



P.O. Box 7, 200 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8EZ. Telephone: 01-837 1234

END GAME

As we approach the conclusion of the miners' strike – since even in the light of last night's rejection by the union of the Coal Board's proposals the effective end of this dispute is really in sight – there will be an understandable temptation to rush things through and to ignore points of enduring principle which, after heavy drafting sessions, only too often become relegated to points of detail.

There is now a Coal Board document which is officially stated to be the final word from Hobart House. Given the Coal Board's negotiating record since July, when it started to make serious and damaging concessions both to Mr Scargill and, later, to Nacods, this newspaper would have no profound confidence in the professed finality of that document any more than it believes that the substance of a settlement with the Mineworkers Union on these terms holds much hope of a healthy future for the British coal industry. Our own ideas for the essential restructuring of the industry which have been put frequently in these columns already, will be deployed in fuller detail when work resumes. In the meantime, however, the Coal Board's final position has to be taken at its full word because it has now not only received the endorsement of Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State (and therefore by extension the Prime Minister) but because its finality, at least, if not its merits, have been agreed by Mr Willis and his colleagues on the TUC.

Not too much should be made of that agreement, but we should be clear about it. Mr Willis and his colleagues, individually and collectively, have agreed with the Secretary of State that the document cannot be further amended. They have said that it provides no basis for further negotiation. That is what Mr Walker and Mr MacGregor assume they will have told the national officials of the NUM yesterday. They have not therefore recommended the docu-

ment. They have nothing to say about the merits of a settlement based on it.

Last night's rejection thus again restores Mr Scargill's freedom of manoeuvre, just as he did at Congress in September. Then he extracted promises of full TUC support for his strike without having to concede any substantial TUC involvement in his operations. The fact that the TUC has been negotiating on behalf of Mr Scargill's union over this weekend reflects divisions within his NEC. But we should not delude ourselves too soon into thinking that, now that the TUC has discharged this limited function, it will have much effect on the outcome of the argument which will continue to unfold between factions within the NUM.

Whatever tactical calculations can be made after today's delegate conference about future political developments within the NUM, the Coal Board's final position is now available for assessment. It can be judged against the underlying principles in defence of which the strike has had to be resisted at so much social financial and political cost to the country. The original principle was an industrial and economic one. It concerned the duty of a public enterprise to manage its operations on behalf of its owners, the taxpayers, but with due regard for the wellbeing of those working in the industry. To discharge that responsibility the Coal Board had to preserve its final managerial prerogative to take decisions which serve the best interests of the industry, always respecting agreed procedures within it but remembering that the overall interest of the industry, and its paymasters, was not to run it as an expensive system of outdated industrial welfare, but as an organization which could make a valuable economic contribution to Britain's economic future.

Mr Walker and Mr MacGregor will assert that the Coal Board's final document subscribes to these industrial prin-

ciples. The Coal Board's final duty to take managerial decisions is upheld and, should the NUM eventually agree, the union's respect for that prerogative and compliance with the preliminary procedures will also be upheld.

The economic principles are less clearly to be seen. It is true that the Coal Board in the document asserts the view that the union membership's best interests would be served by the development of an economically sound industry. That has nowhere been asserted by the NUM which, if it had agreed to the document as a whole would have recognized only implicitly the economic case. Such an omission can only spell trouble for the future, and it should not have been left so vague.

This vagueness will aggravate the detailed negotiations that would have to ensue on questions of pay, amnesty for convicted miners and composition of the review bodies. But there is an even more important reason for regret that the Mineworkers Union might have been allowed to escape from any explicit embrace of the sound economic principle which the Coal Board has spelt out on its own, and for which it has held out over all these months. That concerns the conduct of the dispute which apparently started as an industrial and economic one and subsequently developed into an issue concerning major questions of public order, freedom, violence and constitutional authority.

So much has thus been at stake, though none of those issues will feature in the final settlement. It should have been all the more important, therefore, to see that the industrial and economic elements of the dispute were so clearly expressed that they needed no further explanation to reassure the general public that the struggle was worth being joined. Signatures on the document would not have been enough to reassure the nation of that point.

End Game.

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