
Steve Sinnott, 1951-2008



Steve Sinnott, 24 June 1951-5 April 2008

I felt a great sense of loss when I heard the news of Steve Sinnott's untimely death on a Radio Four news bulletin on the afternoon of Saturday, 5 April.

He contributed a superb article to the special spring number of *FORUM* on Academies; I shared a platform with him on a number of occasions; and I last bumped into him at NUT Headquarters in the middle of February when I was there attending an NUT seminar on Academies. But, having said that, I cannot claim to have known him well – except to realise that he was obviously a genuine, decent guy who earned the respect and affection of the people he worked with.

Steve was a really strong supporter of comprehensive education and cared deeply about the spread of faith schools and Academies. He always spoke with clarity and conviction – articulating views that stemmed from a passionate belief in the liberating power of education. He worked to improve relationships with other unions and, while rightly opposing the workforce agreement, campaigned ceaselessly for improvements in pay and conditions for his members. The NUT was lucky to have him as its General Secretary at this point in its history. It is something of a cliché to say this, but in his case it is undeniably true: he will be sorely missed.

Clyde Chitty
Editor, *FORUM*

The legacy that Steve Sinnott, the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, who tragically died of a heart attack in April, left as a result of his four years at the helm of the union, will undoubtedly live.

He inherited a union riven by factions whose annual conference was a ritual blood-letting between left-wing groupings and the more moderate executive. Within those four years, the union had become far more united than in living memory. He achieved that by adopting a ‘big tent’ philosophy – in that a person’s political background did not matter to him so long as he or she could do the job. The Left was no longer ostracised but encouraged to work with moderates who at that stage controlled the union’s executive.

Some will argue that the result was a more militant stance – witness the one-day national strike, the first such stoppage in more than twenty years, over pay. The truth is more complicated – Steve Sinnott himself detected a mood within the membership for industrial action and backed the action to the hilt. Left-wingers have also indicated that they have moderated their demands in exchange for being able to contribute to the debate over the direction the union takes.

Steve Sinnott will also be remembered on the international stage – in particular for his work in Ethiopia where he played a major part in securing the release of Dr Taye Woldesiate, the former president of the Ethiopian Teachers’ Association, from prison. Dr Taye had been imprisoned for allegedly conspiring against the government. At much personal risk, Steve Sinnott visited him in prison, smuggled out a picture of him in chains and sparked off an international campaign which eventually secured his release.

At home again, Steve Sinnott was less successful in his attempts to secure a better working relationship with the Government. The NUT has always stood alone in being the only one of the six teachers’ organisations refusing to have anything to do with the workforce agreement – largely on the grounds that it does not believe untrained classroom assistants should be able to take control of lessons. There is no doubt that he enjoyed a warmer relationship with ministers and – in particular – Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who greatly respected his

attempts to campaign for the reduction of child poverty and for the increase in education opportunities in more disadvantaged areas of the world. One only had to read the glowing tributes to him from both Mr Brown and Children, Schools and Families Secretary Ed Balls. However, the NUT was never going to relent on its stance over the workforce agreement and is therefore still outside the social partnership struck up between ministers and the other unions.

On a more personal note, he was immensely proud of being the first product of the comprehensive system to become president of the union – a post he occupied in 1994, the same year that he won the election to become the union's deputy general secretary. Even this year, four years into office, he still took great pride in introducing himself to his conference as 'Steve Sinnott, general secretary, National Union of Teachers'. To him, it sounded 'smashing'.

To sum up, then, Steve Sinnott can be remembered for bequeathing a united and principled union for his successor – by no means a negligible achievement.

Richard Garner

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