

30th October 2020

Labour

“All classes of society are trades unionists at heart, and differ chiefly in the boldness, ability and secrecy with which they pursue their respective interests.”

W Stanley Jevons, The State in Relation to Labour, 1882

William Stanley Jevons was a 19th century English economist and logician. During his life he was lauded for, among other things, his work on “The Coal Question”, highlighting gradual exhaustion of UK coal supplies and suggesting that increased efficiency in energy production leads to more, not less, consumption. It’s known now as “The Jevons Paradox”, and for such analysis he’s seen as the first major economist to develop an ecological perspective on the economy. Among his publications, *The State in Relation to Labour* is considered to be a classic in the economics of work. The protection of labour, he argued logically, enshrined in the role of Unions, re-established the social contract in an industrial age.

Jevons made it clear that in the world of work two things matter: the environment, if we are to preserve our planet for future generations, and the value of a workforce, without whom production is compromised and the economy placed under threat. To Jevons, it was logical. In my lifetime, the role of the Unions has been eroded, while environmental concerns have increased. I would argue, with Jevons, that, not only should labour and ecology remain vital concerns for the future of our society, but that *both* concerns should be increased and not diminished or dismissed.

I have my father’s Transport and General Workers’ Union membership card, dated 1946 (in a flashy 1980 cover!) showing he was expected to pay 2/9d a week in subs (the equivalent of 30p now), 4d to the “Distress Fund” and 2d to the “Branch Fund”. My father was committed to his Union because the interests of the workforce were protected. He knew the Union would care for him and his family if he was in distress. He was also a lover of his native highlands, and, if he was alive now, he would be a passionate campaigner for the preservation of the environment. It was logical to my dad, and I suspect he’d never heard of W Stanley Jevons.

A prayer for today

Together we work; together we value each other; together we care for our world.

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