



A jovial Mr MacGregor in London yesterday: "strikers resolved to return" (Photograph Chris Harris)

Thatcher prepared for long strike

By Philip Webster and Ronald Faux

Mrs Margaret Thatcher emphasized last night in the most categorical terms she has so far used that the Government does not intend to intervene in the miners' strike, and made clear that it was ready for a long haul.

Addressing the Scottish Conservative Party conference in Perth, the Prime Minister voiced regret that the dispute was "dragging on" but mocked the claim of the National Union of Mineworkers that coal stocks at the power stations would last for only eight weeks. They had made the same claim on February 6 and that was 13 weeks ago, the Prime Minister said. There were enough stocks for many months to come.

Mrs Thatcher declared firmly: "We are not going to intervene in the coal dispute." There were great opportunities for a competitive coal industry and it was up to the miners and management of the National Coal Board to grasp them.

Some £2m a day had been invested in the coal industry since the Conservatives came to power, Mrs Thatcher said, and another £3,000m could be invested in the next four years.

The Prime Minister's speech, which covered the whole range of Government policies, effectively marked the start of her campaign for the European elections next month which will be regarded as a test of the recovery of the Labour Party under Mr Neil Kinnock's leadership.

She said that she did not

underestimate the task that lay ahead in the elections, but made clear her desire to convert Britain's European partners to the Conservative approach.

Clearly reacting to suggestions that her own tough negotiating style has been damaging to Britain's interests, Mrs Thatcher said the Conservatives would work not to destroy the Community but to preserve the best of its achievements and "to put it on a sounder basis for the tasks ahead".

She said: "In Europe we've stood up for fairer shares and better house-keeping. Oh yes, I admit, it has not always made us popular."

Citing Mr Nigel Lawson's "true radical Tory budget", the continued privatization of state industries, action to control excessive rate rises, help for home buyers and a return of economic confidence, Mrs Thatcher countered suggestions that the Government had been faltering since its election victory last June. She denied that it was being dictatorial.

Her message on the economy was optimistic. "Inflation is falling, output rising, productivity breaking all records - put those together and you get rising living standards and rising profits for investment. And that is precisely what is happening", she said.

The Conservative Party, Mrs Thatcher said, had begun to turn Britain round.

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