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Press office

Extracts from a speech by Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP, Home Secretary, to the Yorkshire Area Young Conservatives' Conference at the Windmill Hotel, Leeds on Saturday 10 November.

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The miners' strike has clearly begun to crumble. The faster that process continues, the better for all concerned - not least the striking miners themselves.

When it comes, the end of the strike will not just mark a triumph of common sense over extremism. It will also mark a triumph of the rule of law over violence.

The challenge to the rule of law in Britain has never been so great or so direct as during this dispute. It has been clear from early on that the stakes could not have been higher. The miners' leaders avoided the ballot. They barely attempted persuasion. They preferred force. They scorned the law. They abused the courts. They vilified the police. And they have even consorted with a terrorist regime overseas. But the very nakedness of the challenge to the rule of law has meant that the triumph of the law is all the more significant and its effects likely to be all the more lasting.

The miners' mass pickets posed the biggest single challenge to public order policing since the War. If their tactics had succeeded, the Nottinghamshire coal field would have been shut by force at the beginning of the strike. Coke works, steel works and power plants would have been brought to a halt. And, no matter how long the strike continued, no matter how great or senseless the hardship suffered, miners wishing to return to work would have been physically prevented from doing so.

That did not happen - because the police stopped it happening. They stopped it because the use of force to stop people from going to work is a criminal offence. The police showed that locally based police forces could respond effectively to a national challenge and do so in the biggest single policing operation in this country, involving, on occasion no fewer than 8,000 police officers. The police have inevitably not always been able to prevent intimidation or to detect those responsible for it. Nor, in spite of their carrying out over 7,600 arrests, have they been able to bring to justice everyone who has committed a criminal offence. No-one could reasonably have expected otherwise. But what the police have been able to do through skill and courage and against the expectations both of the pickets and of many others too is to ensure that all those wishing to go to work have been able to do so.

From the Government the police have received total support in the face of a wave of malicious and irresponsible allegations fuelled by Labour politicians and others. And the cost of policing the dispute is being met to an unprecedented degree by central government. But it is to the police, themselves, as servants not of the Government but of the law itself, that credit must ultimately go for upholding the basic freedoms of working miners and their families.

The rule of law has prevailed because the police would not bow to violence. And it has prevailed too because the courts will not be intimidated.

To the extremists who lead the NUM the judges are "scabs" and their law is just a weapon of class warfare. But for the rest of us the law and the courts are what stands between democracy and tyranny - whatever form tyranny may take.

With the assistance of 9 extra stipendiaries appointed for the purpose, the courts are now clearing the backlog of cases from the dispute. So far over 50 people have received immediate

custodial sentences. The most serious offences have still to come to trial. But already it is clear that justice will not be mocked and that the rule of law will not be suspended to accommodate the interests of those who flout it.

Whether the miners' strike will prove the last dispute in Britain in which mob violence is used for political ends, it is, as yet, too soon to be sure. But the lesson for those who are tempted to flout the law for their own purposes and for those who lend comfort to them is already crystal clear. It is that the courts, the Government and the people are determined to ensure that the rule of law will prevail.