

Tebbit and the unions

By James Alexander

Go on, thump them, Norman ! That's right, really lay into them! Give it to them! Thwack! Biff! Krurgggh!

It is about on the level of a prizefight that the reform of trade union law had proceeded since the Conservatives were elected in May 1979. It's all there. A frenzied crowd of rival fans baying for blood. Wary shadow boxing, then bouts of furious combat. Favourites and villains.

Round one ended with the unions withdrawing to their corner bruised, but still standing. The Tories' champion, 'Softy' Jim Prior had, by dint of nimble footwork, laid some telling blows. Restrictions on picketing. (Crunch!) Narrowed immunities. (Thwap!) Extension of employment protection to closed shop victims. (POW!) State cash for secret ballots. Sneaky. All that the unions could manage was a half-hearted Day of Action. (Phut!)

Hardly had the bell sounded the end of round one than the Tories were publicising their plans for round two. The Green Paper on Trade Union Immunities has been followed by a consultation paper on further reforms. Softy Jim, widely thought to be a bit too clever with the footwork and shy of slugging it out, has been retired. In his shoes, ready to step into the ring, stands fearless Norman Tebbit, whom the fans hope will give the unions a real drubbing, preferably leaving them knocked senseless.

Fearless Norman, presently limbering up for round two, has added some new punches to the battery which he inherited from Softy Jim. Review ballots for existing closed shops. Union-only labour contracts void. Higher compensation for closed shop victims. No compensation for sacked strikers. No immunity for political strikes. Trade union funds liable for damages.

Amidst the blood and fury, the right hooks and short sharp jabs, there is precious little opportunity to stand back and wonder what

they're fighting about. The best result is not necessarily Norman triumphant and the unions lying mangled on the canvas, or vice versa.

The trouble is that the Tory assault owes more to egging on by the fans than it does to careful thought about union power and the rightful place of the trade unions. Most of the blows rained on the unions are as relevant to curtailing union privileges as forbidding a fighter on anabolic steroids to eat spinach. The sources of union power lie in nationalisation, in subsidies, in regulation, in snuffed-out competition and in employment protection; areas which the Tories have hardly touched.

Most alarmingly, Fearless Norman is about to knock himself out with a particularly wild swipe. One of his new gambits is to remove immunity for political strikes. Strikes with a mainly political element would be laid open to civil assaults. As Tories tend to think that all political strikes will be anti-Conservative, this foray is likely to get the thumbs-up from the crowd. But strikes against nationalisation, incomes policy, or Tony Benn, would also be stopped. Poland? Forget it.

Moreover, there is little that a politician could not define as political once he puts his mind to it. Strikes happen for simple motives and complex ones, some good, some bad. But it is not the government's job to decide what is good and what is not. A strike is a strike.

Before Fearless Norman steps into the ring, he might choose his weapons with care, lest they be turned to new and more terrible use by future combatants.