

Scargill's Insurrection or MacGregor's Butchery?

Editorial

When Churchill returned as Prime Minister in 1951 he stated that he had not taken office again to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire. Yet the process of dismantling the British Empire continued under his government. The relative decline of British power coupled with the rise of nationalism in the colonies made this course of events inevitable. There was nothing that Churchill could do about it.

What held true for the British Empire holds true for the British coal industry. The changing pattern of energy supply in the world benefited the coal industry in the 1970s and improved the bargaining position of the workers in that industry. Developments in the 1980s are having the opposite effect. The failing price of oil, the development of new areas of coal supply in the world and the increasing importance of nuclear power all tend to diminish, and will probably diminish further, the economic role for coal mined in Britain. It was not within the powers of a talented imperial propagandist to maintain the British Empire: it is equally not within the powers of a talented union propagandist to maintain a particular pattern of production in the British coal industry.

Of all strikes in the British economy, the essential features of those in the coal mining industry can be most easily understood without recourse to the personalities involved. Of all strikes in recent years, the coal-miners' strike of 1984-5 has been most dominated by the public's perception of the personalities involved. The strike has thus been at best imperfectly understood. Those people who have seen the strike as a battle of personalities, as Scargill v MacGregor, will also misunderstand the nature of a "solution" when it arrives, greeting something which can only be of a temporary nature as the heralding of a brave new dawn.

Secret ballots (or lack of them), picket-line aggro, Scargill the revolutionary and MacGregor the hatchet man all have a place in the everyday drama of political life G.B. 1984-85. But it still remains true that the particular situation of the British coal industry within the world and national economy ultimately determine the nature and size of that coal industry.

Natural resources

Much confusion is engendered by the statement that Britain has approximately 300 years of coal stocks left, and that this is a priceless national asset. Such talk is on a par with claims that a country's wealth is dependent upon the "natural resources" which it possesses. Yet there are many countries in Africa which are rich in natural resources but economically poor, whilst some countries like Japan have next to no "natural resources" but are extremely wealthy. The "300 years of coal" are only valuable if the coal remains cheap in comparison with coal mined elsewhere in the world or with alternative forms of energy. If other forms of energy are more efficient than coal, it would be quite senseless to dig coal out of the ground in Britain. It matters little that these other forms of energy may be produced abroad. The fact that Japan imports the raw material for her energy requirements has not hindered her economic development. Indeed, it may even be that having no home-grown energy production to subsidize has enabled the Japanese to purchase their energy needs more cheaply and consequently speeded their economic development.

All this is not to deny that coal mined in Britain may have some part to play in the future energy needs of the British economy. Equally it is not to guarantee that coal mined in Britain definitely does have a part to play in the future energy needs of the British economy. It merely means that the coal should be mined because it is cheap and not because it is British.

Political mining

If the economics of energy production in the world determine the size and structure of the

coal industry, the peculiar nature of the coal industry within Britain has determined the character of the 1984-5 strike. The National Coal Board has a legal monopoly over the production of coal in the United Kingdom. Any attempt to produce coal without the permission of the NCB would result in prosecution. The inevitable economic inefficiencies generated by government interference in the production of coal have brought disadvantages for consumers and workers alike. Obviously consumers suffer when they have to pay above the odds for coal. At a debate on workers' control in Harrogate in 1977 Arthur Scargill said of the 1972 strike: "Experience shows clearly that this (worker participation) would be disastrous for the trade union movement. If the miners in 1972 had been part of the NCB management, they would have had before them the statistical data then available and, undoubtedly, the decision would have been taken not to concede a wage increase because the finances were not available. What was required in 1972, and what was eventually decided, was a political decision and not simply an economic decision."

A "political decision" in this sense means a decision to increase the subsidy to the mining industry. In 1972 the NUM, like other unions in the nationalised sector, knew that the only barrier to a wage increase was the government and the amount of taxes it was willing to allocate to the mining industry. At first blush this may seem like an attractive position for the miners, but recent events have revealed its more unpleasant aspects. For one group of workers to be placed in a position where they are opposed to the power of the state is a source of needless confrontation. It can also be particularly painful if the government decides to exert itself against that group of workers.

In 1974 Heath, never an adroit political operator, went to the country with a bogus issue of "Who governs?". The country was not fooled and decided that it was not Heath who should govern. Although the miners broke no laws by striking in 1974 and Heath was foolish enough to pick a fight with them at a time of rocketing oil prices, the myth arose that the miners "overthrew" the Tory government. The miners were in fact only

responsible for the fall of the Heath government in the sense that I would be responsible for Heath's suicide if I opened the flat window, invited Heath to jump out and he duly obliged.

The Tory party, like the "Left" in this country, swallowed the myth of 1974 whole and duly prepared for the rerun. Coal stocks were built up, private road hauliers were brought in and an "elderly American" employed as NCB chairman. Battle was provoked by the proposed closure of Cortonwood pit in March 1984, shortly after the end of the winter cold spell. It would seem quite ludicrous if companies such as ICI or ICL planned to confront their workers in this way, but this is part of the logic of nationalisation.

Nationalisation versus workers

Workers who strike in an industry which has monopoly production of a particular item - particularly when that item provides a large share of the energy requirements of the economy - run the risk of suffering from draconian measures by governments. If a strike leads to the severe curtailment of an important item, the pressure from the rest of society is naturally to ensure that economic life returns to normal. Pressure has taken the form of attempts to restrict the rights of trade unions and the eventual outlawing of strikes. The more an economy is nationalised, the more the costs are of economic dislocation and the more the pressure grows to prevent industrial action. Those who criticize the outlawing of strikes in communist countries because this shows that communists are people who inherently like suppressing free expression are missing the point. Given the nature of Eastern Bloc economies, the disastrous results of strikes there make the restriction of trade union rights well-nigh inevitable. The right to strike will only return to communist countries when their economics have been sufficiently restructured to minimise the economic dislocation which strikes bring. Similarly, the full-bearded interference of successive governments in the British coal industry will only end with the end of nationalisation. Talk of communists in the NUM and Thatcherites at the NCB is beside the point. The political ingredient is present in the

nationalisation of the industry. The cauldron was already bubbling and the addition of Scargill's brew and MacGregor's potions were all that was needed for the pot to boil over.

Here's to the next strike

It is extremely unlikely that the coal strike will lead to any sizeable economic benefits for either side. The gains will be measured in political terms, but these will be ephemeral and liable to rapid erosion. The fall of the Heath government was but a hiccup in the history of the British Conservative Party. The defeat of the NUM will also only be of a temporary nature. Even if the NUM is split, the benefits in a nationalised industry of the workers acting together should be sufficient to bring about a partial reconciliation when industrial action is next considered.

All this - the fail of Tory governments, embarrassment for Labour oppositions, humiliation for a major union and penury for workers - all this and more are part and parcel of the politicisation of an activity which is essentially economic. As long as the coal industry stays nationalised it would be wise to buy your tickets early. 1972, 1974 and 1984-85 may have been just an unpleasant aperitif. It could be that Scargill who replaced Gornley will himself have been replaced. The successor of Ezra, Siddell and MacGregor will already be in his seat. But even if the personalities change, the next British coal strike will, without doubt, possess all the characteristics of its famous antecedents.

Free Life