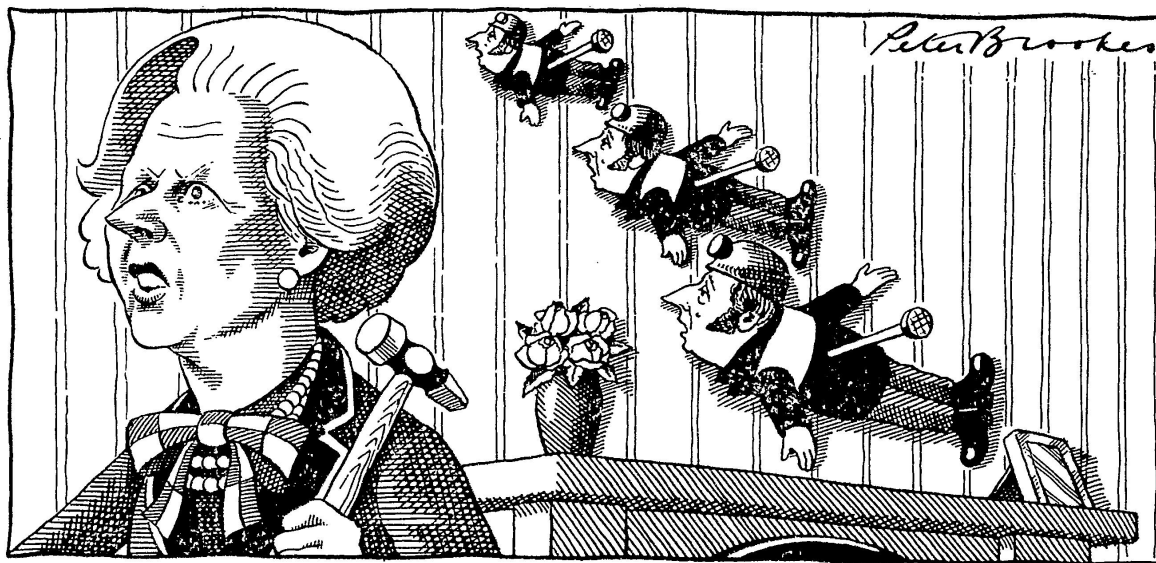


**From Saltley to the Nottinghamshire coalfield: control of the flying pickets could be a new benchmark in curbing industrial disputes, argues Peter Hennessy**



## Have the miners been nailed?

As news filtered back to Whitehall yesterday morning from the coalfields of Nottingham, Lancashire and the Midlands indicating that 44 pits, about a quarter of the national total, were working normally, it looked to officials that a 12-year-old demon was at last close to exorcism.

Since the 1972 coal strike, every civil contingency planner in Whitehall has had the words "Saltley Coke Depot" engraved on their heart. In the second week of February that year, Saltley, in Birmingham, contained the country's last substantial stockpile of coking coal. It was closed after a struggle involving at peak moments 800 police and 15,000 massed secondary pickets. The event changed the landscape of industrial relations in Britain for a decade. It became the symbol of naked trade union power used ruthlessly and successfully.

Saltley caused a fundamental rethink in Whitehall. It led to the dismantling of the old Home Office Emergencies Committee and the foundation of the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) in the Cabinet Office. The CCU remains Whitehall's "doomwatch" organization. It keeps constantly updated files on 16 essential industries and services, assesses their vulnerability to trades disputes and the degree of relief that can be won by policing or by putting in troops as alternative labour.

The CCU is not in the lead on the current coal dispute. With between four and six months' supplies of coal stockpiled at the power stations, plus an equivalent supply of the essential chemicals needed for electricity generation, the issue is not one that could require a state of

emergency under the Emergency Powers Act, 1920 in the medium-term at least. It is being treated in Whitehall as primarily a law and order issue, hence the attention devoted to the National Recording Centre at New Scotland Yard from which the rapid reinforcement, using 7,000 officers, of local police forces in the coalfields is being coordinated.

But the Cabinet Office planners, Mr David Goodall and Brigadier Tony Budd, are important members of the team briefing Mrs Thatcher's ad hoc committee on the coal dispute. And it will be the CCU which will have to revise the intelligence appraisals in its coal file when the dispute is over. Current Cabinet office evaluations are sanguine.

They recognize the importance of legislation enacted by the Thatcher administration banning secondary picketing and a substantial change in the climate of industrial relations since the winter crisis of 1979 that brought down the government of Mr James Callaghan. There are, however, no illusions about the possibility of direct action in defiance of the law, the Government and public opinion causing severe problems in the future. If, for example, the Yorkshire miners, assisted by large numbers of sympathetic trade unionists, decided to besiege the big coal-burning power stations in the Trent Valley and the Doncaster area - the backbone of the national electricity grid - there is very little the chief constables of Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire could do on the day to make sure supplies were not affected if the workforce could not enter the premises.

So there was relief and quiet satisfaction but no premature euphoria in Whitehall yesterday. The police action in Nottinghamshire and the Midlands was judged a significant event. But it looked like being a long and expensive haul, and nerves could fray. Parallell's with the coking coal depot in Birmingham were in the forefront of official minds. The first difference between Saltley in 1972 and Nottinghamshire in 1984 was the quality and robustness of the policing. The late Reginald Maudling, Home Secretary 12 years ago, bore the scars of Saltley but refused to reconsider his view that, in the end, the Heath government was powerless.

He recalled: "During the miners' strike [when] pickets threatened to close the Birmingham Coal Depot, and, in fact, succeeded in doing so, the then chief constable of Birmingham assured me that only over his dead body would they so succeed. I felt constrained to ring him the next day after it happened to inquire after his health! I am sure the decision he took was a wise one, because the number of strikers involved was so great, and feelings were running so high, that any attempt by the relatively small body of police who could be assembled to keep the depot open by force could have led to very grave consequences. Some of my colleagues asked me afterwards why I had not sent in troops to support the police, and I remember asking them one simple question: 'If they had been sent in, should they have gone in with their rifles loaded or unloaded?'"

The ability of police forces since the riots of 1981 to assist each other very swiftly with well-equipped and

trained officers has proved crucial to the shift in the balance of power in outbreaks of violent, or potentially violent industrial disorder of which yesterday's events provide the most convincing evidence to date. It is most unlikely that Mr Leon Brittan's memoirs will contain any passage comparable to Mr Maudling's.

But ministers can be notoriously wobbly on such matters, oscillating between premature euphoria and unjustified despair. There is still a need for confidence-building measures to be seen to be effective at the sharp end of the picket lines. The Government must consolidate its advantage. It could all unravel very rapidly if the flying pickets regain the initiative and official resolve crumbles.

There is no sign of that at the moment. The chief constables are determined to rid themselves of the stigma of Saltley. Mr Peter Joslin, Chief Constable of Warwickshire, said on Sunday: "We are no pushover. Enough is enough." The impression left at the Scotland Yard press conference was that the police have the men and the nationally coordinated tactics too.

Mr Scargill has always seen such confrontations as a war, "a class war" in which you "attack the vulnerable points", the power stations and coal depots. As chairman of the Barnsley Area Strike Committee of the NUM in 1972, he invented the new weapon of the massed flying secondary picket. It could be that the authorities have, at last, developed an effective defence in depth. If they have, March 19, 1984, will rank with February 10, 1972, the day Saltley was closed, as a benchmark in the history of industrial relations.

**Have the miners been nailed?**

From Saltley.

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