

Chapter 10

Liverpool: City of the Left

I was more than a little excited at the thought of visiting Liverpool. Inspector Kear had said that Bradford was a city without 'oomph' (and he was right); no one could say that of Liverpool. Indeed, every writer associates Liverpool with vitality; to me there is only one city that oozes vitality and that is New York. How could Liverpool compare with such a city? Liverpool was a poor place; the kind of poor place that didn't mind the world knowing that it was reduced to ragged trousers. From the outside it seemed like a rich, over-rouged old lady who had fallen on the worst of times and yet behaved as though she was still important, and bored everyone with tales from the past. There were so many questions I wanted to ask and so much I wanted to see. Liverpool, the city that put Militant on the map; Liverpool, the city of one of my favourite films, *Letter to Brezhnev*; Liverpool, the city of two of my favourite playwrights, Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell; Liverpool, home of the Beatles.

But first, because my mind was still full of police talk, and the plight of black people, I found myself drawn to Toxteth. I just wanted to see it and I wanted to listen; to find some black people willing to talk. Bradford had convinced me that necessity has forced the police to try to change, but my brief chats with a couple of Asian leaders had been unrewarding. They had said little and what they had said had displaced the real problem from the brown community into the black community. Bradford's 'browns' were relative newcomers; Liverpool's blacks had a long, long history; Toxteth has the oldest black community in Britain. They, the blacks, are the key to the transformation of the place from a small fishing port to a wealthy city, the nation's second seaport - by 1700. Liverpool was then the centre for much colonial trade, West Indian trade in particular. Liverpool got rich not just by shipping the products of slave labour - sugar and tobacco - but by shipping the

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slaves themselves; hauling them from Africa to the West Indies. The blacks were meant to pass through, not stay, but some stayed in the face of Acts of Parliament making sea-captains account for the numbers that arrived in port and the numbers that left. Despite this, Charles Dickens in 1861 found pubs in the slum area full of blacks. There were race riots in 1919: white soldiers returning from war to find a shortage of jobs led to several days of violence against the black community. There were riots again in 1948 for much the same reason.

The scars of more recent riots were still visible in Toxteth; shops and houses were either boarded up or were girded by metal grills. Granby Street used to be lively, with people walking up and down and chatting and gossiping, with shopkeepers displaying their wares on the pavements outside; with opening hours that meant you never had to worry about running out of anything. There was a real sense of community; now there was silence. Too many shops had been abandoned and there was no pavement life, nothing much to catch my eye, except graffiti: 'Kill Maggie'; 'Smash the system'; 'Do your own goddam thing'; 'Police fuck off'; 'Police, enter at your own risk'; 'No pigs'; 'Hail Lion of Judah'. Rasta colours, stripes of red, yellow and green, had been painted over the street signs. A small black girl held out a handful of change and asked me if I had a 50 pence coin. As I delved into my purse I asked her what it was for. 'The leckie,' she answered. She wanted 50 pence for the electricity meter. 'It's right. It's 50 pence,' she said in a Scouse accent, handing me over the sticky contents of her tiny hand and hoping I wouldn't waste time counting it.

I was looking for Linda Patterson and the South Liverpool Personnel, an employment agency for blacks. It was started in the early seventies, partly funded by Liverpool City Council and partly by the Commission for Racial Equality. 'Of course, everyone *says* they believe in equal opportunities for blacks, of course they say so, but racism is ingrained on Merseyside; everyone thinks of blacks as lazy and dirty, but they won't admit to being racist. Blacks get a better deal in London than they get in Liverpool.

'When I go down to London and see black shop assistants, black bank clerks, I say to myself: "What's this?" Here they try to hide us away. Years ago, my mother went for a job in Lewis's store as a kitchen assistant, and they told her the job had gone, but a while later her white friend went in and got the job with no experience of kitchens. Ma ranted and raved all over Lewis's and got thrown out by the police. Things have improved a bit; a black can get past the first post before getting stuck. I know a young black girl who is a buyer's

assistant in a big shop. She's done that for eight years and put in a dozen times for promotion, but they just won't promote her. She feels unsafe tackling them on racist grounds: they'll say she has a chip on her shoulder and threaten her job. She could move to London - it's the only place where she really could get on with her career - but she doesn't *want* to move.'

Linda Patterson was born in Liverpool. Her grandparents came over from somewhere in Africa, she isn't sure where, sometime in the last century. They worked in a travelling road-show and finally ended up in Liverpool, where her grandmother started a boarding-house in Toxteth. She is the youngest of nine children. Of the nine, three brothers, one a former docker, one a builder and one a cook, are only intermittently in work, another brother is a community worker; of her sisters, one works in television, one in a hospital, one in a factory in London and another in a factory in America, having married an American soldier. Linda married at seventeen and had two children by the time she was nineteen. Her husband, Jimmy, is white. He was once a sales assistant, selling jewellery. One day one of his colleagues referred to Linda as 'a nigger' and a fight broke out and Jimmy was dismissed. He was unemployed for six years and is now a mature student studying sociology at Liverpool Polytechnic. At twenty, Linda rebelled against motherhood.

'I woke up one day and thought, "Shit, another day of screaming kids." So I went on a course called New Opportunities for Women and found another me. That led to evening classes and I finally got my first job as a teachers' aid at the Charles Wootton Centre, an educational centre for black kids. We call the centre "Charlie"; Wootton was a black guy who died during the 1919 race riots in Liverpool. He was being chased by white people and he got to the Pier Head and had nowhere to run, so he dived into the water and drowned. Oh, you've heard of those riots, have you? Most people haven't; it's a part of Liverpool's history that gets swept under the carpet.'

Linda has been in her present post of job placement officer for three years. She has 2,000 blacks on her books. Perhaps fifty jobs a month come in, many of them from white employers paying lip-service to the notion of equality. She says that those on her books have skills, but they are not given the chance to prove themselves; they are not taken seriously in the job market.

'It was no surprise when the rioting started in 1981. There's only so much you can take. From the day you leave school you're on the scrap heap. Blacks like me have to struggle to get where we are.

'I remember the rioting very well. I was coming home from work -

I had an evening job then as a waitress – and when the bus didn't come along, I decided to walk. Everywhere I walked the roads were blocked off by scores of policemen. One of them stopped me and asked where I was going. I told him I was going home and he said he'd walk along with me. And he did for a bit. Then suddenly I felt a hand on the back of my neck; my arm was broken and my head was thumped – it looked like a mountain. They left me in the street. I got up and ran and finally got home and to hospital. It took me eight weeks to get my arm right and months before I felt mentally all right.' While she recalled these events she stared out of the window. Then suddenly she turned back to me and her voice hardened: 'I've always had a hatred for the police; my brothers were constantly harassed. My brothers are not angels by any means, but one ended up in jail for an offence he had not committed. I've seen this community wrecked by police. They will never be able to justify what they have done.'

'Do you think the riots achieved anything – anything good?'

'I don't know that they *achieved* anything; they were not rioting to achieve anything, they were rioting to prove something – that we've had enough of police brutality, and not being able to lead our own lives. Yes, I've heard talk about race-awareness courses for the police, but I don't know how true it is. I get the feeling that everyone is chasing their tails to improve things. But all the police really learned from those riots was how to prepare themselves for more riots in the future; they now have CS gas and heat-resilient clothes. Oh yes, of course, we got Michael Heseltine, the minister for Merseyside. That was great. He gave us some rose bushes and some trees and called it a garden festival and then told us we have to pay £4 to get in!'

'Well, what about Derek Hatton? What happened when Militant ran Liverpool City Council – did things improve for the black community?'

'Militant, or "Milo" as we call them, did nothing for the blacks! They didn't even have a race-relations policy. Derek Hatton did appoint a race-relations officer, a Militant black from Brent. He understood nothing about race relations and nothing about Liverpool. Most of the black groups refused to work with him. We refused and then when we needed a new deputy manager the post was frozen – it was their way of paying us back. *No one* takes the blacks and their problems seriously. Militant was just another group, just another bloody left-wing group.'

Linda Patterson's views were echoed by a handful of other blacks with whom I talked. It all adds up to a shameful tale. No one has ignored the blacks in Liverpool; for nearly sixty years – since 1930 –

there have been any number of reports analysing the problems – I have beside me a list of thirty-nine such reports – but all these words, all these concerned and learned studies, have done little to eliminate racial prejudice and little to remove the black community from bottom-of-the-pile lives with poor housing, health, education and poor job prospects. It came as no surprise to me when late in 1988 yet another report was commissioned: Lord Gifford was asked to chair an investigation into policing and law enforcement in Toxteth. Setting up a committee and producing a report might allow woolly liberal thinkers to bask in a warm glow, but all too often it is a substitute for action rather than a prelude to action. Lord Gifford, a Labour peer, says that his inquiry could be a catalyst for change. I bet his thirty-nine predecessors said much the same thing. The black community forms 8 per cent of Liverpool's population of 500,000; they have 1 per cent of the jobs with the city council (Liverpool's largest employer) and less than 1 per cent of jobs with other city centre employers. Why the hypocrisy? Why are we so good at pretending to care, pretending to take action and yet all the while hiding behind another report? Look around, where are the prominent black figures in our community? A handful of them are in Parliament; there are a sprinkling of lawyers; they are woefully absent in the media; we have one Black bishop, the Right Reverend Wilfred Wood of Croydon. At least the Church of England has tried to improve black representation with a touch of positive discrimination in the appointment of black members to the General Synod, the Church's parliament. It tried, but was voted down. Why are we so reluctant to embrace positive discrimination for blacks – making employers take a representative percentage of their workforce from ethnic communities? It works well in America. And for those who are allergic to American imports, let me point out that fair employment legislation is having an effect in Northern Ireland, where we have been forced to find a way of overcoming centuries of discrimination against Catholics. No party has had the courage to fight for such a step here; not even Militant.

What is Militant – 'Just another bloody left wing group?' I don't think so. I tried to meet Derek Hatton. It was the tail end of his reign in Liverpool. I phoned his office at 8.45 one morning from a call box in Bradford and asked his secretary for an appointment. I could hear her asking his approval in the background and the appointment was made. When I arrived at city hall a thug-like person with broad shoulders and bad teeth barred my way and asked my business. I said I had an appointment with Derek Hatton. He picked up the phone and said: 'There's a lady here who *says* she has an appointment with Derek.'

The thug seemed surprised to learn that I had. I was shown into a waiting room where several men were arguing with a beleaguered looking woman about housing problems. I waited, whiling away the time reading a beautifully produced official guide to Liverpool. Suddenly my name was called.

'Linda!' I looked up and saw Derek Hatton in the doorway. 'Come this way.' What a promising, friendly start, I thought. Inside his office he told me that he could spare me a mere ten minutes as he was loaded down with problems. 'I did say I wanted an hour, and I heard your secretary asking you if that was OK.'

'Yes, yes, it is OK. But not right now. Will you come back tomorrow?' I agreed. I had no reason to doubt his word, he seemed friendly. Tomorrow never came. My calls to his secretary met with excuse after excuse. Instead, I went to meet Terry Fields, Liverpool's only Militant MP, one of two in the House of Commons. I met him in the city centre, in a building that used to be the police headquarters and was therefore spacious and a touch grand. It is now used by the trade unions to run, among other things, courses for unemployed members, telling them about their welfare rights. Terry Fields was a fireman for twenty-six years before entering Parliament. He takes £150 a week plus expenses and gives the rest to the Militant movement. In the Commons he is said to have an angry speaking style, but in Liverpool on a cool September morning there was no trace of anger. He was relaxed; he talked well of himself and his family, but was evasive on Militant. That he loves Liverpool to the point of being sentimental soon became obvious. 'There's nowhere like it. I remember national service; I remember coming back from Germany and getting out of the train at Lime Street and hearing the girls' accents and knowing I was home. It is the same now when I return from London each week. This is a tremendous place, but badly neglected. I've never known anything but poor housing, poor education and lack of jobs, but for all that the place is vibrant. Nowhere like it.'

I asked him what he meant by the word 'vibrant' and he answered by suggesting somewhat vaguely that despite all the problems the people of Liverpool seemed alive and 'perky' and added that the vibrancy comes from the port and the trade, the fact that it's always been open to outside influences, particularly American. The seamen would go there and come back with the confidence born of travel.

Fields' dad was a docker. 'He died on the docks, in harness as it were. He worked like a horse all his life and died like a horse, in harness. He was about sixty then. He was a big bloke and he gave his all to make us a good home. He gave us a room when I married in

1961; we paid 15 s. a week rent and shared the kitchen. Then when my wife's mother died we moved in to look after that family. It took us six years to get a council house in Bootle.'

Terry Fields is an old-fashioned class warrior. He can't be doing with the Labour party because it doesn't fight for fundamental change. When I asked him what Militant wanted, he said it wanted the best for Liverpool. And when I asked him to describe the best, he said better housing, better education, more jobs. Housing and education had been the target of Militant's first efforts. They had made an impressive start on massive problems by setting the demolition squad on high-rise blocks and by cutting off the tops of low-rise blocks, to transform them into the kind of homes that people wanted. They had reorganized secondary education and attempted to create some twenty community schools. When I asked him why Militant hadn't done more for the blacks in Toxteth he said that Militant had done much in the field of housing and education, and had not been able to do more in other areas because it had been constantly under siege both from the Labour party and from the Tory party. In the end he came clean on the blacks: he didn't want positive discrimination. You can't solve the problems of the blacks in isolation, he said; you need a complete policy of socialism.

He wouldn't be drawn any further on Militant, which isn't surprising, because until recently most supporters refused even to admit that it was an organization, they merely said it was a 'newspaper' of the same name. They had to lie because once it was admitted that Militant was a party with principles and policies, then it would be chucked out of the Labour party, whose constitution does not allow for a party within a party. Well, it has now been chucked out, so it no longer has to deny that it exists. To the best of anyone's knowledge Militant came into being in the mid-1960s, centred on a newspaper. Membership is not easy to acquire; those wishing to join often go through six months of meetings and assessment. What they join in the end is a deeply committed group of socialists influenced by the thinking of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky; what they want is socialism by revolution. Their model is the Russian Revolution, which they see as the most important event in world history. What exactly they want for Britain has never been spelled out, but it seems to include public ownership of some 250 major companies and monopolies, a planned economy, a minimum wage, full employment, a thirty-five-hour week, the abolition of the House of Lords and all MPs to receive the wages of a skilled worker.

For some time communists were happy to work outside the system;

when this did not work they decided on a policy of 'entryism', of infiltrating the Labour party and outwitting members simply by working hard and turning up to meetings and getting their point of view voted in. They took over Liverpool Labour party by this method.

Why on earth should Liverpool be ripe for such a socialist takeover? The answer is simple. Economic conditions are poor and the Labour party is weak. The Labour Party has always been weak in Liverpool because the city has a large Catholic population, and, since the Catholics voted Labour, the Protestant working class voted Tory. This splitting of the working-class vote kept Labour out of city politics until 1955. When it finally got control, it was a Catholic-dominated, right-wing Labour party. This party, then, with true sixties fervour, got busy cleaning out the city centre slums and building high-rise flats. Once the nasty things were occupied, the council maintained them badly and voters retaliated. They deprived the Labour party of its majority. Although the Liberal party had the largest number of seats, it did not have an overall majority; some of the time it could rely on Tory party support by adopting Toryish policies, but for the most part this hung council could agree on nothing and, for ten years - from 1973 - the council was paralysed.

In the 1970s public spending in Liverpool was somewhat lower than in many other cities; the Liberal-Tory coalition kept it that way. When Mrs Thatcher's government came to power one of her first aims was to cut local-authority spending and therefore she instructed councils to trim their budgets from the levels of 1978-9. This was bad news in Liverpool because the budget was hardly flabby, and Labour-Militant was in office dying to go on a spending spree. They refused to accept Mrs Thatcher's dictat; they refused to cut services, they refused to increase the rates by more than a small amount. To fund their spending spree they decided to run up an illegal deficit. If Mrs T. didn't like it she would have to sack them all and put in her own commissioners to sort out the mess. What they hoped was that the Tories would not fancy running Liverpool and that to avoid such a fate they would make out a nice cheque to balance Liverpool's budget. After endless negotiations this is more or less what happened. The government gave Liverpool some money (there is argument about how much) and in return the city council had to put some of its spending plans on ice. Needless to say, Militant made much of this victory and tried to play the same card the following year - refusing to set a rate in the hope that the government would once again come to the rescue. The Thatcher government was stony-hearted; it didn't even want to talk to Liverpool. It threw the rule book at the place instead. Councillors were

suspended for acting illegally (by not setting a rate in the allotted time) and fined. End of revolution in Liverpool. At least for the time being.

I say for the time being because I cannot imagine that Militant will pack up and go away. Undiluted socialism is not fashionable at the moment, either in Russia or in China, and diluted socialism in Europe has taken a turn to the right; what is called 'socialism' is tinged with social democratic ideals, but despite this there are still people who believe that capitalism must wither, or be made to wither, and that there is a fairer way of organizing society. The Labour party once believed in this; in the beginning the Labour party believed that a fair society was one in which the means of production did not remain in private hands. They did not want the source of economic power to remain in individual pockets.

The first two spells of Labour rule in the twenties did not produce socialist policies. The excuse was that although they were 'in office', they were not 'in power' and therefore could not do the things they wished. It was a sign of what was to come; a battle between those who were content to tinker and those who wished for fundamental change. The latter have always been overruled. By 1937 it became respectable to argue that the Labour party ought to put less emphasis on public ownership of the 'commanding heights of the economy'. Douglas Jay produced a book in which he argued that such a policy of nationalization might hinder speculative risk-taking and therefore it might be better for Labour to put more emphasis on the use of financial measures, like taxation, to iron out inequalities and redistribute wealth.

When the Labour party came to power under Clement Attlee in 1945, it took impressive steps towards socialism. It nationalized a handful of key industries - coal, steel, electricity and so on - as well as introducing the National Health Service and welfare benefits. Its achievements during six years of both foreseen and unforeseen difficulties make it one of the most significant governments of this century. The sadness for idealist socialists is that it was an end and not a beginning. By 1951 the Attlee government was worn out and uncertain where it was to go next. It could have put forward much-needed plans to *restructure* nationalized industries so that there was an element of workers' control, but it did not. The workforce merely swapped one sort of boss for another, who seemed as them-ish as ever. Nothing was done to enhance the dignity of labour, so why should the workers feel that much had changed? It hadn't, nor was it going to. In 1955 the right wing via Hugh Gaitskell took control of the Labour party. Socialism had lost; Labour from then on was happy to fight for the workers to have a larger slice of the cake rather than aim to bake

the cake itself from a different recipe. Is it so surprising that those who still have faith in socialist philosophy should try and start again through Militant?

I wanted to visit Kirby. The two girls in *A Letter to Brezhnev* came from Kirby. They worked in a chicken factory, taking the innards out, putting them into plastic bags and shoving them back in again. Such a fate had not destroyed their zest for life. But my overall impression of Kirby was that most people's zest had withered. The people of Kirby once lived in central Liverpool; they were decanted in the sixties to a site eight miles down the road, boxed into high-rise blocks. There were no facilities to go with new homes, but at least, in the first instance, they had jobs. An industrial estate offered some 24,000; this has now been halved. Kirby was described to me as a transit camp. The people were physically better off than someone stuck in a Palestinian equivalent, but just as displaced in other ways. Unskilled and jobless, they lacked a role in the modern world; they had no sense of their own worth.

My point of contact in Kirby was a school that was now a trades union resource centre; a centre for the unemployed. When I rang the coordinator, Christine Davidson, she was reluctant to come to the phone and rude when she did. 'You can call in if you wish, but I'm not promising to talk to you.'

'What's the problem?'

'There's no problem. You can call in and explain what you are doing here and then I'll see.'

I called in, intrigued by her attitude. Christine Davidson fixed her eyes on me. Everything about her was hostile. It took ten minutes to get to the point. She felt that I was yet another journalist come to see the hotbed of Militant; I had come, she persisted, because Robert Kilroy-Silk, a former Labour MP for the area, and now a television personality, had written a book in which he had described how he was ousted by Militant. And Kilroy-Silk had argued that Militant's campaign had been masterminded from this very building. I laughed at her analysis of my motives.

'I'm not interested in Kilroy-Silk. I'm interested in Kirby.'

'We wish he'd been interested in Kirby! There he is on television talking to prisoners about the awfulness of prison life . . . *This is a prison. Kirby is a prison.*' I stayed for five hours. During that time I talked to a number of welfare rights experts and to a number of women who came to the centre for help and advice. Very few men come for advice. It is women who bear the burden of unemployment; it is they who handle the family budget; it is they who have to juggle

with inadequate incomes; it is they who fight to keep the families together; it is they who struggle through the maze of benefits. The government has since simplified allowances, and listening to these people talk made me realize how badly that was needed. There was talk of a heating allowance, which was much needed in these damp flats made of concrete: if you live above the fifth floor in the suburbs or above the ninth floor in the city then you are eligible for more money than if you live below the fifth floor in the suburbs or the ninth floor in the city. Then there was a special laundry allowance for those who had bed-wetting children - £3 each week, which was not enough. It cost £1 to use the machine in the launderette and 20 pence for the spin-dryer, but you'd need at least 50 pence to dry a sheet, and no you couldn't go and buy a washing-machine because it was difficult to get credit in Kirby. The only thing you could do was go to loan-sharks and pay huge interest. There are lots of loan-sharks in Kirby; loan sharks are mostly working-class people themselves, who prey on the poverty of others. The centre wanted to start a credit union, but such a venture takes much organization. A credit union would work well in Kirby; it would mean that each week the women could pay into a fund and then, after a number of weeks of paying in, borrow from that fund; it is seen as a form of self-help; a form of saving, where each member knows that others just like her are saving. Few people default because to do so would be to rat on people you know. The loan-sharks are eliminated. The loan-sharks need to be eliminated, but they thrive on Merseyside.

Listening to the women trying to weave a way through the web of benefits made me think of negative income tax. Whatever happened to the prospect of negative income tax? Once a year I have to write down my earnings against my allowances, have them checked and send them off to the tax man, and he writes back and tells me how much money I must pay to the Exchequer. Why on earth can't everyone do that, and those with no incomes or low incomes then be given money according to their needs? It would mean an end to dreaded means testing and an end to the boring debate about universal benefits v. 'targeting'. Computers can take the strain, there could be tax officers to help people with the paperwork - and it would need only a fraction of the ever-growing welfare rights industry. It is not beyond the wit of man to devise such a scheme. It hardly demands an intellectual revolution. In the early seventies the idea was much debated. I remember spending an afternoon at Conservative Central Office having the seeds of such a scheme explained to me. Edward Heath was very keen on tax credits. I suppose that Mrs Thatcher is not very keen on tax credits because she is not very keen on Edward Heath.

That afternoon we talked of many things; we talked of men who leave Liverpool in search of jobs and then don't come back because they can't face their responsibilities; of women who drink – Martini is cheap and popular – and of kids who sniff petrol. The Thatcher government's attempts to streamline benefits and to channel them towards families most in need, and in particular towards families in low-paid work, were much derided. Topping up low-paid jobs merely encourages employers to remain stingy. And low-paid jobs are all that is on offer now; cowboys coming on to the estate setting up workshops demanding long hours in lousy conditions for appalling wages. The clock was going back, they said.

There was June, whose husband had been a docker and who was now unemployed and, she said, unemployable, because he was an alcoholic. She was trying to bring up three children, one of whom wanted to take a two-year secretarial course. 'She is studying Spanish at night school as well, because she wants to work in Spain. She wants to better herself, but it's a struggle for me.' There was Kitty, whose eldest son had gone to Germany for a job as a bricklayer and who had to return because his wife couldn't cope with two young children on her own. There was Dot, who didn't want her son to join a Youth Training Scheme because she saw it as cheap labour. Kitty agreed; the kids on those schemes learned nothing, she said. And then I met Karen, a single mother. She'd got a council flat because her father had told her to leave when she was pregnant; she had received several special payments to help her buy essentials for the flat and the baby. These have now been stopped by the government. They can be had now only as a loan. Karen said she couldn't contemplate a loan because she was already making weekly payments for her cooker and her clothes. She was nineteen. I asked her if she felt she had a right, once she got pregnant, to a flat and income from the state. She said 'yes' without hesitation. She'd worked for three years before getting pregnant and had paid her taxes. Mrs Thatcher doesn't like this attitude. Mrs Thatcher has watched the social security bill rocket, mainly because of the rise in unemployment, but also because of the growth in welfare rights workers, who make sure people get every allowance going and also because young people, like Karen, no longer feel that there is any kind of stigma attached to living on 'the social'. Indeed, for some having a baby has become a passport to a life infinitely preferable to being a shop assistant and living at home. Figures for the mid-eighties suggest that of the 126,000 births outside marriage, 37,000 are to women under the age of twenty. The figure for 1979 was 20,000, almost half. These mothers tend to have low educational achievement

and poor employment prospects. A mere thirty years ago, when contraceptives were not freely available, teenage mothers were frowned upon and forced, through a lack of support systems, to hand their babies over for adoption. No one could argue that such a situation was right. On the other hand, no one can argue that the current situation is right either. That wretched pendulum has swung too far again. Mrs Thatcher considers that Karen and others like her have become dependent on welfare as an easy option, and she doesn't like it. She'd be much more interested in June's daughter, struggling to educate herself out of poverty.

The afternoon was depressing. There was a strong whiff of fatalism in the air. 'Isn't it awful,' was a phrase used all too often. The women felt they have no control over their lives. They get moved out of city centres on to vast estates; they get humdrum jobs; those humdrum jobs disappear; progress always leaves them one step behind. And then I met Tony. Tony has a vision. He works for the Transport and General Workers Union. He's involved in a campaign to persuade union members in work to pay something each week to help those out of work. He'd been a shop steward at British Leyland until the factory closed in 1979. 'They said productivity was low. We were making the TR7 – "the bullet", as it was called. We knew it wouldn't sell, but BL spent £50,000 on a marketing expert to tell them what we could have told them for free! Nothing will ever change in this country until the workers have some kind of say in what is going on.' How true that is, and yet democracy in the workplace or worker participation remains little more than a slogan. Neither of us could understand why such an obvious step, such a vital step, had not been embraced long ago. I'm not naïve enough to think that greater employee participation is easy; it demands a degree of toleration and cooperation between unions whose political and social views are different, let alone unions and management. But in the early seventies I looked at the working practices of Saab in Sweden and I was much impressed by the efforts being made to find a pathway. Fifteen years later, British companies are still at the report-commissioning stage. It shouldn't need legislation to make men see that one group of men wielding power over another group of men and giving orders without explanation is a lousy way of existing. There's something rotten in human nature when men delight in denying others scope to develop potential.

We had a long chat about the future. Tony's vision was clear. He did not see full employment returning. 'There could be full employment for a time, because the infrastructure needs building up; new sewers and roads would mop up labour and an area like this needs shops and

cinemas. But this would only last a while. We need to teach people to share out work and in the end we are going to have to pay people a social wage not to work.

'What is so magnificent about working like a dog, spending your spare time in the pub and then dying six months after you retire? What is so marvellous about that? My vision is that people won't have to work like that and they will have the opportunity for all sorts of leisure and education. Anyone who wants a degree should be able to study for one, even pensioners. Think of the jobs that could be created, with books and schools and teachers and so on. You know, now that all that grinding work of the past is over, the world could be our oyster!'

I strolled off down the street to the station, thinking of the world as an oyster and delighted that someone else had seen the end of our industrial world as the beginning of something much better; someone else saw education as the key. This fragment of conversation was to stay in the front of my mind; it was like a building brick, it joined a little pile of bricks that I was gathering on my journey and which would by the end form a foundation of understanding.

I was staying at a hotel called Feather's. It is in the centre of town, around the corner from the once-grand Adelphi, which is so un-grand now that it has a banner outside saying, 'Rooms from £12'. If I'd known that I'd probably have stayed there, but by the time I discovered it, I felt too lazy to move. I went to meet Paul Feather. He was yelling at someone on the phone when I walked in. He continued to yell at that person for some time. His parents were first-generation Liverpudlians; his grandparents had come from Russia. His parents had the first Feather's hotel; he now has three in the area and the one in which I was staying was the cheapest, 'definitely for those without an expense account', he said. Paul Feather is the Tory candidate for Liverpool Garston, and very flashy indeed. He plays polo, has long curly hair, a diamond earring in one ear and a very large, multi-coloured watch. 'Liverpool deserves what it has got. The people keep voting Labour and although in the past they have been well intentioned, they have no experience of business, no experience of life in general. All they are used to is poverty. There is no vision. The place has been badly mismanaged. Government after government has put money in Liverpool and the city has behaved like a spoiled child and wasted that money. But that's the past; the future is wide open. Let me tell you a story: two salesmen go to an Arab country to sell shoes. One sees that the people there have no shoes, they are not wearing shoes, and he packs up and goes home, muttering, "What's the point of staying, the people don't wear shoes." The other salesman says: "Oh my! I'll stay

for life and make a fortune." That's the sort of person that Liverpool needs. Not the sort who sees the mess, the abysmal quality of life in Liverpool and walks away, but the one who now sees the huge potential.' He told me that hotels were not money-spinners in Liverpool - not for the moment, anyway; he makes most of his money out of high-class catering for posh weddings. He said that since he was always dealing with posh people, he didn't like to admit that he came from Liverpool. Instead he said that Liverpool was merely a branch office. My face said it all. 'I tell you, it's true, that's what these people have done to Liverpool. If you don't believe me, I'll get some of my headed notepaper for you. I try and pretend this is just a northern branch office.' To make sure I got the point, the next day he sent me a sheet of his notepaper.

The last thing Liverpool needs is such an attitude. Instead it needs some positive thinking and some political stability. If there is one reason why Liverpool lags behind Glasgow and Newcastle - both fighting similar depressing economic situations - it is because those two cities have a political stability that enables them to do things, and Liverpool has nothing of the sort. There are of course other reasons. Liverpool's problems are more deep-rooted. It was a commercial city rather than an industrial city. It was a major distribution centre importing raw materials and exporting the products of inland industrial cities. It had few factories of its own; no manufacturing base, no skilled base; and nothing to plug the gap when containerization finally curtailed the need for dock labourers. In the 1960s, the Labour government tried to help by steering the car industry into Merseyside, but when the going got tough in the early 1980s, these plants, which were only 'branch offices' with no commitment to the area, pulled out. By 1985 unemployment in Liverpool had reached 27 per cent, twice the national average; by 1989 it had inched down to 25 per cent. Since the 1960s many politicians with their hearts in the right places have tried to help Liverpool; it has been the recipient of one worthy inner city scheme after another; each has concentrated on the symptoms of Liverpool's malaise rather than the *cause*.

Eighties thinking is trying another tack. Wise men suggest that investment in cities owes as much to fashion and instinct as it does to fine analysis. It follows then that psychology and perception can be as important as the injection of public money to break a cycle of economic and social decline. Thus each city in the first instance needs a flagship development, something to get the city talked about, something to make folk think that things are on the move. Liverpool has Albert Docks. Many cities have dockland development schemes: Newcastle,

Bristol, Cardiff, London. Modern Britain has re-discovered the delights of water, and all around the country pretty scenes are being carved out of derelict waterfronts. When we were a powerful nation, the seas at our command, along with everything else, our docks were awash with ugly clobber, scarring cranes and men doing a hard day's work. Now that we are no longer a powerful nation, our docks have become bijoux, fashionable, like a Laura Ashley print. Albert Docks is a pleasant place to walk around; it contains Britain's largest group of Grade One listed buildings, a million square feet of warehousing converted into offices, shops and apartments. It houses the Tate of the North, which might well have gone to Manchester if the riots of 1981 had not focused attention on Liverpool. There are five-storey warehouses forming an enclosed square – the courtyard is water; the scale is large, the design simple and uniform. The warehouses are made of red brick and cast iron. The upper floors are carried by a colonnade of massive cast-iron doric columns. Albert Docks is nicknamed the Venice of the North, which is a little exaggerated. But it is a heartening sight and the plans for the area are grand.

And it's not the only admirable spot in the centre of Liverpool. There's only so much I could take of Beatles' corner, which has been commercialized for all it's worth, with a Beatles shop and the John Lennon Society Headquarters; a pub called Abbey Road, an Eleanor Rigby statue and the revamped Cavern Club. Cavern Walks, in Mathew Street, is a glossy shopping precinct with, of course, a series of bronze statues of the Fab Four. It's a fine tourist attraction and that is what it set out to be. The Japanese manage day trips from London to Liverpool just to see this tiny section of a once-great city. But there's more. There are pubs like the Philharmonic, and bookshops that serve coffee and carrot cake in the basement and a surprising number of wine bars and bistros, several of which I sought out and tried. They always seemed to be full of young people; the middle-aged with money to spare live over the water in the Wirral, and they don't tend to spend their evenings in town. Indeed I found much to like and only one thing to loathe – the litter, which is disgusting. It's much worse than in London which, God knows, is filthy enough. It's at its worst when there are basements. I spent an hour peering into basements, and each one was filled with layers of discarded rubbish, most of which had once contained food, or sweets, or drinks. The litter spoils Liverpool, but it doesn't ruin it. It's a city that commands great affection, and I can easily understand why Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell have never thought of leaving.

Alan Bleasdale, who is often confused with Willy Russell, once said: 'Leave Liverpool? Why? I like living in Liverpool. It's like an old

overcoat. I know it; I feel comfortable in it. I know where I am and I never feel in danger. My family and my friends keep me here.' Bleasdale's Liverpool is now the leafy suburb of Mossley Hill. But he was born on a 1930s council estate in Huyton; his Dad cycled to work because he couldn't afford the bus fare, and Alan was the first in his family to pass the 11-plus and go to college. He showed me the house where he was born. 'An ugly estate, isn't it? No one could call it attractive, and yet I didn't realize how ugly it was until I left at eighteen to go to college. Then I came back and said, Jesus Christ.' And he showed me the school on the Bluebell estate where he used to teach physical education: some of the windows were boarded up, others were broken. 'Perhaps if you put people in shit, they behave like animals. The downtrodden destroying the places they live in is a bit like self-rape, isn't it? They are Giro-fodder. In my father's day they were cannon fodder, and now they are Giro-fodder.' Alan Bleasdale had been called a Marxist revolutionary for writing a brilliant – a most brilliant – television drama called *The Monocled Mutineer*, in which he showed men, or rather boys, being used as cannon fodder and kicking against the idea to the extent of organizing a mutiny. He was accused of distorting history and turning a minor spot of bother in a place called Etaples into a glamorous mutiny. Historians and Old Soldiers crawled all over the newspapers arguing that the army had squashed the outbreak of 'disrespect' with ease and that it was other people's armies that mutinied, the French, the Italians, the Russians – not the Brits! I reminded him. We laughed. But Bleasdale was saddened by the outbursts against him. He'd written a television serial, not a documentary. And he knew full well what he was trying to say. His father's father had died at Passchendaele. 'He knew it was going to happen. He never saw his son.' None of this makes him a leftie revolutionary. 'We are all full of ambivalence. I've made a lot of money and I want to keep it. In five years' time I might not be able to write another word and I need that money for my wife and children. Yet at the same time I know that wealth must be redistributed.'

It had been my idea to revisit old landmarks and his idea to end up in a pub. We went to the Philharmonic. 'For all its problems, Liverpool kids are full of exuberance and vitality. I notice this whenever I am casting something; it's all teeth and smiles, is Liverpool. We all have elements of the entertainer in us; we like to show off. We're brash and warm. Liverpool people think with their hearts; if they thought with their heads, they'd leave.'

'Leave Liverpool! I've never thought of leaving Liverpool,' said Willy Russell, who is often mistaken for Alan Bleasdale. 'Everyone

asks me that question. I'm a writer, not a performer; I don't need to leave. And where would I go? Where is glamorous? Nowhere is glamorous. You only leave if you have to leave for a job. I look around and see filthy streets, schools that are crumbling, houses decaying, shops boarded up and my car keeps getting broken into, but there isn't another city in which I'd live. You know, when we talk of Liverpool we are talking of a small place. Travel twelve miles and the Scouse accent has gone, you're into Lancashire and it's different. Liverpool was never crushed by mills and heavy industry. We were a trading place, a melting-pot, like New York. We've never looked south to London for leadership. We've always looked to America. At least, we did when I was young, and I suppose we still do now. There's an arrogance in this place which fuels people like Alan and me. This place believes in itself.

'There's a massively flourishing youth theatre. I get at least two letters a week from kids asking how they can get Equity cards. And I was at the theatre the other night when two kids I'd taught came up and said they'd written a play about drugs and were trying to get it put on.'

'Why should they be attracted to the theatre?'

'Why? Because this is a very oral city. Working-class culture is oral-based; the written word is not to be trusted. Schools are middle-class places because they concentrate on the written word, and that's irrelevant to most kids. I left at fifteen with one O-level and worked for six loathsome years in a hairdresser's shop. I got my A-levels at twenty-one and then went to teacher training college. And when I tried to teach English it was a nightmare. Those kids don't want to be taught; they'd got passive resistance down to a fine art. Then one day I started telling them a story, and the next week they asked for another story. This was better than having them fool around, I thought, and then the penny dropped. They want their information inserted orally. When you go to the theatre up here you'll find a different kind of audience to your London audience.'

I'd been to a play the night before. I'd been to see Jim Morris's *Pinocchio Boys* at the Everyman. It was about three boys growing up on an estate on Merseyside who wanted life to be as exciting as television. I had difficulty with some of the television references because I obviously watch the wrong programmes, and I had difficulty with the ending, which was gloomy. With Willy Russell's plays there's usually a sense of optimism. *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* are gloriously optimistic plays: down-trodden Rita and down-trodden Shirley do something to improve their situation. I like this attitude; or was he trying to tell me that it is only women who are foolish enough to be optimistic?

'Women are easier characters; they have a language and emotions and they communicate. They are easier to handle than male characters. Rita and Shirley sort something out for themselves; they want to make life better and that's the way it should be. I've never seen a political play worth a jot. Once politics takes over, the theatre is lost. The world is a better place for having *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the Sistine Chapel. And that's how I feel.'

And the world is a better place for having Willy Russell and Alan Bleasdale. And that's how I feel. And if Liverpool can produce such talent, then the world is a better place for having Liverpool.

I'd met Willy Russell at his office. On my way back to Feather's, I didn't pay much attention to road signs and although I wasn't lost, I thought it wise to check that I was heading in the right direction. I saw two girls chatting on a street corner and I asked them if I was on course for the Adelphi Hotel, my local landmark. One of the girls, who was extremely tall and stunningly beautiful, said: 'I'm going that way and I'll walk with you. It's not good to be walking around here when you don't know where you are going. It's all right for me, I'm Liverpool's first woman bouncer, yeah. Everyone knows me. I got a lot of publicity when I became a bouncer. I do karate and boxing and so I can take care of myself. That's why I can wear clothes like this.' Her skirt was the tiniest mini-skirt in captivity. She towered over me, and her skirt reached my waist. 'I come from Allerton, which is a dead quiet place, so when I became a bouncer I told them I came from Toxteth. They'd know I could look after myself if I came from Toxteth.'

I'm a DJ in a nightclub, that's where I'm off to now. If you ever want a night out, come to Snobs, it's a great place. Turn up and ask for Niki, that's me. Look, do you know where you are now? It's dead straight from here; straight on up there. Ta-ra.' And she was gone. I swear that she had bubbled and chatted from the moment I met her until she delivered me in sight of the Adelphi. I guess she was about nineteen; she had style and confidence, she assumed that every word she uttered was of interest to me. She believed in herself. Niki is the spirit of Liverpool. I'd found it at last.