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A HAUNTING VOTE

Mr Eric Hammond, the leader of the Electricians Union, who was booed and hissed even before he reached the rostrum at Blackpool yesterday said almost everything that needed to be said to and about the Labour Conference. "The cult of violence will haunt this movement for years to come." At this point he was drowned in a wave of hostility until Mr Eric Heffer, from the Chair, appealed for him to be heard on the grounds (advanced, it seemed without intended irony) that it was a Labour Conference which had basic tolerance. That is about the last description that could be rationally applied to the mood of the Conference yesterday which greeted Mr Scargill with a prolonged standing ovation and threw itself not simply behind the miners' industrial case in this dispute, but also behind the NUM leader's intimidatory methods of seeking to win it.

Mr Tony Benn also made it absolutely clear when he answered the debate for the national executive committee yesterday that the party's leadership had no words of criticism against Mr Scargill. The NEC (in spite of Mr Kinnock's tactical misgivings) had endorsed the NUM's motion as it stood, including the assertion that the government's policies involved unlawful actions by the police, organized violence against the miners and the unconstitutional use of a nationally controlled police. In case anybody should have any doubts about where the NEC stood Mr Benn officially declared the party's position. There was no criticism of the NUM for its handling of the dispute; no criticism of the miners who had been "provoked" to violence; no wish to nudge them towards compro-

mise. To Mr Benn, the miners were fighting for everyone from the young unemployed to the blacks harassed by police, and including "us all".

Yesterday's session on the miners' strike and police harassment left no doubt about how the activists who now control the Labour Party see this dispute. Any claim that the miners were striking in the NUM's interests was renounced by Mr Scargill himself; they were, he said, fighting not for the NUM but "against the whole concept of this government's economic policy". In other words, it was nakedly a political strike, and nobody minded that Mr Scargill had manipulated it with insurrectionist methods. To counter the public's rejection of these methods virtually every speaker yesterday stood truth on its head with the honourable exceptions of Mr Hammond, and, in his more gingerly way, of Mr Basnett who advised the conference to keep it as an industrial dispute.

Picket line violence was extenuated on the grounds that (in the words of Mr Ron Todd, of the Transport Workers) there are many forms of violence other than cuts and bruises: there was the "economic violence that destroys jobs" and "the state violence" which put pressure on miners' families. Mr Ray Buckton of ASLEF said that "the kind of violence" he was opposed to was that "against us ordinary working class people". The rhetoric of the day presented it as a class struggle in which batons and "Gestapo-type methods" were used. One striking miner, moving a resolution on the police actually offered "greetings from the police state of Nottinghamshire" and said that those who criticized the miners were

"condemning the finest class warriors this movement has seen for many years."

Some who think that they have seen it all before at Labour Conferences may assume that all this is no more than the latest outburst of conference rhetoric that has no significance for the real world outside. That would be to misunderstand the mood of the activists, their connexion with the events that every citizen now sees on his television screens and their ability to control Mr Kinnock and his colleagues, who can now hardly resist them. It cannot be a matter of indifference that there was no demand from the Labour leadership for violence on the picket lines to be stopped. It cannot be of no significance that even the Shadow Home Secretary Mr Gerald Kaufman felt obliged to say that Mrs Thatcher was the real author of violence because she had provoked the coal strike.

When reason is given no hearing and falsehood masquerades as truth; when a man such as Mr Scargill is the hero of the day, then it must follow that Labour is in very bad shape as a candidate for office. Mr Hammond warned the Conference that electorally the Labour Party would pay for its attitude to violence. If it were not so the prospect for democracy in Britain would indeed be fraught with danger.

A persistent theme yesterday was the media's distortion of the miners' strike. It is a great pity that television cannot run in full, and without comment, yesterday's debate in prime viewing time so that every citizen could see for himself what Labour has now come to. Mr Kinnock will have a hard task to restore credibility to his party when he speaks today.

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