

Ronald Butt

With friends like Scargill . . .

Mr Arthur Scargill is a ruthless politician who wishes to revolutionize society and assist the birth of a socialist state. To this end he seeks to prove (using the strong arm of the miners' sectional interest) that the kind of politics for which the electorate twice voted when they sent Mrs Thatcher to Downing Street (and transferred so many ex-Labour votes to the Social Democrats) will not work.

He needs to establish that it is possible to break the Government's so far successful policy of laying down clear limits to the supply of public money to nationalized industries, and then letting their managements run them without government intervention by subsidizing pay claims or uneconomic production.

Any hope he has of success must depend on whether other unions could be persuaded to challenge public opinion by making common cause with the miners' union. If the strike were to spread, the industrially tranquil life which has been one of the most valued by-products of the Thatcher period would at least temporarily be threatened - and that, of course, involves some risk to the Government.

Yet the risk to Mr Kinnock and his colleagues is much greater since, in the end, this conflict may force them either to reveal more explicitly the kind of society they want (including the relative priority they give to socialism and democracy) or, more probably, to be seen so obviously avoiding doing so as to destroy their own credibility. For generations, the Labour Party has been a house divided but has more or less managed to avoid facing the truth about itself, and the question is only how much longer it can do so.

Put simply, the fundamental issue is whether we are to live in a free economy and society, with the government providing the (non-inflationary) conditions in which personal and commercial freedom can produce the wealth needed to pay for a sufficient standard of welfare for all - or whether it is to be a socialized state in which jobs are preserved by bureaucratic fiat, even when there is no economic market for what they produce; in which demand is engineered by borrowing of a kind that can lead only to inflation and the destruction of real value; in which private decisions are subordinated to bureaucratic.

In the past, Labour has paid reverence to socialism for rhetorical purposes, but its leaders in office have in practice retreated from it. They have done so, first, because faced with the reality as distinct from the theory, and looking at socialism where it operates, they have recoiled from its consequences.

Secondly, they know that, given a free choice, the people will not vote for it. Labour leaders have employed the rhetoric which they deemed necessary to control the leviathan party machine they need to carry

them to power, but in practice they try to preserve a mixed society. That is why Ramsay Macdonald chose capitalist rather than socialist measures, or resignation, to resolve the economic crisis facing him; it is why Attlee (after creating a welfare state broadly acceptable to most political opinion in its principles, if not all its details, and nationalizing some declining industries, settled for a mixed economy.

It is why Gaitskell fought to expunge the commitment to total socialism from the party's constitution and why Harold Wilson fought to turn Labour into (*de facto*) a social democratic party.

The inexorable advance of the left has now brought to the leadership a decent man of the legitimate left, Mr Neil Kinnock, who can welcome neither Mr Scargill's ends nor his chosen means. The only escape Mr Kinnock and his colleagues have found from their dilemma is to accuse Mrs Thatcher of smashing the old consensus; of bringing in hard-faced Thatcherism which precipitated hard-elbowing Scargillism. That is not the case.

Thatcherism came into existence because the "Scargillites" of the Sixties and Seventies gradually broke the consensus for which Gaitskell, George Brown and Wilson (in their different ways) had striven. It was the unions' "Scargillism" that destroyed the idea of a voluntarily planned economy and pay structure; that destroyed Wilson's attempt to capture and keep what was called the centre ground of politics.

The final triumph of Seventies' Scargillism (it was usually called Bennism at the time) was the revolution in the Labour Party's constitution, the abolition of the list of extremist organizations proscribed for Labour Party members, and the winter of discontent with which the unions destroyed Mr Callaghan's government as they had destroyed Mr Heath's.

What alternative was then left, except to try to make capitalism and a free society work in their own terms (while preserving the basic guarantees of the welfare state) which is what Thatcherism amounts to? There was that, or there was the revolutionary socialism which was the aim of the Bennites and the Militants and is now the purpose of Mr Scargill's spearhead. In practice, the official Labour Party could offer no convincing alternative of its own, which is why the Social Democrats have tried to create a party that could operate as an alternative to the Tories within a national consensus of basic principles, as the old Labour Party did. How can it be seriously suggested that this government could have gone down the Heath-Callaghan road to disaster?

Whoever, or whatever party, it was which destroyed the consensus that Mr Kinnock and his friends now bewail, it was certainly not Mrs Thatcher.

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