economic problems.

Trade unions are linked to Marxist concepts such as of the separation of the means of production and the surplus value of labour. Trade unions:

arise because the social process under capitalism provoke the formation of organisations which protect the interests of workers. Separation from the means of production forces the worker to offer his labour power for sale as a commodity on the market. Labour power owes its ability to organise itself to a unique quality which sets it apart from all other commodities, namely, labour power cannot be separated from its bearer, the worker, whose *consent* is necessary if it is to be utilised in the production process. (Erd and Scherrert 1985, 116, original emphasis)

Marx saw the trade unions as being derived from the working classes or the proletariat, those that were required by the capitalist system to sell their labour as a means of existence. The capitalist mode of production pitted the trade unions against the owners of capital (those who were able to derive a living through the employment of others labour) as the two had contrasting objectives. The owners of capital wished to reduce wages as low as possible (whilst still providing their workers with enough to purchase the goods they produced—a key contradiction of the capitalist system of production discussed in Chap. 1), whilst the trade unions wanted to secure for their workers the best possible working conditions (including maximising their wages) (Johnson 1972; Kelly 1990). Here a relationship is formed, whereby trade unions and the owners of capital are necessarily opposed each other as they attempt to secure contradictory goals.

These contrasting goals of the trade unions and the owners of capital are important in this analysis, as it presents, two competing groups: the first (the trade union or proletariat) who seek radical changes to the status quo, though have little resources to employ—with the exception of their own labour—in advocating such a change. The second group (the owners of capital, or bourgeoisie) has strong vested interests in the maintenance of (the existing variation of) free market capitalism and upholding the status quo. They are able to exert profit from their workers and derive a living from the labour they employ. They have resources, but little or no desire to radically alter the status quo.

This chapter examines the role of the trade unions in 1970s Britain and explores what effects they had upon wider society. Drawing upon the questions outlined in the previous chapter, it asks what defined the crisis of 1976–1979, and if there existed a single crisis or if the trade unions were blamed, either fully or partially, for multiple crises. It will explore how this rhetoric of crisis emerged (Hypothesis 1), how trade unions power(s) were presented in popular discourse(s) and ask how such groups were implicated in, and blamed for, notions of crisis and economic underperformance before exploring the implications of this blame and how different groups responded to the perceived threats of the trade unions (Hypotheses 2 and 4). This will act as the first case study and will be compared to the crisis of 2007 (set out in Chap. 4) in the final chapter of this book.

INTRODUCTION TO TIME PERIOD

Trade unions although ideological and holding sectional interests are not void of the circumstances in which they find themselves. In the case of the trade unions in the 1970s, exploring the time period is important as trade unions do not operate in a vacuum, unaffected by the structures around them. As Chap. 1 suggested to explore notions of crisis, both factors of agency and structure must be examined and in this regard, a brief exploration of the structures of the period and the means through which the agency of the trade unions was exhibited is required.

The seeds of the period 1976–1979 were in many respects sown in the early post-war period. Following the Second World War, Britain has embarked on a period of economic growth fuelled by the reconstruction efforts and American aid through policies such as the Marshall plan. This period also saw an incorporation of trade unions into policymaking circles as part of a tripartite relationship. Trade unionists such as Ernest Bevin had held senior cabinet post during the war and the trade unions “emerged from the Second World War with considerable prestige ... Churchill in 1947 referred to the unions as ‘a long established and essential part of our life’ and ‘pillars of British society’” (Wrigley 2007).

However, the 1960s witnessed a decline in economic fortunes. Throughout the decade, Britain fell behind her international competitors. “The annual rate of growth of total output in Britain was 2.8 per cent in the 1960s compared with 4.8 per cent in Germany and 6 per cent in France [and] ... Trade unions were increasingly implicated in economic decline” (Gardner 1987, 2; McIlroy and Campbell 1999, 94). Media perceptions of unions too changed, films such as *I’m Alright Jack* (1959) and *The Angry Silence* (1960) openly criticised the unions and television sitcoms such as *The Rag Trade*, which portrayed an overzealous shop steward “Paddy”, who “would regularly blow her whistle and bellow ‘Everybody out!’” (Stead 1998, 67–70, 80).

The economic problems of the 1960s fuelled the idea of a growing crisis. The 1964–1970 Labour government’s inherited payments deficit grew into “the most severe exchange crisis in recent British history, as foreign holders of sterling displayed little faith in the pound or the viability of the new government’s economic programs” (Gourevitch et al. 1984, 36). The government opted to deflate—a policy at odds with its 5% growth target—rather than devalue. This deflationary policy led the cabinet in July 1966 to order a wage freeze replacing the voluntary

wage agreement of a 5% limit. The voluntary wage agreement had only reluctantly been accepted by left-wing trade union leaders, and the move towards a statutory agreement was deemed unacceptable. Even the more moderate trade union leaders were faced with

an extremely complicated [decision]. On the one hand, they felt a strong impulsion to help the government through a difficult situation: they agreed that the crisis was serious and accepted the need for wage restraint as part of the solution... on the other hand, TUC moderates were aware that blocked wages, especially when accompanied by rising unemployment, would after a brief period of grace begin to generate disaffection among their own shop stewards and members. The fragmented character of the union movement and the decentralization of bargaining activities meant that their militancy would be extremely difficult for the TUC leadership to control. Thus, as the rank-and-file in many unions became militant in 1967-8 ... TUC moderates found themselves assailed from two directions for developments over which they had relatively little control. The government and the media blamed them for the persistence of wage drift and the rising strike rates, while local union officials and militants criticized them for supporting the government's incomes policy. (Gourevitch et al. 1984, 37)

As tensions increased so too did the number of strikes, which rose by 525% in the period 1963–1970 (HC Deb 25 February 1971 vol 812 cc829–830). However, the governments' rhetoric was of cooperation, in setting out the rationale for the White Paper *"In place of Strife"* Barbra Castle stressed cooperation with the unions and regarded them as central to industrial, but also wider, democracy (HC Deb 03 March 1969 vol 779 cc36–166).

The problems of the 1960s (low growth, raising unemployment and inflation) helped to facilitate a notional idea of "crisis" in the 1970s. Whilst this was undoubtedly aided by certain events in the 1970s (such as increasing strikes and militancy of trade unions), questions of economic performance were being asked and the economic role of government, which had dramatically expanded since Second World War, was further questioned. Authors such as King (1975) saw the expansion of the government (through expanding nationalised industries and social welfare) as reaching "overload", whereby its expansion into new areas, such as the nationalisation of major industries, seriously affected the governments' ability to effectively maintain its traditional

responsibilities. According to such narratives, it further encouraged other interest groups—predominantly the trade unions—to seize the initiative and power and to demand excessive improvements in pay, working hours or conditions of work.

There also existed during the period a greater acceptance of the trade union movement and in particular its members. Both the Labour and Conservative Party were “too eager to secure at all costs the largest possible proportion of trade union votes”. This, according to Einzig (1969, 37), encouraged “the enemy within—the trade union’s greed and short-sighted selfishness, which has been the main cause of Britain’s decline ... [the attitudes of the parties in canvassing voters] generated in the minds of workers the assumption that they have only rights and no duties towards the community”.

Far from being universally accepted the relationship between the trade unions and Westminster was often fragmented. In particular the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions needs to be unpacked. This was not a static relationship over time, and involved multiple actors, for example individuals, individual trade unions, Constituent Labour Parties and the Parliamentary Labour Party. The link between the party and the trade unions extended beyond that of wages and industrial relations (Ludlam 2003, 152). Indeed the two groups could often be seen in disagreement; trade unions regularly voted against the PLP leadership at conferences, and through viewing the Labour Party as primarily a Parliamentary Party, Panitch (1976, 235-236) asserts that, the function of the Labour Party in the British political system consists not only of representing working class interests, but of acting as one of the chief mechanisms for inculcating the organised working class with national values and symbols and of restraining and reinterpreting working class demands in this light.

However, the links between the Labour Party and the trade unions and in particular the influence trade unions have over the Labour Party can be overstated. As Flanders (1968, 151) notes, this relationship is often a quite conservative one, whereby trade unions are seen as negatively impacting upon Labour’s policy. Whilst “it would be difficult for the Labour Party to—or a Labour Government—to disregard any strong and widely held trade union opinion, but policy, except in those matters with which the unions are intimately concerned, [are] rarely initiated by the trade union wing of the party”. Coates (1980, 82 original emphasis) notes, “the single most striking feature of the relationship between the

Labour Party and the trade unions in this period [the 1970s] is the gap between the public *image* of trade union power and the private *reality* of waning trade union influence over public policy”.

The relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions has not always been one of cooperation. Minkin (1991) points to a “contentious alliance” between the Labour Party and the Trade Unions. Minkin notes that the trade unions had helped to create the post-war settlement and shape policies such as nationalisation and the commitment to full employment whilst vigorously defending free collective bargaining. This settlement was by the late 1960s (and more prominently in the 1970s) beginning to fall apart. Such changes to the settlement put an increased strain on the relationship between the unions and the Parliamentary Labour Party. Indeed, one of the reasons for the demise of the Labour government in 1970 was the conflict with the unions over the white paper *In Place of Strife* which the government envisaged represented “a statement of trade union rights and responsibilities designed to protect and enhance the standing of the trade union movement”, but was seen as attacking the rights of trade unions and the process of free collective bargaining (Tyler 2006, 461, 473).

Governments in the 1970s perused policies of wage restraint or incomes policies. Such policies used legislation to cap wage rises (normally expressed as a percentage). These were not revolutionary or new, but did link wage increases to inflation (something that will be further explored below). The purpose of such incomes policies was:

to reduce wage increases relative to price increases. Inflation is an agent of income redistribution and the advocates of these policies have regarded incomes policies not only as a weapon to fight inflation, but also as a crucial part of a range of economic measures aimed at creating a surplus so as to divert resources to investment and exports. (Tarling and Wilkinson 1977, 396)

Policies of wage restraint were accepted and advocated by both Labour and Conservative governments. This linked wages—and in the case of the social contract rents—to that of inflation. If wage increases could be regulated, then inflation could be reduced through government action. Such policies, however, went against the practise of free collective bargaining which the trade unions favoured. Since the 1960s “the pre-existing voluntary system of “free collective bargaining” was displaced by a

progressively elaborated object of government intervention—an object increasingly overlaid by a network of legal relations and inset with a variety of new institutions” (Burchall et al. 1985, 397).

The period 1974–1979 aptly demonstrates this contentious relationship, the social contract symbolised the closest integration of the trade union labour alliance “notably [through] the new TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee, in which the TUC, the party’s National Executive Committee and the parliamentary leadership/government were equally represented” (Ludlam 2003, 155). Yet the same contract, as we will see below, highlighted tensions between what the PLP (and its leaders) were asking the trade unions to accept and what they, the trade unions, were prepared to sacrifice in order to maintain a Labour government.

Other authors pointed towards corporatism. Although the term has diverse meanings (Panitch 1980; Cawson 1986), in relation to the British context, corporatism refers to a distinct economic system different to capitalism and socialism (Winkler 1976). Under corporatism, there exists an “omnipotent state contrasted with a concept of powerful, independent interest groups. A system of state regulation from above is opposed to a system of autonomous self-regulation by economic associations. Corporatism means alternatively state domination or institutionalised pluralism” (Winkler 1976, 102).

The term corporatism gained prominence after Second World War and has “been particularly associated with the increased state involvement in managing the advanced capitalist economy, and centred on the integration of central trade union and business organizations in nations economic planning and incomes policy programmes and bodies” (Panitch 1977, 61). Under corporatism, the trade unions were presented as a powerful interest group, alongside business leaders they were incorporated into the economic structures and consulted on policies. These views of the economic structure of Britain were important (along with the media and the presentation of events) in shaping public and government perceptions of trade unions. The Labour government of 1964–1970 failed to legislate on industrial relations, principally through the inability to pass the white paper *In Place of Strife*. This was arguably due to the power of the trade unions, and the government’s failure to consult (and agree with) them on the issues.

Throughout the 1970s, perceptions of trade unions changed, in part due to the perceived crisis in the British economy. Ultimately, this leads

	1950s	1960s	1970s*
Trade Union Membership (average)	9,231,500	9,576,000	11,116,500
Density (average)	44.28%	44.06%	51.23%
Density (Peak)	45.1% (1952)	44.2% (1960, 1965)	55.4% (1979)
Number of stoppages	36,418	32,928	28,368
Number of days lost (000s)	37,767	39,441	132,186

Fig. 2.1 Table of selected trade union data 1950–1980.*“Does not include stoppages in coal for period December 1973–March 1974 other than national stoppage 10 February–8 March 1974. Figures not available”. Data from (Aldcroft and Oliver 2000, 90, 94–95) (Wrigley 2002, 19). Figures for Trade Union membership are taken from Wrigley

to changes in macroeconomic management which sought to rectify this crisis by fundamentally altering the relationship between capital and labour. Such attempts at crisis resolution will be discussed in Chap. 3. What is clear, however, is that the seeds of the economic problems of the 1976–1979 were sown in the post-war period. Low growth rates sparked notions of a relative economic decline and, when coupled with the inflationary pressures of the 1970s, placed pressures upon wages and living standards. Unemployment and union membership were also rising as Britain entered the new decade (R. Taylor 1993, 378–382). This, along with the traditionally fractured relationships that existed between trade unions and the Labour Party, helped create a sense of the trade unions becoming increasingly visible and politicised. Economic indicators, along with ideological questions over Keynesianism and the rise of corporatism (and later monetarism), increased the importance of industrial relations and especially the trade unions.

Perceptions of the trade union movement in the 1970s were heavily linked to notions of increasing strength, their membership had been rising since the end of the Second World War and there was a greater willingness to undertake an industrial action (See Fig. 2.1). Such actions were equated with an increase in trade union power. Industrial action was increasingly, within the media, pitted against democratic interests to the extent that a “plausible case could be made that strikes had brought down two elected governments, those of Edward Heath in 1974 and Jim Callaghan in 1979” (Howell 2007, 131). Because of their increasing

power and influence, it was perhaps inevitable that the unions soon became the scapegoats for Britain's poor economic performance compared with that of her main competitors... the press and media writers led the campaign against them. The sharp increase in industrial strife in the late 1960s and 1970s finally turned public opinion against them (Aldcroft and Oliver 2000, 88).

The trade unions by 1970 were growing in strength. Membership was rising throughout the decade and peaked in 1979 at 13.4 million, a density of 55.4%. Membership moved beyond the blue-collar, traditional base, to encompass those employed in white-collar and public sector occupations. Such changes increasingly placed trade unions and governments on different sides of industrial disputes. The number of shop stewards rose too, from 90,000 in 1961 to 317,000 in 1980 and by the "end of the 1970s shop stewards had spread well beyond their traditional concentration among manual workers in manufacturing to become widespread in the public sector and as representatives of manual workers in private services and white-collar workers in manufacturing" (Howell 2007, 122–123). The extension of trade unions into the public sector and the changing relationship between governments and public sector workers led to contemporaries questioning the economic role of government and the wider relationship between the economy and democracy (King 1975; Brittan 1977; Hirsch 1977).

Trade Unions not only increased the numbers of members they had, from 10 million in 1964 to more than 13 million in 1979, but also became increasingly concentrated. In 1964 there existed 641 separate trade unions; by 1979 this had fallen to 454. The largest organisations accounted for almost half of the unionised workforce and 64% were members of TUC affiliates. More than 2,000 TUC nominees sat on an increasingly variety of tripartite bodies and quangos, General Council members were firmly installed in 'the corridors of power', polls showed many believed the leader of the TGWU to be as important as the Prime Minister and the assessment that the unions were running the country was endorsed by academic commentators. (McIlroy and Campbell 1999, 99–101)

However, this increase in trade union membership, concentration, and proximity to decision-makers should not be seen as a sign they were able to greatly influence decision-makers or exert large swathes of power. They retained a consultative role and despite possessing "very real

influence” Mcllory and Campbell (1999, 101) warn this did not equal “power to determine decisions”.

Trade unions and industrial relations had by the mid-1970s become so important that one commentator noted following the 1974 general election “public attitudes on a range of social and political issues will be conditioned by their perceptions of the industrial relations situation” (Hartman 1976, 4). The way members of the public generated their perceptions about the trade unions and the effects of such opinions are important in analysing how notions of crises manifested themselves within the late 1970s. The 1970s were portrayed as a time of increasing union militancy; union membership was increasing, and despite the number of stoppages declining, the number of days lost was expanding between 1970 and 1979 there were a total of 29,942 stoppages which resulted in 128,704,000 days lost—compared to the 1950s which saw nearly a third less stoppages (21,155) and less than a quarter of days lost, 32,524,000 (Aldcroft and Oliver 2000, 94–95).

Clearly, offering analysis of each of these stoppages would be impractical in a single study. Therefore, this study will focus on a single period of stoppages in what became known as the Winter of Discontent 1978–1979. However, this is not to suggest that strikes hold a monopoly on industrial relations (or indeed is the most important period in industrial relations) or that these were the only example of trade union power in the period 1976–1979. Therefore, the role of the “Social Contract” 1976–1978 played in generating notions/narratives of “excessive” trade union power will also be examined. Both of these periods represented periods of significant change which through legislative processes were instigated by governments, as opposed to being periods of industrial unrest and portrayed as being instigated by trade unions. Both of these periods saw notions of blame directed towards the trade unions. It is these effects and the notions of blame which occurred that are important to this study. Through such events, narratives and notions of crisis developed and it is this levelling of blame, rather than seeking to present a contextualised, general theory of industrial relations in this time period that leads me to emphasise these events.

The previous chapter introduced the powers of the media as holding an ability to control the selection and presentation of news. Such powers affect the framing of the debate, what messages are presented in news reports or in newspapers and the parameters for such debates, deciding what is, and importantly what is not, relevant to such debates. Exploring

such narratives and the power of the media will help offer an exploration of the crisis of 1976–1979. Such an exploration will help ascertain the accuracy of the hypotheses established in the previous chapter which suggest that the capacity to blame in times of crisis is inherently unequal (Hypothesis 1) and that groups are able to create dominant narratives based upon their relative positions within society (Hypothesis 2). Through exploring this crisis in detail, I will offer some analysis with which to compare the crisis of 2007 in Chaps. 4 and 5. Before analysing, the effects of each a brief descriptive account of each event in the context of the late 1970s will be offered. These events will then be related to the concepts of crisis, framing, agenda setting, blame and crisis resolution and through the research questions outlined in Chap. 1.

Social Contract

The Labour Party in the 1974 (February) election, introduced the idea of a social contract. This was based upon their 1973 Labour's Programme and was appealing to the trade unions. During the election campaign, at a speech in Nottingham Harold Wilson [quoted in (Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 98)] sets out the need for a “social contract” between government, industry and the trade unions, with each party willing to make sacrifices to reach agreement on a strategy to curb rising prices. He added ‘we have agreed such a new contract with the TUC [though this agreement was later revealed to be incomplete by an interview with Hugh Scanlon].’ Within the contract there was “an explicit commitment that pay restraint [though this] would not be a one way street” (Thorpe 1999a). Trade unions were expected to control wage demands in exchange for spending commitments and social reform (e.g. “repeal of the Housing Finance Act, restoration of free collective bargaining, increased pensions and strict price controls on key services and commodities”) (Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 98). This was set in contrast to the confrontational approach of the Heath government and signalled an acceptance of partnership and cooperation to overcome the failures of *In place of Strife* and the Heath government's *Industrial Relations Act*.

As part of the social contract, the Labour Government established the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), implemented a new Trade Union Act, and passed acts on health and safety, employment protection and equal pay (Thorpe 1999b, 142). In return for these legislative measures, the trade unions were expected to curb wage demands,

which even union leaders themselves viewed as being inflationary (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 24) and reduce the number of stoppages, a policy which initially proved successful as “during phase II of the pay policy in 1976–1977 [the number of] days lost through stoppages were at the lowest level for ten years” (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 27).

Despite agreeing to the “contract” “the government immediately began to marginalise these commitments in favour of preferences for incomes policy and public expenditure cuts, which had led the Social Contract to be described as the ‘Social Contrick’” (Rogers 2009, 634). The 1977 budget was described by more people as “unfair” than “fair”, and at 36% the number of people describing it as fair was the lowest level since 1952. Healy’s own personal rating as Chancellor fell to 38% (Gallup Political Index, April 1978; June 1979). The year 1977 saw a turning point as the Gini coefficient, which had been falling since the start of the decade, began to rise; a trend which continued for the next 15 years. Arguments for defaulting on the terms of the contract emerged from both the political left and right (Callaghan 1987; Benn 1990, 73–74, 348).

Outside of pay restraint, the government failed to curb rising unemployment, especially for the youngest and eldest members of the workforce, introduce any industrial democracy or a wealth tax (which was “persistently postponed”) and offered only a limited increase in pensions under the 1975 Social Security Act. Yet the unions maintained their side of the bargain, the TUC “persistently forbade unions to defer settlements in order to escape ... pay limits”, called on their members to “work and vote for Labour” and amassed funds totalling a million pounds to support the Labour Party’s 1979 election campaign. This “loyalty to a Labour government ... was *not* the creature of excessive trade union power” but demonstrated an imbalanced relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party (and by extension the government) in the latter half of the 1970s (Coates 1980, 83–85).

Such analysis did not appear in the right-wing narrative, which saw the contract as over powerful unions holding the country to ransom (Clark 2001). One former Conservative, Home Secretary (quoted by Black and Pemberton (2009, 555)) noted; “the only give and take in the contract was what the government gave and the unions took”. Here the New Right—a fraction of the Conservative Party, which included Margaret Thatcher—sought to continue to blame the trade unions for the economic problems of the 1970s again linking problems of inflation

with a narrative of an overly powerful trade union movement. Such simplistic narratives presented inflation—which was regarded as high and a key political issue—as stemming from the actions of the trade unions. Only through curbing the trade union powers (in particular the power to achieve high wage settlements), so the narrative went, would the rate of inflation fall.

The government was required to call an election no later than November 1979, with many predicting an autumn (1978) election. To maximise their chances in the upcoming election, the government was keen to demonstrate they could take a hard line with the unions. Such a policy involved implicitly blaming the trade unions for generating problems of inflation, through excessive wage settlements. Phase IV of the incomes policy, which was due to last between 1978 and 1979, can be viewed more as electioneering on the part of the Labour government than a serious attempt to reach negotiations with the unions. Having governed with no majority since April 1976, the government sets out its commitment “to limit pay increases to 5% ... there was no question of union agreement. To most informed observers, the new limit seemed utterly unrealistic” (Thorpe 1999b, 145). The government’s rationale rested upon a renegotiation after the election. Following re-election (which would hopefully provide Labour with a majority in the House of Commons), the government could renegotiate the pay settlements to “a more sensible stance” having demonstrated their toughness in the election campaign by sticking to the 5% figure. “It seemed inconceivable, to most people, that there could be any other explanation: after all surely Callaghan of all people, was not trying to face the unions down as Wilson had tried to do over *In place of Strife?*” (Thorpe 1999b, 145).

The policy of a 5% pay cap was not discussed with the trade unions, and even the cabinet was itself split on the issue. As Roy Hattersley explained in the House of Commons in 1978, the idea of a pay norm was seen only as a temporary measure, and that a return to collective bargaining, albeit with qualifications, was the government’s long-term goal (HC Deb 13 December 1978 vol 960 cc673–810, 1978). Yet such a policy not only heightened the confrontation between the trade unions and government, but also gave traction to emerging narratives linking inflation explicitly to increases in wages.

WINTER OF DISCONTENT

The postponing of the election, from autumn 1978 to the spring of 1979, led to the breakdown of the social contract and the pay cap of 5%. In December, and following a 3-week strike, the motor company Ford settled a pay claim at 15%. Parliament rejected an opposition proposal by 285 to 283 votes, which would have granted the government powers to impose penalties on the company. As Hattersley noted in his speech to Parliament rejecting the proposal, this was not the first pay deal to break the norm. However, the vote should not be seen as a desire to keep the government's industrial relations policy intact. It was Ford's size, rather than the principal of the wage restraint led the Conservative opposition to propose the amendment (HC Deb 13 December 1978 vol 960 cc673–810; Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 120). The failure of the pay policy, and in particular the inability of the government to impose sanctions on Ford led public sector workers, whose wages had lagged behind their private sector counterparts, to push for increased wages (Artis and Cobham 1991, 15). This led to knock on effects and spiralling wage claims within the public sector, threatening the 5% pay norm established in stage IV of Callaghan's income policy. "Oil- and petrol-tanker drivers threatened to strike over a 25% pay claim but settled for 20%. And, on 3 January 1979, lorry drivers struck ... they settled for a 21% pay rise. The 5% pay policy was dead even before public-sector workers struck on 22 January in favour of a £60.00 per week minimum wage" (A. Taylor 2001, 122–123).

The Winter of Discontent, as the period, of collective strikes, became known as, was not a unique event (or even series of events) located only in the first few months of 1979, but a product of the economic failings of the decade (Hay 2010). And arguably, just as the causes of the Winter of Discontent were not primarily in the first few months of 1979, the effects were possibly felt most in the 1980s. Secondary action, "namely action directed at parties outside the contractually-bound disputants, and 'secondary picketing', away from employees' place of work" lead to growing calls for new legislation (Smith and Morton 2001, 134). The Winter of Discontent "destroyed the image that only Labour could deal effectively with the trade unions" (A. Taylor 2001, 123). No longer was the public convinced that a Labour government could handle the trade unions better than a Conservative one. Such perceptions aided Thatcher, who herself later admitted, without such changes, "it would have been

far more difficult to achieve what was done in the 1980s” (Thatcher 1995, 414).

One former Labour minister, William Rodgers (1984, 172–173) saw the subsequent election loss as a result of trade union activities. This view was shared through the discourse of both the left and right within British politics, and outside of politics images of rubbish lying uncollected in the streets and even reports of dead bodies lying unburied (due to a grave diggers strike in Liverpool) became synonymous with the strike action and wider economic problems of the 1970s (Sandbrook 2012, 4). Such perceptions were enhanced by the medias reporting of events. Rodgers (1984, 178) notes “The reporting of the strike by newspaper, radio and especially television was dramatic and had much more impact on opinion than the public’s own direct experience of the strike”. This supports the second hypothesis established in the previous chapter—that groups are able to generate dominant narratives based upon their relative positions within society—may be accurate. The power of the media to present dominant narratives that on occasions went against the experiences of individuals demonstrates a clear power of agenda setting and gatekeeping.

CREATING A CRISIS: “WHO GOVERNS BRITAIN?”

In exploring the period 1976–1979 and the creation of a crisis, it is implied that at some point in the 1970s Britain witnessed a change, moving from being in a state of non-crisis to one of crises. The period 1976–1979 undoubtedly was one of the great changes in British industrial relations. This section demonstrates, using the language of crisis developed in Chap. 1, how the trade unions were presented as—and blamed for—causing a crisis. In doing so, it will draw upon the four aspects of this case study set out above. Questions of blame, framing of debate, agenda setting and crisis resolution are all important in analysing the crisis. Before such analysis can be undertaken, the crisis must first be defined—what was the 1976–1979s a crisis of?

The first of my research questions, outlined in Chap. 1 asked:

1. What were the reasons/ factors that helped define the crisis?

Two interwoven crises can be identified, the first is an economic crisis, blaming the trade unions and in particular the excessive wage increases

they demanded for generating high levels of inflation. The second is of a political nature, which questions the compatibility of the vested interests of the trade unions and wider democratic practises/institutions.

The first narration of the crisis stemmed from the economic activities of trade unions. Between 1973 and 1979, GDP growth fell to 1.4% (p.a.) from 3.26% (p.a.) for the period 1968–1973. Throughout the 1970s, inflation averaged 12.6% and the number of working days lost due to industrial action peaked in 1979 at 29,474,000 (Aldcroft and Oliver 2000, 135; R. Taylor 1993, 380, 385). Inflation was further, through the blaming of the trade unions, linked to what were becoming increasingly seen as “excessive” pay claims and settlements. Such discourse argued that inflation could only be curbed through wage control (either formal or informal). The unions were blamed for causing wider economic problems in other industries—for example, during the Winter of Discontent.

The second crisis narrative—possibly of greater importance for governments (though this is not to diminish the importance placed upon the economic crisis)—was of a political nature. Trade unions were presented as posing a threat to the established order. The question of “who governs Britain?” was not one confined to academic debate in the 1970s, but was explicitly put to the British public by the incumbent Prime Minister (Edward Heath) ahead of the February 1974 election.

The situation was not aided by the lack of a parliamentary majority, which came about as a result of the February 1974 election, or indeed the small majority afforded to Wilson in October of the same year that slowly eroded away over the next 3 years. If the 1970s can be presented as a struggle for governance, between elected and vested interests, or for the mechanisms which would allow a party or organisation to govern, a small parliamentary majority offered few signs of an end to the struggle.

The February 1974 election is not the only election arguably lost by a government as a result of its industrial relations policy. The 1979 election, although with different casualties, was built in the same manner. The Winter of Discontent had cost the government dear, and unelicted, vested interests were again blamed for bringing about a change in government. The breaking of Phase IV of Labour’s incomes policy was again framed in purely economic terms, the debate was framed in terms of wage increases against inflation (the assumption being that wage increases and low inflation were contradictory policies to pursue)

and the unions were presented as holding the country to ransom. This links to the first crisis; a crisis of an economic making, which could be seen through (among other factors) rising inflation levels, balance of payments problems, increases in the number of days lost due to industrial action and rising unemployment rates.

The “strike threat” distinguishes trade unions from most other monopoly groups (although the OPECs role in the oil crisis of 1973 is one example of other monopolies acting in a similar way) (Brittan 1977, 194). This distinguishable feature singled out the trade unions and ensured they were easy targets to blame. Yet such monopoly status does not simply equate with financial gain. Trade unions are often presented within the media as concerning themselves solely with money. Television news reporting’s often assume the cause of strikes to be money, despite government statistics “used by television and industrial correspondents for other purposes ...[which] reveal that between one quarter and one third of industrial disputes are about matters other than money” (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 20–21). This is an important point, as the presentation of the motives for industrial action is a key factor in determining how such action is perceived. If trade unions are viewed as democratic and defending their members’ interests, they can be viewed in a more positive light than if they are viewed as self-interested and looking only to maximise their own gains.

Instances of crisis were presented within the media. Just as Heath’s election campaign has as its central theme the question of “who governs?” newspapers and politicians increasingly took up this question in the Winter of Discontent. Articles and headlines such as “We’re Being Run by the Strikers” (*The Sun* 1979a) “Union men in Cabinet Stopped Jim” (Greig 1979a) “Is the Crazy Gang Running Britain? Is ANYONE running Britain?” (*The Sun* 1979b, 1 original emphasis) again presented the vested interests of the Trade Unions as being detrimental to normal governance. Headlines such as “Battle of Britain ‘79” (*The Sun* 1979c), with its historic connotations further increased the level and importance of blame to be allocated to certain parties (i.e. the trade unions), presenting them as an existential threat to democracy much in the same light as the fascist regimes Britain fought against in the Second World War, and in doing so escalated the importance of the strikes.

The crisis that existed had two arenas: an economic one whereby factors such as inflation and unemployment—measures of economic performance—were, it was argued, being constrained by union actions,

and a second arena which raised issues of democracy and governance and questioned the ability of the government to use the mechanisms of the state to pursue democratically agreed policies. Trade union militancy was viewed as the cause of these problems, which themselves were linked by the power unions were able to (or perceived to yield). This crisis emerged in different places in the period 1976–1979s, but the causes of the crisis were linked, it was argued, under the banner of trade union power.

This analysis of 1976–1979 demonstrates that there existed two, interwoven crises: the first one was of an economic nature, which used empirical evidence such as low(er) GDP growth and rising inflation. The second crisis was one of a political nature: governments were “overthrown” by vested interest groups and could not effectively govern the country.

PLAYING THE BLAME GAME

If it is then accepted a crisis occurred in the late 1970s, then blame must be levelled, either at someone, a group of agents (an) institution(s) or (a) structure(s). The crisis that emerged was by no mean unavoidable, it was not due to natural events but to the choices of certain people, principally as I have demonstrated above the media and politicians—those that were able to create and generate discourses. The trade unions became increasingly blamed for the economic underperformance and political uncertainty faced in Britain.

The second and third research questions, I set out in this chapter, asked:

2. Who was blamed for the crisis? How were these groups blamed?
3. Who was able to instigate such blame?

Initially in the 1970s, newspapers were able and willing to present complex arguments and engage with the trade unions. Rather than offering simplistic narrative concerned solely with blame, the media noted the difficulties in quantifying the powers of the trade unions and their effects. Although not particularly favourable to the unions, such analysis was relatively neutral. However, a series of strikes, particularly in the mining community had, by 1974, if not 1972, eroded much of this balanced or even favourable media coverage. The Conservative government

was quick to blame increasing industrial unrest upon the trade unions. Such narratives throughout the decade resonated and gain traction within the media and even, towards the end of the decade, were being purported/advanced by the Labour government.

Such balanced opinion, however, was not extended following the miners' strike of 1974 and the February 1974 election. The Conservative Party document *The Right Approach* further blamed the political and economic failures of the previous government on the trade union movement. In doing so, the document singled out the trade unions for special mention, for generating notions of class divide and conflict, and suggesting the economy needed to be "rebalanced" away from the public sector (Conservative Party 1976). Such an ideology linked the political and economic crises of the 1970s, and in doing so focused on the trade unions. The unions were not only responsible for the excessive levels of inflation but also for the undemocratic removal of Heath's democratically elected government, and continuing industrial disputes, which embroiled both his government and his Labour's predecessors' the 1970s. The Conservatives policy of *Stepping Stones* noted "the trade unions are central to this rebuilding process ... because they are the only group whose leaders' political convictions and lack of economic understanding could pit them against any government which dares to be done" (Smith and Morton 2001, 133). This strategy accepted theories of overload and the "need" to reduce the size and scope of the government's actions. Following the 1979 general election, James Prior (1979, 10), the new secretary of state for employment and sceptic of the New Right, noted "I profoundly believe that a large part of our troubles flows from governments in Britain trying – and being wrongly expected – to do too much in the wrong places and in the wrong ways".

During the Winter of Discontent, the media further generated, and shaped, notions of crisis. The word crisis appeared in prominent positions in newspapers, for example, *The Sun's* (1979d, 1, 8) headline "Crisis? What crisis?" which was attributed as a quote to James Callaghan as he returned to Heathrow from an economic summit in Guadeloupe, not a holiday as the newspaper suggested. This was used by the paper to reinforce the negative portrayal of events and present the government and Prime Minister in particular as divorced from the real situation/threat posed by the unions. However, as the article later notes (in smaller print) Callaghan did not actually deny the mounting economic

problems, or even say the words “Crisis? What crisis?”—a term which was in fact used by the *Mail* three days earlier—but rather said “I don’t think other people in the world would share the view there is immediate chaos” (Greig and Porter 1979; Thomas 2007, 269). This simplistic line of attack was echoed by Conservative Party deputy chairman who is quoted as saying “[The Prime Minister] stepped off his jet to tell the British people ‘there is no crisis’ ... not only is he complacent he is arrogant to the extreme”.

Page two of *The Sun* newspaper was filled with pleas from businesses to end the strikes (ignoring the trade unions protests and demonstrating a bias towards capital), and even warning of fatalities if settlements could not be reached. The page also had a story entitled “the unions must be sorted out”, which quoted the leader of the opposition Margaret Thatcher as saying “if power is not used responsibly then we in Parliament shall have to look at its distribution” (*The Sun* 1979c, 2). The term “responsibly”, however, is not derived from a value-neutral position but defined by Thatcher herself.

The Sun adopted the “Crisis? What crisis?” “quote” as a tagline to reference stories relating to industrial relations, and from January 19 also incorporated the tag line “Battle of Britain ‘79”. Sensational headlines, and sub-headlines, heightened the importance of the strike and continued throughout the month: “Famine Threat” (*The Sun* 1979c, 2) “Shut Down Britain” (*The Sun* 1979f) “School Meals Hit in Food Blockade” (*The Sun* 1979g) “The Noose Tightens: Food Stores Ready to Close as Blockade is Stepped up” (Cay 1979) “Chaos on all sides: Troops Move in as Ambulance Men Say The Strike goes on: Four Million Children are Blockaded from Schools” (McHugh and Condon 1979) “It’s Guerilla Warfare” (Kay and Chapple 1979) “Children Hit as Hospitals Close Doors” (Mattei 1979) “No Mercy Till Further Notice” (Collier 1979) and “Pickets Hit Cancer Wards: Patients sent Home ‘Some will Die’ says Doctor” (Hodgkinson et al. 1979) a story that was grossly misrepresented (Thomas 2007).

The Sun was not alone in its portrayal of the Trade Unions and the crisis, the *Daily Mail* ran the headline “Britain Under Siege” (Greig and Porter 1979) which again inferred that Callaghan was on holiday whilst the crisis brewed. The article, which claimed that the response from Whitehall was “Crisis? What Crisis?” three days before *The Sun*’s headline, linked the current dispute to that

of five years ago when Mr Heath took on the miners over pay and lost. [However] this time there was at least one noticeable difference. While Mr Heath took a personal grip on the emergency Mr Callaghan spent yesterday in the West Indies ... Apparently communications between Downing Street and Barbados ... are so good that he can afford to make the most of his junket in the tropics.

Pages 16–17 of the newspaper had a full spread dedicated to the story. Alongside, a photo of Mr. Callaghan and his wife “strolling on a sun-warmed beach in Guadeloupe” ran the heading “Dear Jim, Glad to see you’re having a good time” (Winchester 1979). Other articles continued the tone: an “Ostrich Prime Minister” with his “head in the sand”, or a “Great Pretender” who was unable to act against trade unions, constrained by his “obsessive friendship with the unions” (*Daily Mail* 1979a, b, c; Greig 1979b) the impact of which was so great (or over exaggerated) that the newspaper talked about “the end of civilisation” as a strike at Liverpool docks affected production at the Heinz factories (*Daily Mail* 1979b).

One commentator (Bresler 1979a, 6 original emphases) in the *Daily Mail* claimed the police should be given greater powers to make more arrests of picketers and suggested that the “bully-boy tactics” of the unions need to be reassessed and asked “isn’t it time that we drew up the picket lines?” In a later article Bresler (1979b) asks “why are the pickets left alone by the police?” Presumably, Bresler rejects the idea of the Government regulating, as his newspaper had throughout the “crisis” sought to discredit Mr. Callaghan personally and his own article seeks to pick apart the 1974 Industrial Relations Act. Instead, a royal reading of the term “we” may be offered, whereby it is his own views he wishes to be enacted (or used to set the agenda), without consultation or deliberation. The article did not call for any form of democracy but, like many other newspaper articles, especially comment sections, used the positioning of the media within wider society to suggest, in quite a contradictory manner, that the unions are ill-representative and lack the mandate to strike. Instead, the author’s own opinions should be enacted into law and a firmer approach to wage “negotiation”, with a trade union unable to strike (or to strike only in a manner that is heavily regulated, or dictated by those they are trying to negotiate with) for improved wages or conditions.

Much of the analysis surrounding industrial disputes largely excluded the trade unionists. The comment was taken from policy makers and MPs, but not the trade unionists, either those who were involved or those newspapers labelled as militant or extremist. This upholds my first hypothesis which suggested that the capacity to blame is unequal (in the case reserved for the media and politicians). The exclusion of the trade union movement (by those seeking to discredit or vilify them) ensured that their narratives could not gain prominence/dominance and they were unable to counter or challenge the existing narratives. The media's reporting of news was analysed in a royal commission, 1974–1977, headed by Lord McGregor of Durriss. The commission concluded that the reporting of industrial relations (among other policies) was “highly factual” and “devoid of any overt bias”. Yet “on trade union affairs it drew attention to failings because non-specialists and sub-editors were handling the copy of specialist reporters; and to an ‘unsatisfactory mosaic’ produced by ignorance of industrial relations”. Two members of the commission further noted in a minority report the “complacency” of the main report, especially “on the polarisation of the press between ‘the excellence of some of our quality newspapers and at the other edge the vacuity and irresponsibility of some of our popular newspapers’” (Hetherington 1985, 4–5).

Trade unions protested the media reporting of events, criticising “the way trade unionist’s actions are portrayed in the media”. Such arguments were not new but as the reporting became more hostile throughout the decade and “became more pronounced ... because of the amount of coverage that was being given to disputes”. Trade unionists claimed they were subjected to an “unending series of attacks and abuses which exceeded the experiences and expectations of even the most seasoned media watchers”. Such attacks influenced public opinion to the extent that by February “polls showed an almost universal cry for ‘reform’ of trade unions ... [yet those calling for ‘reform’] had little or experience of the disputes taking place. Their sole source of information was the media” (Trade Union Media Working Group 1979, 5–6). Furthermore, such polls failed to explore what kind of reform was being advocated. To equate such polls with a desire to curb the trade unions powers to strike is too simplistic and ignores the fact that even in January 1979 opinion polls were suggesting that as many respondents described the trade unions as “a good thing” as did “a bad thing” (R. Taylor 1993, 371).

Rather than portraying an inherent bias against the trade unions such polls highlight the role of the media in setting the agenda. The media's attacks on the trade unions led to a growing perception of crisis and placed the blame for the economic problems of the day at the feet of the trade unions.

Contradictions within the media reporting of the strikes appear. Two articles both in the *Daily Mail* covering the ambulance drivers strike suggest that no matter what the unions decided to do they would be wrong: the first entitled "The Unions' Hospital Will Not be Hit" (*Daily Mail* 1979d) criticised trade unionists for continuing to work at Manor-House Hospital which treats predominantly union members, despite the municipal workers strike. The second "Sick Old Man Left in the Snow" (*Daily Mail* 1979e) surrounds an ambulance crew who were instructed not to attend to a former miner and husband of a former nurse. On both occasions, the newspaper criticised the trade unions. This suggests a wider anti-union agenda from the newspaper which can be further represented through another story in the last week of January. One story had the headline "You Name It—They'll Stop It" running across the front page, yet as it continued on page two the same article noted that lorry drivers were returning to work, under the smaller heading "More Council Workers Out- More Lorrymen Back" (Edwards and Willis 1979). Further contradictions were to come, in February the *Daily Mail's* headline "They Won't Even Let US Bury our Dead" (Young and Loudon 1979) referred to a gravediggers strike in Liverpool, although when questioned "Liverpool's Chief Medical Officer, Duncan Bolton, ... insisted there was no short-term threat to public health but eventually conceded that, if the dispute continued for months, then burials might have to take place at sea". Such conditionality was overlooked in the *Daily Mail* article which noted "with bodies piling up in the cities mortuaries, some may have to be buried at sea" and "*The Sun* and the *Telegraph's* headline 'Bodies May Be Buried at Sea'" (Young and Loudon 1979; Thomas 2007).

One journalist (Potter 1979, 2) said the dispute had "expiated [the myth] that only Labour under a leader who understands the unions, can handle the unions". Again the unions were not presented as equals in shaping the economy but rather like a naughty child who could not be reasoned with but instead had to be "handled". Even in an article which started with the reporting of two men on the pick lines being shot at had the sub-headlines, "lorry men defy union's orders to ease the big blockade" and "the pickets defy orders" (*The Sun* 1979h).

Further misrepresentation occurred during an Ambulance strike in 1979, *The Sun* (1979a) ran with the headline Ambulance Men Vote for “Total Stoppage: ‘If it Means Lives Lost that is how it must be’, a quote attributed in the article to Bill Dunn the so-called “strike boss”. The right-wing press further presented this strike as a war against the sick which demonstrated “the utter bankruptcy of an ungovernable, union-dominated and over-extended state form unable even to guarantee the most basic needs of its citizens” (Thomas 2007, 270). Indeed, on four days: 15 Monday, 20 Saturday, 23 Tuesday and 24 Wednesday, January, the developments were so bad that the newspaper had to temporarily move the “page three girl” to page five. This was done simply to maximise the impact of the strike upon the newspaper readers. On the first two occasions, she was returned the next day and in the Saturday edition, the newspaper still found space on page three to advertise “Paradise on the Isle of Wight”, a Ladbroke Holiday brochure (*The Sun* 1979i, j, k, l).

Thomas (2007) demonstrates how the late 1970s saw the emergence of a right-wing meta-narrative which describes the 1970s as a period of economic turmoil and social unrest. This “myth” of the 1970s, generated by the political right, replaced the left-wing narrative of a myth of the 1930s, the key narrative in the legitimisation of the post-war settlement and the welfare state. In doing so, this right-wing narrative emphasised the role of the trade unions in generating economic and social problems. David Blunkett, quoted in *the Independent*, demonstrates how the narrative has shaped government policy and social attitudes since 1979, and in particular to a fuel shortage in 2000, “We are all bound in by history and we all remember the ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ of 30 years ago” (Woole 2000).

Such discourses shaped the blaming of the trade unions: industrial unrest or strife was their fault—and by the tone of the articles their fault alone. According to this narration, the trade unions were acting irresponsibly, strikes were no longer considered to be an acceptable tool in the discussion process, nor were discussions viewed as a two-way process. Such discourses were often based upon contradictions, and rather than accurately reflecting reality, pursued for alternative reasons (e.g. the continuation of the struggle between organised labour and the owners of capital over the means and of methods of production or control of the political agenda).

Such presentations of the trade unions by the media were by no means inevitable. Miners during the strike of 1972 benefit from favourable public opinion, at least initially (*The Guardian* 1972). A Gallup poll in February 1972 asked the question “Are your sympathies mainly with the employers or mainly with the miners in the dispute which has arisen in the coal industry”, 52% of respondents said they sympathised with the miners—twice those who sympathised with the employers (20%) (Gallup Political Index, February 1972). Union support, however, declined in the latter half of the decade. In 1964, 70% of the public saw the trade unions as “a good thing”, a net positive result of 58%, by 1979, those viewing the trade unions as “a good thing” fell to only 53% (only just over half of those surveyed) and the net result fell to a mere 20% (A. Taylor 1999, 180). In the eyes of the public, the power of the unions was not linked to normative assumptions about the nature of trade unions. Instead, the changes of reporting were linking to a growing anti-union agenda supported by both politicians and the media. Here the relative position of each group sought to achieve dominance of the discourse and define the “crisis” in order to implement favourable reforms.

Opinion poll data suggests that public support for trade unions in the 1970s declined, before recovering in the 1980s (see Fig. 2.2). The percentage of respondents thinking the trade unions were “a good thing” fell over the decade, whilst the percentage agreeing that the trade unions were a “bad thing” increased. Figure two demonstrates the changing pattern of trade union support; here the 1970s can be seen as offering the trade unions consistently lower support than either the 1960s or the 1980s.

By the mid-1970s, there was a growing perception among the public that the trade unions had become too powerful. The public, in 1974 favoured the idea of a social contract between government and trade unions rather than continuing disruption and power cuts (Gardner 1987, 48). In September 1979, over three quarters (77%) of those surveyed in a Gallup poll thought the trade unions were “too powerful”, with just 5% believing that trade unions were “not powerful enough”—the corresponding figures for January 1979, during the Winter of Discontent, were even higher: 84 and 3% (Gallup Political Index, September 1979). Partly, this was because of the perceived links between strikes and trade unions strength. This viewpoint focused on the disruptive effectiveness of trade union actions, e.g. industrial action and strikes. Such changes in

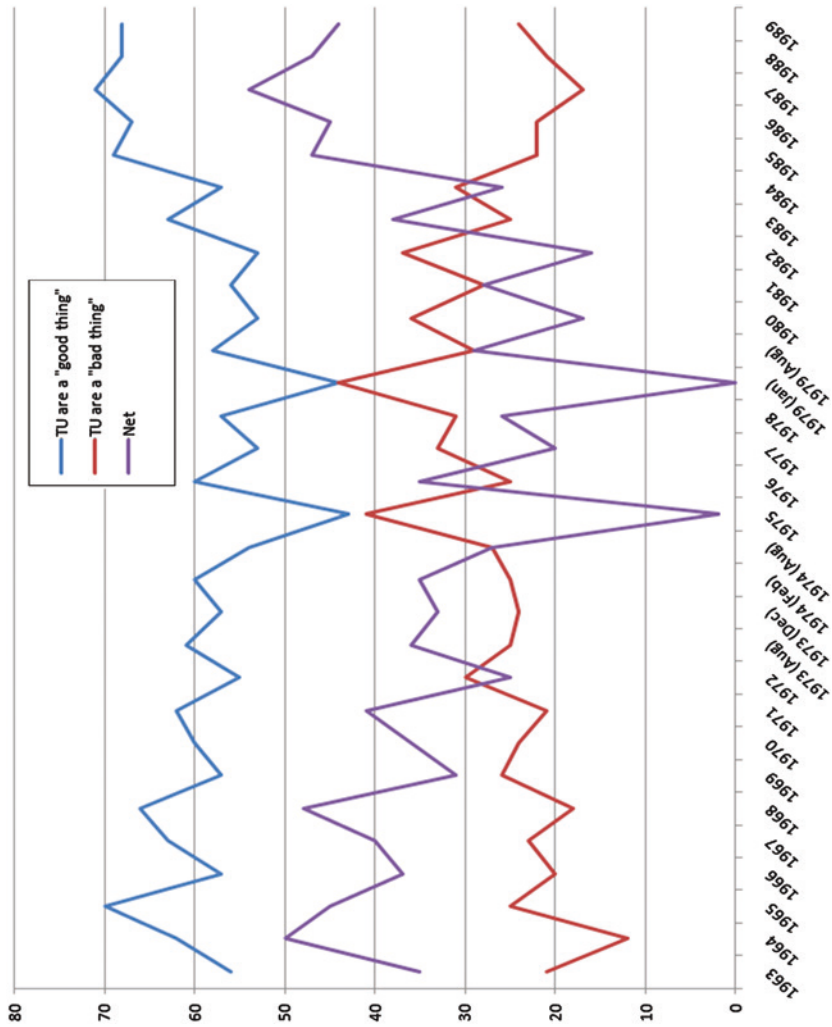


Fig. 2.2 Public perceptions of trade unions 1963–1989. Source R. Taylor (1993, 371)

public attitudes coincided with changes in the reporting of trade unions in the popular press.

The crisis that emerged could therefore be seen to develop through narratives of strike action and over powerful trade unions, the Winter of Discontent according to this narrative pitted militant trade unions against democratically elected governments, yet the unions ability to negotiate with government during the social contract did not generate a crisis nor was it an example of trade union power. However, others did not confine the crisis to these events, King (1975, 295) highlighted the trade unions along with businesses and the state as “among a number of contenders for wealth, power and influence” which had a destabilizing effect upon the country. The trade unions found themselves ill-placed to argue against the dominant narrative of the government and media. Notions of relative economic decline and the increasing scarcity of resources meant:

In the emerging impasse of the 1970's governments faced starker choices than they had for the two decades before. If private capital could not accumulate with existing levels of working class industrial power, then either private capital had to be transformed or working class power had to be cut. The basic incompatibility of interests between capital and labour here forced choice: and took off the agenda of national politics the possibility of any corporatist resolution of that choice. (Coates 1989, 81)

With the relative economic decline and increasing scarcity of resources, the state and its natural bias towards capital saw as its only means of protecting the relative living standards of the owners of capital attacking the conditions of the working classes. In this sense, the trade unions, as the defenders of the working-class movement were attacked. A simplistic narrative occurred which presented the trade unions as causing inflation. Despite such analysis being questioned by Brittan (1977, 258) who noted that “the direct effect of unions is not, as popularly believed, to cause a continuing inflation” the unions were, in simplistic fashion, linked to cause inflation and control of pay rises was seen as means by keeping inflation down; this was the basis behind the incomes policy of the social contract. As a Bank of England report notes, the 1970s were a time when “monetary policy was subordinate to incomes policy as the primary weapon against inflation” (Nelson 2010, 4). “Between February and 1974 and the end of 1978 prices rose by over 100%” (Butler and

Kavanagh 1980, 25), despite the social contract and pay moderation. This rise in inflation, which occurred from 1972 was in many ways unique to Britain, between 1972 and 1977 Britain's inflation rate was twice that of the average OECD countries—despite this being a “highly inflationary period for the world economy” (Brittan 1978, 248). Such analysis was overlooked within the media and throughout the decade the trade unions increasingly became blamed for the crisis. Trade union wage demands and wage increases for their members were presented as causing inflationary pressures. Increasing strike action and union militancy were held responsible for both a democratic crisis and the inability of governments to operate.

Politicians too blamed the unions for generating excessive inflation rates. Interestingly, it was only some wage rises which were viewed as generating inflation. During Phase IV of the social contract, the government imposed a 5% pay cap upon wage settlements. MPs pay rose from £5,750 in 1975 to £9,540 by 1979, an increase of over 60% and in 1975 annual pay increases for MPs were introduced to combat inflationary pressures (Bamibridge and Darcy 1999, 76–77).

Gallup opinion polls suggest that the public saw the role of the trade unions as extending beyond strikes and viewed industrial relations as complex. Equally, evidence suggests that it is hard to conclude that the public saw “excessive” trade union power as normatively negative. In February 1979, 84% of respondents thought that trade unions were “too powerful”, yet despite this, the ongoing Winter of Discontent, and 51% of respondents saying strikes were the most pressing issue, when Gallup asked “generally speaking, and thinking of Britain as a whole, do you think the trade unions are a good thing or a bad thing?” 44% said they were a “good thing”—the same number as responded “bad thing” (Gallup Political Index, February 1979). The number of people responding “a good thing” had been declining since 1976, and this decline occurred simultaneously to a decline in the public's perceptions of trade union power (see Figs. 2.2 and 2.3)—and, perhaps surprisingly, in 1977 only 69% of trade unionists saw trade unions as a “good thing”, whilst 21% thought they were a “bad thing” (Gallup Political Index, September 1977).

Public perceptions of the trade unions did not always reflect the media's reporting of events, or analysis. Partly, this is because some members of the public were also members of the trade unions, and as union density approached and breached the 50% mark the two groups

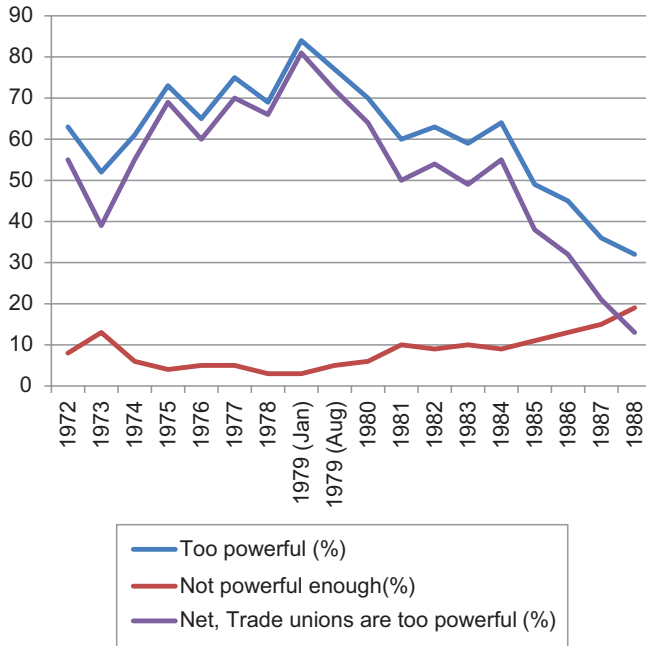


Fig. 2.3 Public perceptions of trade unions power, 1972–1988. *Source* R. Taylor (1993, 370)

overlapped significantly. It can be expected that members of trade unions have a more positive perception of trade unions than those who are not members (yet both are members of the general public). The media and the trade unions are therefore separated in a way the public and the trade unions are not. Public perceptions did not generate notions of crisis, certainly not in the same manner as the narratives of politicians and the media but saw industrial relations as a complex entity, making little normative assumptions about trade union activities and distinguishing between a negative strike or period of industrial action and their views of the trade union movement as a whole.

The blame that emerged, then, came from journalists and politicians—members of the bourgeoisie. They levelled blame for Britain's poor economic situation (in particular high levels of inflation), but also a crisis of democracy (whereby vested interest was inhibiting the

democratically elected government's ability to legislate), at the trade unions. In doing so, they highlighted the economy as the key issue of the 1970s and linked these crises to wider debates over policy. Despite protestations, the trade unions were offered little agency in the reporting of news or in defence of their actions which were presented in a one-dimensional manner.

My first hypothesis stated:

H1 The capacity to blame within crises is inherently unequal. The bourgeoisie due to their prominent positions in society and greater resources are both better equipped both to blame individuals and to avoid blame themselves.

The answers to my second and third research questions have demonstrated that the powers of the media and politicians to instigate debates led to inequalities within the presentation of narratives, and in particular within the framing of the crisis. Trade unions were largely overlooked and ignored as simplistic narratives of crisis—including those that did not match with the wider public opinion—became dominant. The narratives were defined by members of the bourgeoisie—those within the media and politicians, two groups who sought to blame the trade unions for what they labelled as a “crisis”. Such narratives involved a simplification of events, in particular, the links between trade union wage claims and inflation were simplified to create the impression of a self-obsessed over powerful trade union movement. In such an example, the trade unions, through being excluded from the debates, were susceptible to being blamed not only for their actions in the crisis of the 1970s but also for wider structural economic problems. Such blame was levied by journalists and politicians—groups whose members can be seen as deriving from the bourgeoisie. Such a case then can be seen to support my first hypothesis.

Agenda Setting and the Framing of the Debate

As Chap. 1 demonstrated, levelling blame can affect the process of agenda setting. If Britain was to overcome the economic crisis undoubtedly, some policies would have to change and a new policy direction pursued. For the elites, or bourgeoisie—those that were able to define the crisis—the situation required curbing trade union powers and influence.

Through such narrations, they sought to frame the crisis of 1976–1979 as one of the trade union powers, presenting an agenda for trade union reform in the process.

Equally, there existed a democratic crisis: the vested interests of the trade unions were seen and portrayed as being so powerful they could bring down elected governments. The trade unions it was argued forced both the 1974 (February) and 1979 general elections, which both removed incumbent governments. The powers of the trade unions were (or were presented as being), then markedly different to other pressure groups who pursue(d) their own interests. According to such narratives, the powers of the trade unions to effectively bring the country to a halt questioned the extent to which the democratically elected government of the day were able to undertake their duties. Pay rises, linked unfavourably to inflation, were seen as a legitimate area of concern for government—so much so that the House of Commons was asked to vote to impose sanctions on motor company Ford (a private company) for agreeing a 17% pay settlement with its workers in 1978 (HC Deb 13 December 1978 vol 960 cc673–810).

The Winter of Discontent further posed questions over the role of agenda setting in determining periods of crisis. There existed, or developed, a constructed discourse which presented the period as one of crisis, yet this period saw no large fall in GDP and no twin problems of rising unemployment and inflation (this is in contrast to the years following, the “resolution of the crisis”, which themselves included a prolonged recession, 1980–1981) (Hay 2010, 464). Instead, a single discourse was presented by contemporary politicians which centred upon the rising number of strikes and unemployment. This demonstrates how a particular discourse can be established for a particular purpose. In the case of the Winter of Discontent, the New Right was able to generate a narration of a crisis (of the state) in order to pursue their political goal of a different economic paradigm (Hay 1996, 253; see Chap. 3). This may suggest that changes linked to the crisis or crisis resolution would “over blame” the trade unions for their part in the crisis, in order to generate such a paradigm shift.

Policies such as the social contract which limited trade unions rights to collective bargaining were seen as essential to control the rate of inflation. Here the government aided employers and the owners of capital by seeking to restrict pay increases (though these groups were not necessarily comprised of the same individuals). Through blaming the trade

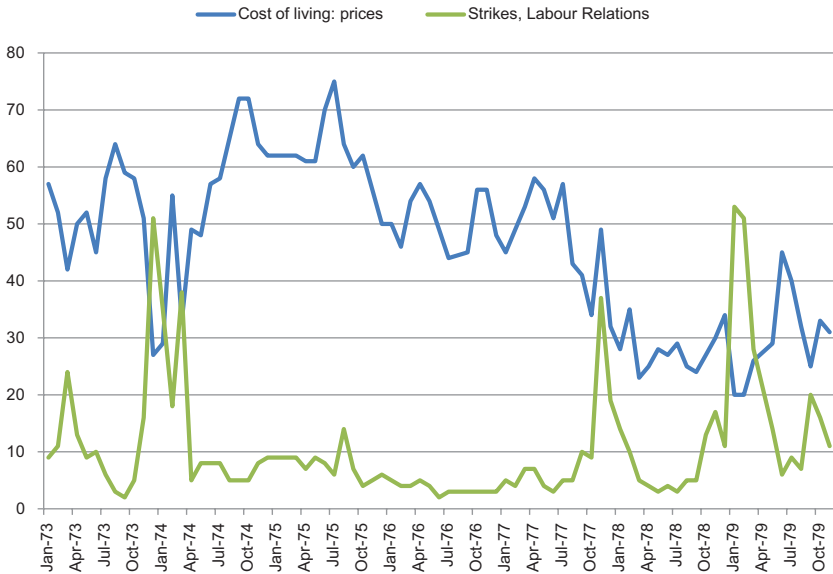


Fig. 2.4 Respondents (%) to the Gallup question: “What would you say is the most important problem facing the country at the present time?” *Source* Gallup Political Index 1973–1979 (data for January 1975, February 1975, August 1976, April 1979 and December 1979 unavailable). Between August 1978 and March 1979 and from June 1979 read “Labour Relations” and in May 1979 read “strikes” for “strikes, Labour Relations”

unions for rises in inflation the government, along with owners of capital, argued in favour of a reduced state and extended the importance of the private sector within the market.

As demonstrated above, the reporting of the trade unions in the media coincided with a decline in support for trade unions and industrial action. The media reporting of the 1979 election campaign and the Winter of Discontent that preceded it ensured salience was given to certain issues. Until 1978, the need to “control prices” was regarded by the public as the most pressing concern for the government; however, this was a distinct entity and clearly, at least in the minds of the respondents, separate from industrial relations and strikes (see Fig. 2.4). As Fig. 2.4 demonstrates, strikes and industrial relations were, for the majority of

the decade, perceived to be less important than the cost of living, inflation. Only on two occasions between 1974 and 1979 (January 1979 and February 1979) were the issue of strikes the “most important issue” for more than half the population. In contrast, on average over 46% saw the “cost of living” as the most pressing issue (the corresponding figure for “strikes, industrial relations” was just under 11%). What is clear is the issue of trade unions was within opinion polls not correlated with strikes or industrial action—it was a practical, rather than theoretical concern. Politicians’ and the medias’ narratives that wage settlements were linked to inflation were not shared by the public at large.

In 1978, both the need to prevent the rise in unemployment and to prevent strikes became pressing concerns (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 38). A Gallup poll in November 1978 found that a third of the population thought that politicians should concentrate the next general election campaign on trade unions. Yet this was only the fourth most popular answer behind unemployment (68%), cost of living and prices (65%) and inflation (58%) (Gallup Political Index, November 1978). Whilst inflation or the pace of inflation may have been at the foremost concern of the public, the wide differences in the proportion of respondents who said “prices” and “industrial relations” (as much as 66% in October 1974) suggest that the public did not view trade unions as the sole cause of inflation (Gallup Political Index, October 1974). Instead, the public placed the blame at the feet of government, in November 1974 nearly three quarters (71%) of those polled thought that the government was not doing enough to control the rise in prices (Gallup Political Index, November 1974). The figure for November 1978 was 65%, although by this stage, the public’s opinion of the trade unions and wage claims had hardened: 69% of respondents thought that trade unions were taking an “unreasonable attitude towards government’s prices and incomes policy”, a third thought that the government had handled wage claims “not firmly enough” (though 38% thought they had handled them “about right” and 70% approved the government’s “present policy of trying to restrict wage claims as much as possible” (Gallup Political Index, November 1978).

Public opinion therefore was more complex than the arguments presented in the newspapers or by politicians. The links between trade unions and inflation presented by politicians were not readily accepted by the general public. Such results did not, however, prevent politicians and journalists from monopolising the framing of the parameters of the

debate. This proves problematic when, in a defined crisis of democracy, the democratically elected government and the media sought to overlook the public's responses to analysis of events. Instead, as the previous section demonstrated the media and politicians generated simplistic narratives which blamed the trade unions for the crisis and sought to promote their own, relative, positions within society. This supports the second hypothesis, which states that such groups are able to create a dominant narrative due to their favourable positions in society (e.g. as politicians or within the media). Again this “dominant narrative”, due to its origins, is intrinsically likely to be more favourable to capital than labour. The debate such groups enacted centred upon the trade unions, placing them at the heart of the economic and political difficulties of the decade. This sets out a clear means by which the crisis could be resolved and in doing so laid the path for trade union reform in the 1980s.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE? CRISIS RESOLUTION

The 1970s witnessed the creation of a crisis and blame being levelled at the trade unions. Trade unions were blamed by politicians and journalists for generating economic and political problems in the 1970s. Politicians and the media used declining economic indicators to construct a narrative of a crisis which itself levied blame explicitly at the trade union movement. The charges brought against the unions were that they had led to increase rates of inflation and brought down two democratically elected governments.

As Chap. 1 established, periods of crisis resolution can only follow from a period of crisis—the resolution of a crisis cannot precede the crisis. The unions were presented as the instigators of the crisis that emerged in the 1970s and the debates surrounding the political agenda in the 1980s clearly placed industrial relations reform at the centre of policymaking. The conclusion to the crisis of 1976–1979 can only really be seen in this light, through the policy choices of the 1980s, and in particular the relationship between capital and labour which was embedded in a period of conflict. The changes that were instigated have undoubtedly extended beyond the 1980s—some these in particular relating to the banking sector will be explored in Chaps. 3 and 4.

Trade unions were seen as being politically threatening to the existing status quo. The role of the trade unions in (governmental) decision-making was publically examined. The conclusion returned was that they

posed threats to the constitutional arrangements and government of the day. Trade unions were presented as “forcing” two of the four elections of the decade, and, in a manner which ignored the obvious roles of voting and election campaigns, causing two changes of government. Such simplistic narratives became more pronounced throughout the decade and were viewed in some circles as laying the foundations for the legitimisation of Thatcher’s anti-union agenda (Hoskyns 2000, 80–94).

Successive notions of blame towards the trade unions and a desire to curb what was viewed as excessive power (facilitated by government’s desire to control inflation levels) led to a new discourse from the New Right which proposed and pursued an alternative strategy, whereby the “designated role for unions was ‘economic partnership in a market economy’” (Kavanagh 1992, 186). Much of the New Right’s economic thinking was developed from Friedrich von Hayek (1978, 338–339) who once claimed “inflation is probably the most important single factor in the vicious circle wherein one kind of government action makes more and more government control necessary” Hayek “emphasised that inflation had become the chief threat to the stability of the macroeconomy and was encouraged by the principal features of the welfare state. Labo[u]r unions put pressure on wages, which forced an increase in the money supply above the growth of production, further adding to existing inflation” (Matthijs 2011, 111).

A growing acceptance of this narrative and its underlying normative assumptions (e.g. the importance of inflation, the role of trade unions in wage bargaining process and the inflationary effect of wage growth in the economy) in public circles enabled it to become mainstream economic and political thought, epitomised by the landslide election victory of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Wage restraint could only be achieved in the short term, and the failures of such policies led to large-scale, visible confrontations and periods of “wage explosions”. Trade unions were no longer presented, or regarded, as responsible economic partners in a Keynesian welfare state, able to help shape a “New Jerusalem” as they had been in 1945. This tripartite relationship had broken down and trade unions were pitted against their former partners.

Another success of the New Right’s narrative was the linking of the trade unions and the Labour Party. The New Right narrative presented the unions and the Labour Party as being closely related and concluded that such a relationship affected (hindered) the latter’s ability to govern (Howell and Vale 1992, 17; Cronin 2006, 52–53). The Conservatives

famous 1979 election poster, which depicted a growing unemployment queue under the slogan “Labour isn’t Working” with its double connotations is one example of how such a narrative was used in a political context to delegitimise the government and help set the agenda for the incoming Thatcher’s government policies towards industrial relations.

The emergence, and success, of the New Right was based upon the rhetoric of crisis, and in particular a narrative which blamed the trade unions (Hay 1996). Such a discourse viewed trade unions as holding excessive power and constraining economic performance. In this regard, the trade unions were linked to the crisis through the notion of blame. In creating such a discourse, the New Right was able to affect the agenda of British politics in the 1980s, placing trade unions reform high upon that agenda and in doing so were undoubtedly aided by the popular press’ depiction of events in the 1970s and Thatcher’s electoral victory in 1979.

Upon entering office the new employment secretary, Jim Prior, proposed a series of measures undertaken to curb the powers of the trade unions including the virtual abolition of the “closed shop” and a ban secondary picketing (Young 1990, 194–195). The Thatcher governments passed four Employment Relations Acts between 1980 and 1988, which are conveniently summarised by Blancflower and Freeman (1993, 21):

- a. Employment Act of 1980 abolishes statutory recognition procedures; extends grounds to refuse to join a union; limits picketing.
- b. Employment Act of 1982 prohibits actions that force contracts with union employers; weakens closed shop; removes some union immunities
- c. Employment Act of 1984 weakens union immunities, requires pre-strike ballots, strengthens employer power to get injunctions
- d. Employment Act of 1988 removes [further] union immunities; extends individual rights to work against a union

The government also undertook an “onslaught against trade unions” through the dismantling of the tripartite structures which had afforded the trade unions “access to the corridors of power in the 1960s and 1970s”. It further excluded the trade unions from Government Communications Headquarters—“a serious violation of the basic principle of freedom of association, [again t]his was done without any

consultation of the unions involved” (Evans et al. 1992, 577, 581, 586). Many of these changes passed faced criticism from the trade unions, yet were enacted without consultation (William et al. 1993, 1) in part this was achieved due to the process of blame attribution in the 1970s, which continued into the 1980s.

The fourth of my research questions explored the issue of agenda setting and asked:

4. What agency/powers did the blamed parties have in times of crisis?

I have already demonstrated that politicians and journalists were able to set and define the agenda, and in doing so exclude the trade unions from shaping such discourses or even creating parallel narratives. Such policies became clearer in the resolution of the crisis. Here narratives of crisis were developed from the perspective of politicians and journalists and excluded the trade unions. The trade unions developed no new powers in the crisis, and lost some of their existing powers, for example, an ability to negotiate with the government. Although the social contract offered a little incorporation into policy planning—e.g. rent controls were placed upon the agenda—its collapse left the trade unions marginalised, and later excluded, from the process of policymaking.

This is not to suggest that trade unions were passive in the 1980s. The trade unions could still act in some positive ways for their members. Huhne (1986, 384) notes, between 1979 and 1986 “the differential between non-union and union pay rates had widened”. Whilst this can be seen as a partial success of the trade union movement and offer benefits for joining trade unions—that wages were higher on average for trade union members than those not in trade unions—this could have occurred due to either a rise in trade union wages or a relative fall (in real or absolute terms) for non-unionised workers. Either way, it suggests some positives for trade unions and trade unionists. Here the trade union either increased pay for its members (as opposed to non-unionised members) or reduced the rate at which wages fell over the period.

Trade unions retained the powers to strike and take industrial action—though legislative changes throughout the decade made this power harder to enact. The unions suffered defeat in major strikes in the 1980s, for example, the steel strike of 1980 and the miners’ strike of 1984–1985. Furthermore, despite improvements in public opinion, the unions were unable to affect policy principally due to a confrontational and

ideologically opposed government with large parliamentary majorities, a weak Labour Party—a party still largely funded by the trade unions, the introduction of anti-trade union legislation, declining trade union membership, the inability to affect media coverage of industrial relations and a shift in normative assumptions surrounding economic performance (and corresponding government macroeconomic indications, in particular the acceptance of high unemployment in order to counter inflationary pressures) (Edwards and Bain 1988; Towers 1989; Yoniwn 2004).

The powers of each group—the media, politicians and the trade unions—to blame were inherently unequal. The simplistic discourse and narrative construction of the former two groups helped alienate the latter group from discussions regarding blame. It further sought to delegitimise the unions from responding to such notions of blame—not only were they blamed but the scope for them to protest against such blame was further removed and legislation in the 1980s further quelled the trade unions’ powers. Such an analysis is coherent with my second hypothesis, that blame is unequal during times of crises. Such a point shall further be developed comparatively to the banking sector crisis in Chap. 5.

The fifth and final research question asked;

5. Were the crises resolved? If so How? What effect did the resolution have upon the blamed party or parties?

According to the rhetoric of the New Right, the crisis resolution centred upon weakening the powers of trade unions. Legislation was brought into restrict the actions of trade unions and prevent future national stoppages, or stoppages of the scale of the 1970s developing. Legislation, passed by politicians who simultaneously excluded trade union input, was central to this resolution. The accompanying rhetoric was not about curbing trade union powers to prevent strikes or industrial unrest, but to conquer inflation.

The causes of the economic crisis of the 1970s, according to this argument, were not industrial action (though undoubtedly they did have some impact) but wage claims. Inflation was the only key economic factor Thatcher could claim in 1990 to have tackled better than the leaders of the 1970s. GDP growth averaged 1.8% under Thatcher compared with 2.6% between 1970 Q2 and 1979 Q2 and unemployment in 1990 was 50% higher than the government inherited—“a record that would

look even more appalling but for the government having fiddled the measurement some 22 times” (Gilmour 1992, 68–73). This desire to reduce inflation and its commitment to “sound money” brought about monetarist policies and shifted focus towards the supply side of the economy. Such policies, along with the Big Bang deregulation of the banking sector in 1986, would lay the seeds for the financial crisis of 2007 (see next chapter).

The New Right redefined the definitions of a successful economy by prioritising the inflation rate over that of unemployment. This shift further weakened the trade unions. Trade union members are comprised of those in work, and a large increase in the number of people unemployed means a reduced pool from which trade unions can recruit/source their members. It also means there exists a larger pool of potential new recruits threatening workers job security and making it easier for firms to hire strike breakers. Unemployment doubled in the first Thatcher government and rose steadily until 1986 before falling towards the end of the decade (R. Taylor 1993, 397). Marx saw the relationship between capital and the trade unions as fundamental to the process of production and stemming from the competing goals of the two groups. Such arguments are not new (see Gamble 2009 or Moran et al. 2010), however, the dominant narratives and policies of controlling or taming the trade unions who were blamed for causing economic problems were. Growth was lower than in the 1970s and the privatisation of industries, along with a desire to reduce the size of the state (in part to overcome the second crisis, that of governability (Gilmour 1992, 97)) meant that new sources of employment and revenue (especially government revenue) had to be found. Policies of “liberalisation” should be viewed in this regard. If organised labour was seen as a block to growth—and therefore needed to be weakened—then other areas of the economy—i.e. capital needed to be strengthened.

Arguably, the resolution of the political crisis of ungovernability was tackled more successfully by the Thatcher administration. In doing so, this rested upon the notions of the trade unions as threats to liberty and democracy. Thatcher, quoted by Gilmour (1992, 76), once spoke of the striking miners in 1984, comparing them to the Argentine invasion of the Falkland islands, “We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty”. Privatisation was the key policy of the Thatcher government to this extent. If industries

were not tied to the government, then questions of governability would not emerge on the same scale as they had done in the 1970s. Rather than leading to changes in governments and elections industrial disputes could be privatised.

The ungovernability crisis was further resolved through excluding the trade unions from policymaking decisions, through the legislative reforms outline above and partly through the privatisation program. Both had the effect of increasing the power of capital in the economy, as private industry was portrayed as being more efficient than the public sector. In the private sector wage negotiations, profits and other decisions were not subject to government scrutiny and could therefore deal with the trade unions in a more ‘appropriate’, (or adversarial) manner. Whereas previously some decisions, e.g. making workers redundant may have been highly politicised—as MPs feared higher rates of unemployment could lead to a bias against incumbents at the next election—they were now a “privatised”, and disaggregated matter concerning individual employers and employees.

In a similar manner, the trade unions were weakened by the depoliticisation of industrial relations—previously they were able to vote (in general elections, or on in some cases at Labour Party conferences) on who governed the industries in which they worked. Following privatisation, this power was nulled—they had little or no say in who the bosses of private firms were. Between 1981 and 1991, public sector employment fell from over 7.6 million to under 6 million. Furthermore, whereas previously strikes in industries such as coal had large political effects, due to the interconnectedness of the public sector strikes in the new privatised industries now became isolated instances. Arguably, the events of 1979, where coordinated strike action brought down an elected government, could not be repeated again (Parry 1987, 60; Hicks 2005, 478). The trade unions paid a heavy price for being blamed for the crisis of 1976–1979. The paradigm shift that occurred in the 1980s significantly weakened the powers of the trade unions suggesting, along with my fourth hypothesis that the union may have been overblamed for the crisis. Such a hypothesis relies upon a comparative element—which will be dealt with in Chap. 5 of this study—however, the realigning of the economy away from the trade unions, by governments and supported by the simplistic narratives of the media suggest that the bourgeoisie were indeed able to act in the interests of capital and excessively punish the trade unions in the 1980s.

CONCLUSIONS

Through building upon the hypotheses and research questions set out in Chap. 1, this chapter has explored how notions of crises occurred in 1976–1979. It has explored how the trade unions were blamed for creating these crises, and who they were blamed by, what the effects of such blame were and what agency trade unions had during these crises.

The 1970s saw changes in the perceptions of trade unions. The trade unions were initially viewed sympathetically both in opinion polls and within the media, yet as the trade unions become increasingly visible in everyday life such perceptions became less favourable. Throughout the period, trade unions were in both political and media circles treated as a homogeneous group. The problems, according to such definitions, were structural and highly related to the power—or perceived power—of the trade unions.

The media's coverage of industrial action as well as wider reporting on the state of the British economy placed the unions at the centre of notions of economic decline and strife and raised questions over their relationship with business groups and governments in economic planning and the wider issue of democratic government. Over the course of the decade, the trade unions were portrayed (by both government and the media) as pursuing vested interests at the expense of the country. If the late 1970s were a drama written by politicians and journalists and played out in the media, the trade unions were the villains of the piece. Such a narrative became widespread and accepted, without any input from the trade unions. They were increasingly marginalised in such debates and unable to defend themselves; the narrative, along with the positions of those advocating and accepting the narrative, excluded the trade unions from the debate. Blame was levelled at the unions and high-profile events such as the Winter of Discontent (1978–1979), reinforced notions of excessive power.

The crisis of 1976–1979, however, was not a, single, homogeneous act. Two distinct crises can be drawn. Firstly there emerged an economic crisis which highlighted warnings of inflation as its most prominent features. Excessive pay settlements, it was argued, lead to inflationary pressures and (if such settlements were not matched with productivity increases), stagflation. Furthermore, a growth in the number of strikes was a visible reminder to the public, of the “zenith of labour power”, industrial unrest and lost productivity (Aldcroft and Oliver 2000).

The second crisis was one of a political character. The economic interests of a minority were pitted against the political will of a majoritarian democratic system or representative government. Successive governments were viewed as over-extended (King 1975; Parsons 1982), and calls for state retrenchment became louder. Authors and politicians questioned the compatibility of trade union actions and democracy; one author questioned “whether free collective bargaining [was] still compatible with the traditional practices of parliamentary democracy” (Finer 1973, 391).

Such, growing, perceptions of crisis led to debates surrounding blame and crisis resolution. These concepts are inevitably linked to crises and (along with agenda setting and the framing of debates) are key to understanding and developing a narrative of a crisis and finding (policy) solutions to such a crisis. The trade unions were blamed for instigating industrial action—strikes were portrayed as the product of trade union militancy rather than any shortcomings from employers or a failure of negotiations—and thus marginalised from the ensuing debates aimed at overcoming/alleviating the crisis. Industrial action, this narrative contended, was not due to a breakdown in talks between employers and the trade unions, but to the (unilateral) action of the unions themselves. Such a narrative blamed the trade unions and over presented union militancy; any industrial action was not viewed as a last resort, but as an ideological decision of the trade unions, causing pain upon others to pursue self-interested goals.

Both the economic and political crisis narratives and notions of blame emerged from within the bourgeoisie. The majority of politicians, journalists and editors of newspapers sought to blame contemporary economic problems upon the trade union movement. In doing so, they defined the crisis, through a lens of normative assumptions, transferring such assumptions to the definition of the crisis. Inflation, arguably the main driver of the crisis, was presented as stemming from the bottom up and “excessive” wage claims were not seen as being reactionary but were blamed for generating the economic problems of the day. Such analysis presented the trade unions as “the engines of inflation” (Taylor 1991, 174). Strikes were viewed as stemming solely from the actions of the unions, rather than being portrayed as a breakdown in communications between two parties. Responses from the trade unions or balanced analysis were increasingly overlooked in the media despite, in places, being supported in public opinion polls. Newspapers and television news failed to convey complex economic arguments or engage with the trade unions in a meaningful way. Instead, they, along with politicians who wished to

detract blame from their own policies, sought to lay blame at the trade unions presenting them as instigating industrial unrest and causing the trade unions to be seen increasingly as a “problem” (Joseph 1979; R. Taylor 1993, 274–278).

This chapter has further indicated that my first and second hypotheses, set out in Chap. 1, may be correct. It has demonstrated how different agents in times of crises are able to advocate blame and that such blame and the ability to blame in times of crisis can be seen as unequal. It has further suggested that my fourth hypothesis—that the trade unions were overblamed for the crisis of 1976–1979—may be correct. This chapter has made no comments about the nature of the banking crisis (my fourth hypothesis also suggested that the banking sector would be under blamed in the crisis) and as such a comprehensive analysis of this must be saved for the final concluding chapter, Chap. 5.

Through defining the crisis as a structural one, the Thatcher government was able to instigate widespread radical changes aimed at promoting the role—and owners—of capital within the economy. Chapters 3 and 4 will outline some of the consequences of such changes, yet the above analysis demonstrated that such changes were levied at the trade union movement with little scope/analysis of the different agents/groups involved in generating what the New Right effectively coined as a crisis. This indiscriminate approach can be seen as a deliberate attempt to weaken the powers of the trade union movement and suggests that the trade unions were indeed “over-blamed” for the crisis of 1976–1979.

This chapter has demonstrated how the narratives and practices of industrial relations changed over the 1970s. New narratives of over powerful or irresponsible trade unions emerged and were important in generating notions of both a democratic and an economic crisis. Chapter 4 will explore similar questions of blame, crisis formation and resolution, agenda setting and governmental and public attitudes towards the banking sector c.2007–2015. Chapter 5 will then draw parallels from the two crises, exploring if one group (the trade unions of the banking sector) had greater powers to respond to notions of blame and if so why (or how) were such powers afforded to them. This chapter will act as a conclusion exploring comparatively my research questions and hypotheses to make some comments about the nature of crises. However, before such discussions can take place, it is worth reflecting on the crisis resolution and asks how did the economy “recover” from the trade union crisis discussed in this chapter.

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