

Runcie challenges Tory handling of miners' strike

By Clifford Longley, Religious Affairs Correspondent

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, has delivered an outspoken challenge to the Government's handling of the miners' strike and to its economic policies in general.

Asking: "How long can we wait for jam tomorrow?" he denounced unprecedented levels of unemployment, despair and poverty in the community, inequitable sacrifices and those who "treat people as scum".

He was speaking to *The Times* after the Church of England's senior bishops had met in London under his chairmanship, and his remarks are thought to reflect the tone of their discussions.

On Saturday the Bishop of Birmingham, Dr Hugh Montefiore, who holds the key "social responsibility" chairmanship in the Church, condemned the Government's "politics of confrontation" and said that the miners' strike was motivated by understandable fear of the future.

Meanwhile the Bishop of Durham, the Right Rev David Jenkins, yesterday described his attempts to sway the Secretary of State for Energy, Mr Peter Walker, as almost a "dialogue of the deaf".

Mr Walker had asked the bishop, as one who had studied Marxist theory, to declare whether Mr Arthur Scargill was bent on a political crusade to undermine democracy. The bishop disclosed that he had a private meeting with Mr Walker last Wednesday.

The indications are that most senior bishops wish to see the Church take a high profile in present public political controversy, in spite of the considerable risks. A relatively small number, perhaps no more than half a dozen diocesan bishops of the 44, believe that the Church should either support the Government or keep silent.

In his interview with *The Times*, Dr Runcie called in

question, the Government's fundamental economic objectives. Violence on the picket lines, he said, could be traced back to violent language, to "the cheap imputation of the worst possible motives, treating people as scum in speech".

He challenged policies which caused "unemployment on an unprecedented scale, poverty, bureaucracy, despair about the future of some communities, and inequitable sharing of the sacrifices called for".

If those were the consequences then an Archbishop of Canterbury had to question the policies, even if economic growth, better living standards, higher pay and the recovery of



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national pride were self-evidently worth aiming for. Anger, fear, a sense of injustice and violence were damaging the fabric of the nation, Dr Runcie said.

He condemned violent picketing, but spread the blame for it wider than the miners. "In a society where there is felt to be unfairness, or in a society where things matter more than people, or where there is a lack of meaning, or responsibility or fulfilment to life, it comes out in this awful cancer of violence."

People were being desensitized to violence, Dr Runcie said. Violent language distorted the truth, poisoned the atmosphere and inflamed passion. "Abuse, the cheap imputation of the worst possible motives, treating people as scum in speech, all this pumping vituperation into the atmosphere has a deep effect on the possibilities of physical violence."

Dr Runcie went on to say that Britain needed leadership which would unite, not divide, the nation, adding: "That's not an attack on the Government. I think there are people in all the parties who have a much greater sense of agreement than you might think, leadership which would unite and not divide the nation."

Asked what would follow if there was no change of course, Dr Runcie replied: "Bitterness and anger will spread especially if power supplies are affected. We shall all suffer economically, and the divisions will take generations to heal... there is a danger there will be an increased authoritarian kind of government, either from the right or the left."

He began the interview by saying: "Archbishops should stick to principles", and ended by saying that he wanted to avoid simplistic statements, but "as a Christian you have got to speak for those who are suffering most".

The interview adds the archbishop's full weight to the Church's unprecedented intervention in the political arena, and comes on the eve of the conference of the Conservative Party, once a traditional ally and friend of the Church of England.

A factor to justify this new political role, in the minds of some bishops, appears to be the lack of effective political resistance to the Government from the "middle ground" of secular politics, because the Labour Party is seen as tied to Mr Scargill.

The bishops seem to be well aware that they risk permanently alienating many of their traditional supporters. So far, though, there is a surprising absence of evidence of a grassroots revolt against the bishops' lead. Letters they have been receiving from the public are far from unanimous in criticizing the direction the Church is taking.

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