

Statement by the General Secretary to the Executive Council 4th December 2012

Some of you will have already had an opportunity to consider the issue, but it's only proper that I explain my thoughts to the Executive.

I hope all of you agree that, together, we have been able to create a climate of tolerance and unity within the Union which is essential to make us effective in delivering for our members. Of course there are differences and disagreements, and, as long as these are debated in a civilised manner, there is nothing wrong with that. In my opinion it makes our union stronger.

We have come a long way in the last two years, but we all know there is a lot more to do. The initiatives we have launched include our leverage strategy; 100% Campaign; retention; E-Coms strategy; legal & affiliates; community membership; retired members plus; schools programme; CLaSS think tank; and not forgetting our political strategy. These are only in their infancy.

Reviewing each Region and Department in order to make certain that efficiencies are maximised and introducing procedures on all employment matters, including absenteeism and capability all require time, focus and determination. As does changing the culture of the officer corp. and establishing core standards.

Of course, in everything we do there is no end point. The Union will always be reviewing and reacting to events. But, it is important to lay a strong foundation in order to enable the Union to be confident in its core strengths and values so as to deliver this on-going process.

When I ran for GS, I was 60 years old and was able to indicate that I would be a single term GS and that was the case. Of course, what has changed is the Law which now means all workers have a right to voluntarily work beyond 65 if they so wish. All of us will have to make an individual choice at some point. For me, that point has arrived because I am now asked by valued friends and colleagues to consider the prospect of extending my period of office for the good of the Union.

All of us like to think we are indispensable. The truth is we are not.

If I were to be run over by a bus tomorrow, life in the Union would go on.

But, the matter under question is the prospect of continuity and what that could bring. Would my continuation in office for an additional two years be beneficial to Unite?

I believe the answer is yes...not just to solidify the foundations of our vision, or of our new found unity, but to avoid the dangers in our current timeline and confront the political challenges that lie ahead. Our current timescale would mean holding an election for GS just before the next General Election which would not be good for either Unite or the Labour Party, and is liable to cause divisions in the union, sufficiently divisive to, at best, threaten, and at worst, shatter the unity that we are creating.

A strong continuation of leadership would be essential to ensure that a newly elected Labour government would deliver on its commitments, in particular, trade union rights. Or, if the Party is defeated, a continuity of leadership would be vital in dealing with the “nuclear-like fall out” that would follow.

To expect a new leader to deal with either of these scenarios would be unfair and unwise.

So, why now?

The change in the law means that I could wait till I was 65 and run again but that, for me, is a bridge too far. I understand the logic and the political arguments for extension and continuity, but I’m only prepared to go on until 67 years of age. That means triggering an election with immediate effect while I’m 62.

Colleagues should know that I don’t take anything for granted and I know that I will need to convince our activists and branches if I am to secure their support.

I am also conscious of the sensitivities involved and the attacks that our enemies will launch, given that we, as a union, oppose the extension of the retirement age; although that opposition has been targeted at the compulsory nature of any extension.

And I am also aware our ex-Amicus members have lived through Roger Lyons, Ken Jackson and Derek Simpson seeking to ‘hold on’ to office. But, in all of those cases they wanted to hold on without an election. This is different because I would seek to refresh my mandate from the members for all of the reasons mentioned. It is not about wanting to cling to power for personal reasons. I have sought assurances that if our members supported me again, then my additional two years would be at no extra cost to the Union.

On a personal note, I want to say how proud I have been to serve our members and fight for our movement. During these most challenging times I feel it is a personal duty to ensure our union continues to operate at full strength over the next few years.

I, therefore, ask for your permission to sanction a General Secretary Election with immediate effect.