

Brenda Dean: 1943 – 2018

Sisters and brothers, we are gathered here today to honour the memory and give thanks for the life of Brenda, the Right Honourable Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde.

Brenda became fixed in the public mind (and first came to my attention) because of the role she played in the mid-80s in the printing dispute. I remember the Saturday evenings I spent down at Wapping, wandering among the crowd, eyeing the deployment of the police force, listening to the conversations, sensing the drama and the tension that were only too palpable on those occasions. I and so many others like me, ordinary members of the public, just wanted to stand in solidarity with those who resented the way thousands of workers had arbitrarily lost their livelihoods. And, with images from the mining communities of Yorkshire still vividly imprinted on our minds, we weighed up the impact of the new legislation aimed at disempowering the unions; and we wanted to keep an eye on a police force whose role in the miners' dispute had given us so much to worry about. It was Brenda, the first fully elected leader of a British Trade Union, the acceptable face of the labour movement, that gave us all a focus for hope. It's only since reading her book "Hot Mettle", however, that I've become aware of the frenetic activity and the endless confrontations (with fellow trade-unionists, politicians of various hues, captains of the printing industry, and barons of the press) which she underwent in that *annus horribilis*. I remember wondering how anyone could survive those battles without losing hope or dignity or self-respect or all of these. It must surely be our judgement, all these years later, that that is precisely what Brenda did. And how!

We register her death with immense sadness. She was a human dynamo, a force of nature, an easily recognizable player on our national stage. The public at large, her associates in the bewildering range of interests she went on to serve, those who worked most closely with her, her friends and family, and especially Keith, have all lost a precious ally, a notable exemplar for social mobility, a breaker of glass ceilings, a warm-hearted human being, a tireless battler for justice and so much more.

"Nothing in her life became her like the leaving it." There she was, in Nottingham, at work, and even when she'd clearly been struck down, insisting that she be got back on her feet so that she could get on with things. What spirit! What commitment! Fantastic. But the sudden-ness of it all has quite

taken our breath away and left a dark hole, an empty chair, something of a vacuum. The jazz and the dazzle, the boating and the batting, the suppers at home and the evenings out, have been shorn of their glamour. As we heard a moment ago, “we can shed tears that she is gone, or smile because she has lived; we can cry and close our mind or smile, open our eyes, love and go on.” “Love,” after all, “is not love that alters when it alteration finds.” Even death can’t diminish the quality or the power of love. And yet, for all that, though parting may be sweet sorrow, sorrow it undoubtedly is. And we must acknowledge that on an occasion like this.

But sorrow simply can’t have the last word. Not with Brenda Dean. Gratitude jousts with sadness and begs to be noticed. For how can anyone who’s known her feel anything other than the privilege of having done so? I see in front of me the faces of countless people from so many walks of life who, apart from coming to pay their respects, have come with lives filled with memories. People from parliament, across the field of industrial relations, members of the various boards and committees and offices she served, those who supported her in her personal life, school friends and fellow-typists, admirers-from-a-distance, we all have so much to be thankful for. And we can each of us form pictures of her now, right now, from moments when she filled our minds with the latest idea she’d been hatching, or touched our hearts with the compassion she was feeling, or lit up our lives with her cheerfulness.

Brenda wasn’t the only woman in the public eye during those fateful early years. Some of you may remember the other one! But Brenda stood out for the way she not only loved being a woman but also for the way she spent the whole of her public life making opportunities for young women to advance their careers and giving them the courage to take the opportunities that came their way. Nor was she the only trade union leader in the public eye during those fateful years. Some of you may remember the other one! But again Brenda stood out for the way she kept her Union together under such great pressure and for the concern she showed not just for the front-of-house London chapels of her trade but also for the rank and file in supporting services not only in the capital but across the land. There’s no doubt that Keith’s presence at her side through these tough times was of immeasurable help. Just as Torvill and Dean were winning their gold medal in Norway in the winter Olympics, our very own McDowell and Dean were skating their bolero over the thin ice of industrial relations with equal aplomb.

So far I've dealt with the mixture of sorrow and gratitude we must feel at an occasion like this. In order to complete a cocktail guaranteed to shake and stir, we must now throw in hope. Here we are in Brenda's parish church and that adds a whole new dimension to the life we're celebrating.

This service has given me a quite unexpected experience the memory of which I shall long cherish. It's the singing of "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" – a song which Brenda used to sing in her early years at Sunday School. As, indeed, did I. For her, this was a song that always evoked a memory of the day when the band of the Salvation Army came round to her house while she was convalescing with scarlet fever. The band gathered outside her bedroom window and played the little sunbeam song to buck her up and help her recover. It was just like that famous scene from the film "Brassed Off"! It's so nice that we've sung it here today. My Sunday School teacher, a railway worker just like Brenda's dad, would have relished the thought of a congregation like this, a gathering of the great and the good, all promising to be good sunbeams for Jesus, and to shine for him each day, at home at school and at play. Good on you one and all. The world will be a warmer and more cheerful place in the measure to which you keep that promise.

She and I were fellow-trustees for a while of the Christian Socialist Movement – she honoured the part played by people of faith in the social progress of the nation. And she kept that faith alive somehow in her own busy life. She'd pop into the dark interior of Christ Church on Blackfriars Road for a tranquil moment of contemplation at the height of the Wapping dispute. She kept a little quiet time every day in her attempt to keep the busy-ness of her whirling life at bay. And she said her prayers. We can be grateful for the balance and depth which such little touches gave to her public persona.

So here we are in church in the season of Easter. We cannot be silent on the salient message of this season. It is, put quite simply, that love is stronger than hatred, light more powerful than the dark, hope more compelling than despair and life far more potent than death. We must each of us find our own way to the core of this mystery but for many, I know, the message of Easter resounds loud and clear that death is not the end, we do not die into nothingness, and hope reigns supreme. And that's the note on which it's fitting to end these remarks.

Dear Brenda, we love being here with you but now, may you rest in peace and may light perpetual shine upon you.