

Ronald Butt

Scargill's gift to Thatcher

In Trafalgar Square at the weekend, Mr Arthur Scargill told a rally of his supporters that his strike had "motivated a resistance movement similar to the one that had worked throughout the Second World War". That is indeed his great achievement and the British people may come to feel that they owe him a debt of gratitude.

The resistance Mr Scargill has motivated is not, however, that of the miners' strike, which is now collapsing with nothing to show for it but the hardship of the misled men and their families. The significant resistance is that of the Nottinghamshire and Midlands miners who from the start have held out against Mr Scargill's call for blind obedience, and of those workers in other trade unions who have resisted every attempt to bring them out in his support.

It has been the Nottinghamshire miners, working despite intimidation, the transport workers who insisted on moving coal, the power workers who were determined to stay on duty, and the dockers who refused to stay out on strike, who have ensured the defeat of Scargillism. In doing so they have struck a blow which may well have shaken loose the bonds of feudal trade unionism under which workers who have put themselves under a union's protection, as a medieval man submitted to a feudal lord, were required too often against their own real interest to follow wherever their leaders led.

The recent desperate attempts of the TUC and even of the Labour Party to secure a negotiated settlement to prevent the final rout of Mr Scargill's regime tells its own tale. In one sense, Mr Kinnoch and his colleagues should benefit even more than Mrs Thatcher from the defeat of Mr Scargill's type of militancy, which represents everything suffered by Labour moderates and members of the legitimate left at the hands of the hard left. They (like responsible trade union leaders) cannot wish success to tactics that put democratic socialism at risk.

Yet they also see that successful resistance by ordinary trade union members to the demands of their barons could strike at the essential power structure and force it to go in new directions. Some moderates might welcome this, but the vast majority of Labour activists, little though some of them may like Scargillism, do not relish change in the power base which has sustained their party for so long.

They know that Mr Scargill's ambitions have been defeated by trade unionists who have houses, mortgages and savings (except to the extent that Mr Scargill has drained them away) and who have come to see the connection between the marketability of their product and their own prosperity. They are the very voters against whom Mr Benn complained bitterly in the 1979 election on the grounds that, having bought their council houses, they dared, in a wild gesture of individualism, to bedeck a new front-door with a brass knocker, and even sometimes put a Tory poster in their window. The newfound confidence of the individual property-owning trade unionist is a cause of real alarm in the Labour Party.

All this represents a great challenge to Mrs Thatcher and when the strike ends she will need to respond with sensitivity and imagination. Seeing Mr Scargill off will assure the Conservatives of nothing. During recent months there has been a seepage of support from both directions to the Alliance. It would not surprise Conservative strategists if the Alliance pushed Labour into

third place in the coming months. In theory, of course, the Conservatives would prefer a party structure within which powers alternated between themselves and another party that accepted a free economy rather than a socialist party. But they also know that (as demonstrated in a study of the British electoral system by Dr Gordon Reece of Bristol University just published by Conservative Action for Electoral Reform) the effect of the Alliance could well be to let Labour in.

The key fact shown by Dr Reece's persuasive and strictly academic study is that while Labour needs only 23 per cent of votes to remain the second largest party, the Conservatives have cause to worry about their existence as a major party if their vote drops to 32 per cent in a situation in which the Alliance was a serious competitor. In the latest opinion poll by Gallup it was down to 35 per cent with Labour and the Alliance at 32 and 31.5 per cent respectively.

Mrs Thatcher has to address her mind to the need to be much more responsive to the mass of potential Conservative voters, and to the Two Nations syndrome of North and South. Some of her ministers will need reminding that it will not do to think as though the Tories were a southern middle-class party. Equally there are risks in Mr Nigel Lawson's ideas (now apparently abandoned) for removing the "distorting" tax advantages for mortgages and pensions, advantages which, whatever the rational case against them, help lay the foundations of widespread property ownership. She also has to take note of the clear evidence from the Gallup poll that only 25 per cent of Conservatives opted for tax cuts at the expense of social services, while 46 per cent wanted more social services and 25 per cent chose the status quo.

This does not mean that there is no possibility of removing wasteful and unnecessary state provision, or of shifting some responsibilities from state to private. (The long-term case for restructuring the health and welfare services on more rational lines remains).

Nor does it support the often irresponsible attacks on some of the Government's economies. But it is increasingly important that the Government should not seem indifferent to accusations of reducing standards in such services as hospitals on which the great majority rely.

Mrs Thatcher's instincts support this position but her rhetoric of personal responsibility, and the undoubted need to resist demands for greater total spending, do not make it easy for her to acknowledge it. Nor, so far, has she brought herself to address the rank-and-file trade unionists directly on how she sees their position when this destructive strike is over.

The way should be open for a more responsible and decentralized kind of trade unionism which is less baronial and more open to local bargaining in the light of local conditions, recognizing that each worker's prosperity rests on the productivity of his work. That should involve, wherever possible, worker's participation in the profitability of their work. But all this will only happen with government encouragement and it cannot be taken for granted.

Trade unionism could quickly fall back into the old ways which prevailed before Mr Scargill reduced them to tragic absurdity. This strike's end will be a great opportunity for Mrs Thatcher: what she says, and how she says it, will hardly be less important than what she does.

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The Times (London, England), Thursday, Feb 28, 1985; pg. 10; Issue 62074. (1150 words)

Category: News

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Gale Document Number:CS168530012