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THERE IS A WAR ON

Until the dock strike ministers thought that the Government was handling the coal strike rather well. That took too narrow a view of the dispute for our liking, but there were facts to support it. For 19 weeks, for instance, no single union had been able or willing to give effective support for Mr Scargill. Some 65,000 workers at the NCB had continued to work, with a gradual but increasing return from strike. Coal was produced, which meant that the country's ability to withstand a total shutdown at the pits was consequently extended until next January at least. Moreover every succeeding forecast by Mr Scargill about the imminence of victory or the likelihood of a wider industrial war with the assistance of more trade unions was discredited by events. Taking a narrow view, therefore, ministers felt they had contained the effect of Scargillism very successfully. What changed everything with the dock strike?

First this view failed to take account of the increasing distress felt by the public at the daily spectacle of massive criminal violence and intimidation going unpunished and, in spite of the efforts of the police, often unchecked. Secondly the insistence of ministers that this was purely an industrial dispute, in defiance of its criminal and insurrectionary flavour, suggested either a dangerous insouciance unworthy of a government committed to law and order, or a tacit admission that since the Government had not the power to meet the threat, it would pretend that there was no threat in the first place.

Thirdly, and maybe as a consequence of the suspicions raised by this insouciance, the dock strike which was clearly engineered to coincide with the pit strike lent substance to the thought that Mrs Thatcher might suddenly, after all, be defeatable. That was not just evident in some trade union quarters. It showed up in the behaviour of the financial markets. It doubtless crystallized a more general unease in the public mind. It rippled through Parliament. It may even have rationalized in the minds of some Cabinet ministers a palpable dissociation from their leader which has not gone unnoticed in recent months.

The point has thus now been reached when the political consequences of a prolonged pit strike are too serious to permit ministers to describe the strike merely as an industrial dispute between the employees and the management of a nationalized industry. There are much wider

implications to it, even without the dock strike, though it seems that it took the dock strike to open ministerial minds to this fact.

Of course those wider implications are not the responsibility of Mr MacGregor and the National Coal Board. It must still be in their interest to settle in a way which preserves the management's right to be the ultimate arbiter of which pit can be kept open and which should be closed. That right is fundamentally challenged by Mr Scargill. That is why we should not be deluded into thinking that a settlement was so close that only one word - 'beneficially' - divided the parties. It is not an innocent word. It symbolises the division between two philosophies - one which seeks to run pits, regardless of cost, as a kind of occupational therapy for miners; the other which wants to apply the usual commercial criteria to pits, as all other industrial enterprises do, particularly in the harshly competitive field of energy.

The NCB will therefore want the details of its aborted offer to lay on the table. There is some hope that more miners will drift back to work after a few weeks of the holiday season. In the meantime some thought will be given to closing down any pit which can closely match the list of requested redundancies, and even of asking the Government to change the regulations to allow striking miners to return to work only for so long as they need to collect their redundancy payments and be off.

That policy is obviously the only one for the Coal Board, since its purpose is to produce coal and it needs a labour force to do so which is not permanently being radicalized onto the barricades by Mr Scargill. It is a measure of its difficulty that most private estimates suggest that in addition to Mr Scargill's few thousand shock troops, there might be at least 50,000 more members of the NUM whose militancy will be difficult to overcome while on strike, and even more difficult to accommodate within working relationships at the pithead after the strike has ended.

For ministers, however, it is different now. There is a war on. There always has been such a war for the hearts and minds of the British people, at least since 1969 when Mr Harold Wilson lost out to trade union power. Mrs Thatcher was elected in 1979 to reassert the power of Parliament and the law over the increasing challenges to them from trade unions. A combination of political neglect and

gradualist legislation postponed any decisive confrontation in the first parliament. But it was always going to come and not necessarily in the guise of a general strike since the structure of the modern trade union movement makes that much less likely.

Mr Scargill is the exemplar not just of coercive trade union power, but of a kind of undeclared civil war against society. Indeed, in his case, it is not undeclared since he has repeatedly made clear his intentions. He has declared war on British society and society, being British and fair, and lazy and prone to ridicule extremists rather than to take them seriously, has postponed its response. Not surprisingly ministers have also wanted to postpone the moment of retaliation for that reason. But they cannot now expect to cope adequately and firmly with the challenge posed by Mr Scargill unless they tell the British people the score.

We have been on the defensive for nineteen weeks. Those have been tenable tactics, provided everybody has been in the picture; and that is where hitherto ministers have failed. Mrs Thatcher and her ministers must now combine words with deeds. Words must convey the importance that ministers attach to this crisis, their determination to overcome it and its profound significance for society. Without such words the deeds which must follow in meeting the physical challenge of violence, intimidation and disruption will not command the public support which may be necessary.

Mr Scargill will survive any settlement and will hope to preserve his shock troops, duly radicalized, to fight another day. So this strike must only end in circumstances where such a recurrence is recognized to be wholly unrealistic. It is time for the Prime Minister to come to the front of the stage and tell the people - not just her backbenchers, not just Parliament - what the issues are and how she and her government intend to deal with them. She is at her best leading from the front and the country is now faced with a frontal assault even though it comes from within. In the long history of Britain there have been many such epic struggles to secure and maintain society's freedom under the law against all kinds of threats to that freedom. At such a time leadership needs to speak to the people and inspire each citizen to see that the cause of freedom, within and without, is a heroic one which ultimately affects us all.

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