



In whose palm?

The fudge which will end Britain's six-month-old coal strike is already clear. The means by which it will be achieved is less clear, and whether it will avoid another strike in two years time is not clear at all. That is for Mrs Thatcher to decide.

The fudge will embrace the over-generous terms already offered by the coal board chairman, Mr Ian MacGregor, covering redundancy, withdrawal of existing pit closures and consultation over future ones. In return the miners will concede some form of words to allow the closure of at least some uncommercial pits. Since Mr Scargill has sworn he will give "not one inch" on his demand to veto any such closures, the concession will have to involve his defeat, disguised or not.

It is now unlikely that the vehicle of this defeat will be either Mrs Thatcher or Mr MacGregor: the antagonism of Mr Scargill and his supporters is too implacable, the back-to-work movement too hesitant. Nor will defeat come at the hands of the government's inert trade union laws or from some new judge-enforced ballot, which Mr Scargill will disregard. Instead, Mr Scargill's defeat will come from within the union movement itself, as workers refuse to put their jobs at jeopardy to featherbed the miners.

On Monday, the Trades Union Congress took the first shambling step, six months late, towards this defeat when its moderate executive gathered the miners into the bear-hug of "total support"—support which it has neither the capacity nor the intention to deliver. This year's chairman, Mr Ray Buckton of the train drivers, knows about that support: he received it during the 1981 rail strike shortly before he was left bruised and defeated in the ditch. There is still far to go before the TUC finds the nerve to send railwaymen and dockers across miners' picket lines. But its new executive (like its old one) loathes Mr Scargill, and is alarmed by the violence of his miners and the damage they are doing to the union cause. Union members are in revolt, crying out already for the secret ballots which Mrs Thatcher is about to give them.

The TUC may be an ironic weapon for Mrs Thatcher to wave in the face of union militants. But at present it is the best she has. It involves her keeping her ministers' mouths shut—and Mr MacGregor's shut too. The fudge may be unavoidable, but if she keeps quiet now and lets the TUC grapple with Mr Scargill's public intransi-

gence, she should still be able to make it taste like victory. Mr Scargill could then find himself wailing the National Union of Mineworkers' usual refrain about TUC treachery.

Mrs Thatcher did not precipitate this strike any more than did her appointee, Mr MacGregor. But her previous surrenders to the miners, and the surrenders of her predecessors, helped to cause it. Her ability to snatch political credit from the past six months' strife will depend on whether the cabinet can somehow restrain itself from sowing the seeds for yet another coal dispute in two years' time, when a general election will be in the offing. All Britain's major industries have passed through labour upheavals in the past four years as they struggle to modernise in the face of recession and changing markets. They have had to cut staff, reduce capacity and alter work practices. As a result, there have been strikes in the ports, shipbuilding, steel, railways, car manufacture. But out of these strikes have come change and realism.

Strikes are caused by subsidies

Not in coal. The reason is appeasement: no other British industry has collected so many subsidies from successive generations of ministers terrified of the miners' industrial muscle. Mr Scargill's presidency is the direct consequence of that appeasement. He scored personal successes in 1972 and 1974 and goaded his union leader, Lord Gormley, into the startling defeat of Mrs Thatcher over pit closures in 1981. He has since reduced the Tory government to such a pass that it has closed only 49 collieries, compared with 335 closed by union-dominated Labour governments since 1964. The Thatcher government has meanwhile multiplied subsidies to the coal board since it took office, to an impoverishing £2m per day.

There is in this sense nothing political about the present strike, beyond Mr Scargill's own demagogic oratory. The miners of South Wales, Yorkshire, Durham, Scotland are not so stupid as to believe they can bring down Mrs Thatcher a year after a landslide election victory. The men in these areas are striking, as Mr Scargill says, because their past experience suggests that this is the way to save their jobs and preserve their traditional communities. They know the market will not buy their coal. They follow Mr Scargill because he

promises that he will make the government buy it instead. With Mrs Thatcher's help, it is a promise on which the militant NUM has always delivered.

The significant element in industrial relations revealed by this dispute is the split within all the unions involved. It is a split not between left and right, nor between militant and moderate. It is between the high-productivity and low-productivity sections of each industry. It is between those coal, steel and railway workers who believe they can survive without featherbedding and those who know they cannot. The dispute has injected a brute economic realism into the traditional solidarity of British trade unionism and divided it along precisely the right lines. Miners, dockers, railmen, steel and power workers in the Midlands, the south and even parts of Wales and Scotland no longer feel a sense of historical identity with Mr Scargill's faction within the NUM. When the Labour leader, Mr Neil Kinnock, says he is "with the miners" he is risking being with the wrong ones.

Investing in nonsense

The productive workers of Britain will be the losers if the settlement of this strike proves there is still treasury gold at the end of every militant rainbow. Hence it is vital, whatever the outcome of the fudge, for the government to stop hurling big money at coal—and certainly to stop boasting about it. France is cutting coal production by more than a third. West Germany is concentrating its industry on a few efficient pits. The likely result of present British investment plans will be to make the British coal industry still the most highly-subsidised in western Europe, hopelessly uncompeti-

tive against imports. Only constant—and foolish—pressure on the generating boards to burn more coal (with subsidies to pay artificially high prices for it) will maintain even present levels of consumption.

Yet at the weekend, there was Mrs Thatcher's energy secretary, Mr Peter Walker, declaring that once the miners go back to work "the government is willing to underwrite an extension of the plan for coal. . . . This would mean massive investment in the industry. . . . We could become the greatest coal production nation in western Europe." This is precisely the give-away attitude which has wrecked any sense of realism in the coal industry. To promise another colossal £3 billion of public investment to coal at this time—on the basis of productivity conditions most unlikely to be delivered—is a slap in the face of industries, public and private, which have had to tighten their belts during the recession. It is like asking a man to sign the pledge with a case of whisky as the prize. Public subsidies for the coal industry are no more "economically viable" than are Mr Scargill's definitions of closable coal mines.

The defeat of Scargillism will therefore not come when the NUM leader is forced to concede some form of words on uneconomic pits. Mrs Thatcher's style of toughness is oratorical and public. It clearly frustrates her to take a back seat in the coal strike, and it will frustrate her even more if the lacklustre TUC proves the agent of a settlement. But the real test of her toughness will be her willingness to abandon past promises to the coal industry and treat it as she has treated other sacred cows of the public sector. Britain's coal industry must not be left believing it can inflict such turmoil on the nation with financial impunity.

Canada's upheaval

The triumph of Brian Mulroney's Tories was more than a matter of getting in line with Ronald Reagan's Republicans

For most Americans, most of the time, Canada scarcely exists. This week, however, it made their front pages. The Conservative election victory there (see page 43) has come as an encouraging portent for the Republicans, two months before the United States goes to the polls, for two obvious reasons. First, it conforms to the majority's swing to the right recently shown in several other western democracies. Second, it brings in a government pledged to repair the damage done to relations between the two North American neighbours during the long years of Mr Pierre Trudeau's Liberal rule in Canada.

But Americans would be wise not to view the great Canadian upheaval only in these simple terms. The message from this landslide is not that Canada is falling into step with President Reagan and marching to his tunes. Relations between the governments in Ottawa and Washington may, for some time, glow with new friendliness; but this will not mean that the doctrine of North American continentalism has finally triumphed.



Undoubtedly some part of the Canadian Tories' sweeping success was based on the same kind of swing that other electorates have demonstrated. Canadians, too, have decided to see if a right-wing government can resolve their economic problems, by reducing government intervention and restoring freer markets. But they did not vote against public spending: the Tory leader, Mr Brian Mulroney, has been making expensive promises in many directions. Nor did they vote for big budget deficits in the Reagan manner: Mr Mulroney says the deficit must be reduced, although he has not said how. The votes for the Conservatives were votes for less government interference with business; but the mere fact that, while the Liberals were squelched, the left-of-centre New Democrats held their position unexpectedly well suggests that something more was involved than a prevalent down-with-government, up-with-business mood.

In part, Mr Mulroney won because, for the first time, the Conservatives had a bilingual leader from Quebec