

Ronald Butt

The myths mined by Mr Scargill

The strike in the coal mines is a wholly unnecessary action which has only come about because Mr Arthur Scargill has been able to exploit miners' fears for their jobs and their deep mistrust of the Coal Board's chairman, Mr Ian MacGregor.

On any rational assessment, both the fears and the mistrust are unfounded. Mr MacGregor, partly because of his record in cutting British Steel down to economic size and because of the confidence the Prime Minister has in him, has actually been uniquely well placed to get investment money for the coal industry from the Government — and he has succeeded in doing so.

Massive investment in new mines has been offered in return for improved productivity. Because the worst 12 per cent of coal output loses £275m a year (with coal from the 20 least productive pits costing £89 a ton compared with £28 a ton at the best pits) the Government has sought to take out between 3 and 4 million tons of production a year. The aim has been to improve productivity annually by 4 per cent, but in practice has risen by only 4.7 per cent over 10 years.

Even so, investment in the coal industry has been at the rate of £2 million a day under Mr MacGregor, and total subsidies for the industry in the year ending March 31 were £1,300m (which includes £197m attributable to the strike and overtime ban). Nor have Mr MacGregor and this Government been more ruthless than their predecessors in closing uneconomic pits. Labour in 11 years closed 300 pits; in 9 years of Conservative government there were only 92 pit closures.

The coal board's intended cut in high-cost production would reduce mining manpower by 20,000 a year, which is the same rate of reduction as under Sir Norman Siddall. But there are to be generous redundancy payments for those who want them and, more to the point, all who do not want redundancy will be found work in pits elsewhere.

In short, the Coal Board's case is so utterly reasonable, and its actions are so unorthodox that the question why there is a strike at all might seem to defy rational answer. The reputation which Mr MacGregor brought with him from British Steel is a large part of the explanation. Mr Scargill has used this to ensure that Mr MacGregor should never gain the confidence of his workforce. He has depicted Mr MacGregor as a hard and alien hatchet man which (though unfair) is a characteristic example of the potent mythology by which revolutionaries always fan the flames of their insurrections.

Mr Scargill has been much assisted by Mr MacGregor's lack of interest in the art of communication. Almost all his public appearances leave the impression that he considers the merits of his case so obvious that they hardly need repetition or clarification, and the flaws of Mr Scargill's to need no rebuttal. No politician would take such a risk with a political opponent, which is what Mr Scargill is.

Politicians understand the danger that the big lie, or the unfounded charge, may be accepted for truth if it is not repeatedly rebutted. The unfounded charge which has been Mr Scargill's most powerful ammunition has been that something different is happening under Mr MacGregor than would have happened under another chairman.

So, by appointing Mr MacGregor the Government handed Mr Scargill a weapon which has enabled him to do great damage at some considerable risk to economic recovery. It is, however, also a weapon which will ultimately destroy Mr Scargill as a significant figure in revolutionary socialism. It has tempted him into

an offensive that is bound to fail. All the Government's contingency planning is for a very long dispute, continuing until the end of the summer. Stocks are not being drawn down at a dangerous rate; oil for electricity has been imported; with 44 pits still working, Mr Scargill has made no advance since the strike began.

Violent picketing has alienated the public and Mr Scargill now seems to have more difficulty in raising the numbers he wants for his rallies. With the shortage of money biting more painfully for the striking miner and his family in the holiday period, resolution will be stretched to the limit. When the limit is reached nothing should be contrived to save Mr Scargill's credibility, or raise his face from the mire in which he has chosen to plunge it.

Yet when all this is said, the strike will have proved damaging not only economically but also for the Government's standing with many rank-and-file trade unionists. Simple victory for the Coal Board is not enough; much more should be done to make the miners see the strength of the Government's case. Like government, successful industrial management depends on consent and on the understanding of its workers.

No government can afford too many enemies. Though there is no need to take too seriously Mr David Basset's dramatic threats of the worst of all winters of discontent next year, there is increased restiveness in the public sector, and the Government needs to do more than it has been doing to make its case politically.

Ministers should also tread sensitively, and it was not helpful when Mr Tom King, the Employment Secretary, suddenly revealed last weekend (in answer to journalists' questions) that the Trade Union Bill now ending its progress through Parliament may be amended to allow immunity only to those strikes which have been sanctioned by a majority in a ballot.

As the bill is now absurdly worded, unions are obliged to hold a strike ballot but can still declare a strike, with immunity, if the ballot has a no-strike majority. (Thus, theoretically, a strike could be declared with immunity on (say) a 30 per cent affirmative vote.) The anomaly arose because it was at first felt best not to pressure unions about the precise majority needed, and because it was assumed that in practice they would not flout an anti-strike majority.

So the proposed amendment, though it came as a bolt from the blue to Mr King's colleagues, is simply common sense. But its timing in the middle of the miners' strike (though this has given it added relevance) looked too much like devising law on the trot as a political expedient for current problems. What should have been in the Bill from the first looked like an anti-union gesture.

While the Government leaves Mr MacGregor to see Mr Scargill off, it needs to do more thinking about how to convince union members that what it is doing for efficiency and financial solvency is to their own advantage. It should consider what it can do where there are closed pits to assist in bringing work to those who do take redundancy.

Two years after Disraeli's death, an article in *The Times* observed that he had discerned the Conservative working man in the inarticulate mass of the English populace "as the sculptor perceives the angel prisoned in a block of marble". The Government needs that discernment today, and a more fluent tongue, as it attempts to liberate the individual trade unionists who have been used by the likes of Mr Scargill.

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