



10 DOWNING STREET

Prime Minister

In replying to Alex
Eadie yesterday you
undertook to look at
the Adjournment debate to
which he referred. I do not
think you need to read it
in any detail: Mr Nellist's
speech was a standard
Militant diatribe. It was clearly
a rowdy occasion, especially
since Conservative backbenchers
enjoy taunting Mr Nellist
who is an identikit
Student revolutionary.

J.F.

Coal Industry Dispute

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn—[Mr. Durant.]

10.59 pm

Mr. Dave Nellist (Coventry, South-East): For nearly nine months, 145,000 miners and their families have stood out against all that the Government have been able to throw at them. The miners have thwarted the Government's plans to destroy several communities, to seek directly the end of 70,000 mining jobs, to seek indirectly the end of a further 85,000 which depend on those miners being in work and to destroy the already tarnished hopes of a new and young generation growing up in the mining communities. For nearly nine months, despite everything that the Government and the media have thrown against the miners, their families and their communities, this strike remains solid.

The strike remains an inspiration to workers as a whole on how to resist the attacks of the Tories. It has destroyed the myth — often propagated by Tory Members of Parliament in the House — that trade unionists are selfish, greedy and always out for themselves. This strike is not principally about today's jobs for today's miners. It is also about miners fighting for the generation hoping to inherit those jobs and on behalf of their class, to reverse the general tide of unemployment in the black spots of Britain.

Tory Members of Parliament, as shown by their peals of laughter, have no chance of understanding the sacrifice of the past nine months, when families have sold cars, houses, furniture, televisions and videos and told children, "There are no birthdays this year. There is no Christmas coming up and their will be no holidays." The sacrifice that those families have made on behalf of themselves and their class is something that Tory Members of Parliament, with their salaries and their family background, would never understand.

This generation of miners has refused the bribes handed out by the Tory Government. They have refused to be bought off by redundancy payments — the lump sum social security benefits — which in recent months have been dangled as carrots in front of miners. The miners have resisted the Government's attempts to starve miners and their families back to work, with the criminal removal of £15 a week from the benefits paid to the families of striking miners. The families of strikers are worse off than the families of those who have committed major crimes — murder and so on — who now rest in the prisons. The families of striking miners have resisted the Government's attempts for nine months with the magnificent support of ordinary workers and their families in the rest of their class, whose collections of food and money, especially in the period to Christmas, have helped to alleviate some of the suffering and to sustain the families.

The families of striking miners have also resisted nine months when 8,000 workers — brothers and sisters of mine — were arrested. One in six of those arrested have been released without charge. That is an indication of the blanket nature of the arrests. Three quarters of the rest of those who have been arrested have been taken under what I would describe as the bogus charges of obstruction of the pavement, obstruction of the highway and obstruction of a policeman. They have been charged under section 5 of

the Public Order Act 1936 and other legislation used by the police to remove the pickets and picket organisers from the picket lines.

In addition, during those nine months of attacks, the miners have had set against them daily, every evening on the television screens, a biased media and, often, the twisted propaganda of the National Coal Board. The finger of the Government hovers behind that campaign of misinformation. That is what we have come to expect from a Tory media and Tory press. *[Interruption.]* When one looks at the number of editors of daily newspapers who have received knighthoods from the Government who are in the pockets of their millionaire owners —

Mr. Alexander Eadie (Midlothian): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Obviously, some Conservative Members have had a very good dinner. This is a serious subject, and my hon. Friend is entitled to be heard and to put the point of view representing his constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Harold Walker): No matter how unacceptable or unpopular their opinions may be to some, hon. Members are entitled to express them, provided they keep within the rules of the House.

Mr. Nellist: The campaign of misinformation launched by the media is what we have come to expect from those editors who received knighthoods from a Tory Government who are in the pocket of their millionaire owners.

One of the aspects —

Mr. Anthony Beaumont-Dark (Birmingham, Selly Oak) *rose* —

Mr. Nellist: If the hon. Member wants to make a point he has plenty of opportunity with the Tory propaganda that comes out daily in the media.

One of the aspects of the strike —

Mr. Beaumont-Dark *rose* —

Mr. Nellist: One of the results of the strike and the campaign of disinformation by the Tory media against miners has been the spur that that has given to Socialists and trade unionists within the Labour movement.

Mr. Beaumont-Dark *rose* —

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Mr. Beaumont-Dark) must restrain himself. Clearly the hon. Member for Coventry, South-East (Mr. Nellist) is not giving way.

Mr. Beaumont-Dark: He is not restraining himself.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member must not shout at me from a sedentary position.

Mr. Beaumont-Dark: I will shout at you standing up.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Neither will the hon. Member stand on his feet while I am on mine. The hon. Member for Coventry, South-East is entitled to express his view and make his speech —

Mr. Beaumont-Dark: Rubbish.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: —and I hope that the House will allow him to do so.

Mr. Eadie: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Did you hear the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly-Oak (Mr. Beaumont-Dark) say "rubbish" to you while you were reprimanding him?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. No, I did not hear him say that. If the hon. Member said it, I deprecate it, but the hon. Member has already left the Chamber.

Mr. Nellist: One of the consequences of the media attacks on the NUM, the miners' families and trade unionists in general will be the spur that it gives to Socialists and trade unionists within the Labour movement to create a daily Socialist alternative to the Tory papers of Fleet street. Contrary to the attempts that have been made over the past two weeks to give the impression that the strike is crumbling, three quarters of the miners on strike remain solid. If Tory Members present in the House at this late hour wish to take some comfort from this afternoon's figures from the Coal Board, I offer them figures to destroy their case, in Scotland 225 miners returned to work making a total of 1,258 miners at work trying to weaken the strike. That is 9.5 per cent. of work force; 90.5 per cent. remain on strike. In Yorkshire—Tory Members seem to be overjoyed about this—450 went back, according to the National Coal Board. That makes 1,785 at work according to the NCB, and means 3 per cent. of the work force. It means that 97 per cent. of the miners are on strike.

In south Wales, according to the NCB, nine miners went back this morning. That makes 85 miners at work—less than 0.5 per cent. It means that 99.6 per cent. of the miners are on strike.

When do we hear Government spokesmen, the press or other parts of the media use figures of 90, 97 or 99.6 per cent. of miners on strike as a demonstration of the strength of the dispute? It is an illustration of the misinformation that pours out of the "tube" daily. Those figures do not give confidence to the Tory Government. It is a sign that time is running out for them. *[Interruption.]* It explains the marked reluctance of Tory Ministers and others in the House to give straight answers to questions about the dispute.

If a Member asks a Minister in the Department of Energy whether he will answer questions on the consequences of the strike on power stations, to gain an admission about the power stations that have already closed because of the strike, the simple answer is no. The Minister is afraid to tell the truth.

When we ask about the depth and penetration of oil imports over the past 12 months—where they are coming from, and how much they cost the Government—the information, apparently, is unavailable. Either the Government are not telling the truth when they say that the information is not available, or they ought to organise the Departments better, because senior civil servants are being paid a great deal of money not to collect information to give the Government a picture of what is happening. When we ask how many power stations have been built over the past 10 years, apparently the information is not readily available. Plainly, the Department of Energy cannot even count. When we ask about the movement of coal and whether imports are coming through the ports, the Department of Energy is not prepared to tell us. And those are just the questions that the Table Office accepts.

Then there are all the questions that the Department of Energy will not even take from the Table Office. The Department is not prepared to say what happened on 5 November, when there was a yellow alert and the grid was in a state of partial emergency. It will not list the power stations having difficulty generating electricity. The

Department is not prepared to give any form of answer to those questions. It is a sign of the Government's weakness that they are not prepared to back up their claims with detailed facts and figures.

The blame for the dispute rests not with the miners, who have conducted a heroic struggle in the past nine months, nor with the NUM leadership, but squarely with the Cabinet and the Government. The Government planned for the dispute seven or eight years ago when they were in Opposition. A report by the present Secretary of State for Transport, commonly known as the Ridley report, was released by *The Economist* in 1978. It spoke of dealing with the enemies of a future Tory Government—in particular, the miners—and set out a plan for doubling the coal stocks, which took place in the first four years of the Tory Government, reaching a record total of 58,500,000 tonnes. It referred to contingency plans for the import of coal—we have seen the effect of that at Hunterston in Scotland—and spoke of encouraging hauliers to recruit non-union drivers. It also referred to establishing dual oil and coal-fired power stations the oil for which, despite the Government's refusal to answer questions, is widely rumoured to be costing £25 million to £30 million per week.

The Ridley report also spoke of cutting off the money supply to strikers and establishing a large mobile squad of police to deal with picketing. *[Interruption.]* That, together with the appointment of MacGregor, after he had butchered the steel industry, a subject on which my family has a personal axe to grind—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is entitled to make his speech in his own way without continual barracking and jeering from hon. Members.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you give an assurance that all the bars in this place have been kept open? If they have not, it might not be a bad idea if you made the necessary arrangements to get them open so that the Tories can get back where they came from and carry on drinking.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: This is a very serious subject. I hope that whether or not hon. Members agree with the hon. Member for Coventry, South-East (Mr. Nellist) they will at least give him the chance to make his speech in his own way.

Mr. Nellist: The Government's preparations for the dispute included the appointment of MacGregor, with his record of butchering the steel industry—my family has personal experience of those cuts—and his record as head of the Amax corporation in America in the 1970s. But all that preparation has not succeeded—despite those who worked throughout the dispute and are rightly described as scabs and despite pressure from the Government's starvation policies and direct pressure from the police. Miners in my area of Warwickshire have experienced that pressure in the past two or three days, with threats that unless individual miners went back to work the police would press more severe charges to ensure that they got sacked. Despite all the pressure on individual miners in recent days and weeks, the Government's preparation has failed.

The Government's preparation has failed largely because of the heroic role played by the women in the coal mining areas. In the first week of the dispute, MacGregor

said that he would like to hear from the miners' wives. He said that once and he never said it again because there are now 170 support groups established by the women in those areas. After the dispute is over, there will be a legacy of women who were previously trapped within four walls listening to interviews with the Prime Minister on the Jimmy Young show and being told that their only role was as providers for their menfolk and their children without any political or industrial role in the community. They have learnt what it is to struggle, to sacrifice and to organise and they will put those talents to use when the strike is over by coming into the organised labour and trade union movement.

Despite all those attacks, and in particular the organised, cynical and calculating use of the police against mining communities throughout the country, the Government have failed. I remember visiting my brother-in-law, an NUM member, at Selby three or four months ago when my sister was about to have a baby. We watched the television. At 20 minutes to six o'clock we watched the BBC news headlines. There was a story about seven policemen being sent down south to arrest post office robbers who were known to have sawn-off shotguns. Two of those policemen were shot. One was shot in the head and groin. He ended up on a life support machine and subsequently died. At a quarter to six I switched over to watch the ITV headlines, expecting the same sort of story. But the story was about 1,000 policemen on horseback, with dogs, truncheons and riot shields, escorting one man—Brian Green—into the Gascoine Wood area of the Selby coalfield.

That shows eloquently that, when it comes to the real issue of law and order, the Tory Government think it a bigger crime to stand on a picket line and defend jobs than to use sawn-off shotguns, attack post offices and kill police officers. [Interruption.] That is the sort of attack that has separated communities in the mining areas from the police and created gaps that will take generations to heal.

This morning on Radio 4 was one of the few occasions on which the voice of a miner's wife has been heard. She was a woman from Yorkshire. She said that before the strike, if someone was attacked in the street, he would telephone the police. "If the police are attacking you, who do you phone?", she asked.

That is the price that the Tory Government will have to pay—[Interruption.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker Order. Unless the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Cartiss) desists from interrupting from a sedentary position, I shall have no option but to ask him to withdraw from the Chamber. I hope that we can have order for the remainder of the hon. Gentleman's speech.

Mr. Nellist: That is the tab that the Government will have to pick up for the blitzkrieg that they have conducted against the pit villages of south Yorkshire—Armthorpe, Grimethorpe and Fitzwilliam. They have tried to soften up the pit communities. They have tried to warn the communities that surround power stations that when they try to move that coal in the weeks ahead police and perhaps troops will be used in a similar way in those communities.

Throughout the dispute, inside and outside the Chamber, we have heard the Government talk about economic and uneconomic pits. The Secretary of State has talked about a subsidy of £130 a week to keep miners

working in what he describes as uneconomic pits. They would more accurately be described as pits starved of investment, or facing difficult geological conditions. Even if it costs £130 a week to subsidise getting that difficult coal, would it really matter? That rabid Left-wing newspaper, *The Sun*, estimates that it costs £150 a week to keep someone on the dole. That would be the net economic cost of the sacrifice of the communities that the Tories are attacking.

So far, the Government have been prepared to spend £4,000 million attacking the miners and their families. They say that there is not enough money for houses or for education. That £4,000 million would be enough to provide an increase of £25 a week for everyone registered as being on the dole. [Interruption.] It would be enough to provide a tax cut of £4 a week for every insured worker. Yet the Tories say that there is not enough money to give benefits such as that, but they have the money to attack the National Union of Mineworkers, because the dispute is not about economic and uneconomic pits. It is about attacking a trade union and attempting to destroy it as a preface to weakening the rest of the trade union movement. It is not about the sequestration of NUM funds. In the words of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, it is about the castration of the NUM. It is about neutering the trade union movement.

The reasons are plain to see. Despite the Chancellor's attempt to deny it, and the talk from the Government Front Bench, there has been no economic upturn for working people. Five million are unemployed. Six million live in damp houses, and 9.7 million cannot afford a week's holiday away from home. Eighteen million people live on the poverty line. The Government's only solution is to mount further attacks on the unions that protect working people. That is the rationale behind the attempted destruction of the NUM. The miners are a shining example of how to oppose the Government. They show that workers have not been bought off in their struggle. They have not been bought off, as some sections of society have suggested, because they now own cars and houses with brass knockers on the front door.

In the past nine months I have been proud to stand on picket lines shoulder to shoulder with miners. It is where every Socialist, every trade unionist and every Labour Member from the bottom to the top of the tree ought to have been. The Tories have tried to isolate the NUM from the rest of working people using the media, the police and cuts in benefit. The miners will not be broken and the Tories will reap a whirlwind from the dispute. They are responsible for the rebirth of Socialist traditions in the NUM and the trade union movement as a whole.

The Prime Minister is respected in Britain for one thing alone. She stands resolutely for her class, for the moneyed, for the aristocracy, who pay for her to come to this place. She fights for her class. Among the miners and other workers there is a new generation of young men and women who are fighting for their class. The blame for the dispute rests with the Cabinet and the Government. The miners will not be broken. The whirlwind that the Government will reap will lead in the not too distant future to their downfall and an early election. Those in the ranks of the miners and the trade unions who are now joining the Labour party are doing so because of the dispute and because their eyes have been opened to capitalism and the way in which the Tories have attacked working people. They will not be satisfied with trying to patch up

[Mr. Nellist]

capitalism and piecemeal reforms, such as past Labour Governments have, unfortunately, put through in the past. They will want to ensure that no young person goes without work when they leave school, that no pensioner dies of hypothermia while the Government gather coal stocks of 58 million tonnes, that our children have the same sort of education as those who go to Eton and Harrow and that they have the same sort of homes as those on parliamentary salaries and above. That is the language of Socialism. Through their attacks on the workers, the Government are creating a new generation of Socialists out of the miners' strike.

11.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy (Mr. David Hunt) rose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the Minister, I have an apology to make to the House and the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Carttiss). I am afraid that I have done him an injustice. It appears that the hon. Member that I sought to reproach earlier for sedentary interventions was not him but the hon. Member for Leicestershire, North-West (Mr. Ashby).

Mr. Hunt: It will be difficult to respond to the stream of irresponsible invective that we have heard from the hon. Member for Coventry, South-East (Mr. Nellist) but I should like first to observe the normal courtesy of congratulating him on securing this opportunity to debate the important issues in the coal mining dispute. May I ask him to reflect for a moment that he was able to do so because he was successful in a ballot? It is a sad fact that precisely such an opportunity to participate in a ballot has been denied to the NUM and its members. That is especially inappropriate for a union that has a great tradition of democracy, and whose book states clearly in rule 43:

"A national strike shall only be entered upon as the result of a ballot vote of the Members".

Some areas were given an opportunity to vote and they decided two to one against joining a strike and many of those who voted in favour of a strike have carried on working pursuant to that democratic decision. The rest have chosen the only alternative. Deprived of the democratic right to a ballot, miners have been voting with their feet for an end to this tragic and unnecessary dispute. They are voting now with their feet in ever-increasing numbers.

Only a month ago, when I first came to this important responsibility, an average of 10 men a day braved the mobs to return to work. Three weeks ago about 75 men a day were abandoning the strike, two weeks ago the numbers rose to an average of 500 a day, and last week it doubled to an average of 1,000 men a day who rejoined their colleagues at the pits. Today, more than 2,200 have returned to work, bringing the total of NUM members no longer on strike to more than 60,000. That means that there are now more than 90,000 men at work in the industry, from a total of 222,000 employees.

Five times as many Conservative Members are present in the Chamber as Opposition Members. My hon. Friends

will ask why there has been this surge to work and why so many NUM members have defied the barricades. They are some of the bravest men in the country. As Lord Stockton said in the other place last week, they are some of the best men in the world. One must be brave to be one of the first four men who defied abuse and intimidation to return to work at Bilston Glen colliery on 5 June. This morning, 642 men were at work at that important pit.

Only two weeks ago, two men returned at Bersham colliery for the first time. Today 307 worked at that north Wales pit on the first two shifts. The hon. Member for Coventry, South-East has tried to exercise some influence at the Coventry colliery. I understand that he has been on the picket line there regularly. Nevertheless, today nearly 700 men are at work, which is a 60 per cent. attendance.

The hon. Gentleman talked about a struggle by the working classes, but he is talking about a fight in which miner is set against miner and community against community and about damaging internal strife within a great and proud industry.

Faced with a leadership of the NUM which openly boasts that its position has not budged an inch since the dispute started, miners must feel a growing sense of disillusionment about their leadership's totally intransigent attitude. Before them is the most generous offer ever made to miners since nationalisation. That offer includes: a guaranteed job for every mineworker who wants to stay in the industry—the kind of guarantee that makes my constituents in Merseyside green with envy; no compulsory redundancies and the highest redundancy benefits in western Europe; a pay increase to keep miners well ahead of average industrial wages; continuing investment on a substantial scale in the industry's future—£650 million more than originally envisaged in "Plan for Coal"; an undertaking now to examine the 4 million tonne capacity reduction proposed in March and to consider the future of the five particular pits under the industry's review procedures; a new independent advisory body within the colliery review procedures; and an enterprise scheme to bring new jobs to mining communities.

That is what the Board has offered. By contrast, what is Mr. Scargill offering his industry? Twenty producing coal faces have already been lost during the dispute so far, and a further 80 coal faces at about 50 collieries are causing serious concern.

The hon. Gentleman did not leave me much time to reply, so I must conclude my remarks. The Government want this great coal industry back to normal working as soon as possible. Those of us who care about the industry want to see a coal industry that increases its markets and makes itself highly competitive. The only way ahead for the industry is for the miners to reject the extremism of their leadership. The support for the hon. Gentleman is shown by the absence of his hon. Friends tonight.

The Question having been proposed after 10 o'clock and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.

Adjourned at twenty-nine minutes past Eleven o'clock.