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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate government's role in and handling of the 1984/85 miners' strike. It is easy to justify this approach because the conduct of government has been one of the least investigated features of the dispute. We all seem to agree that government was centrally and crucially involved, yet research into its conduct has been largely neglected. All too often it has been assumed rather than analysed.

I will look at government's role by:

a) testing and challenging the main theories and assumptions to have emerged so far;

b) testing (within the constraints of available evidence) government's own claims for its behaviour against the reality of events.

This task is made more difficult by the lack of sources since so much of what government was up to was decided within the secrecy of Cabinet committees. Fortunately, however, there is quite enough to make a start and more information is filtering through all the time.

Theories of government's role in the dispute

There have been three main theories, or 'viewpoints' is probably more accurate, of the government's part in the strike. They usually, but by no means always, correspond to the political standpoint of the commentator. The first two theories are closely related and rely on overlapping evidence.

1. Deliberate Provocation.

In this view government deliberately provoked the NUM into confrontation, having carefully picked its battleground and the timing for the battle. The argument is put neatly by Labour MP Eric Heffer in the preface to 'Digging Deeper',

"In 1974 the miners again went on strike. Their action led to the defeat of Edward Heath's Government at the polls and the election of a Labour Government. The ruling class, especially that section which looked to the 'radical right' as the answer to Britain's problems, never forgot or forgave this. Once the Conservatives regained political office, this time under Mrs. Thatcher, they determined to bring the miners to heel and if possible, inflict a major defeat on the entire trade union and labour movement. They prepared well for this struggle; Digging Deeper clearly outlines their strategy. The Ridley Plan, leaked to the 'Economist' in 1978, was followed to the letter: coal stocks, in Britain and abroad were built up: power stations were converted to

oil use; Ian MacGregor, an industrial hatchet man first brought in to butcher the steel industry, was appointed Chairman of the Coal Board to employ his US union-busting techniques to the full."

In this view government has two main motivations: revenge and the need for a quiescent labour movement.

"...Thatcher did not aim to destroy the trade unions. The role of the TUC had been essential in containing mass resistance to redundancies. What she wanted was a weaker, more bureaucratic less political trade union movement closely policed by the courts. Her model was the trade unions in the United States, whose leaders have passivley acquiesced in the mass sackings and pay cuts imposed on them under Ronald Reagan.

...The Americanization of the British trade union movement could be achieved only by taking on and decisively defeating a powerful group of workers. The obvious candidate was the miners. They were the only major section of the working class to have successfully resisted the rundown of their industry during Thatcher's first term." (1)

The 'deliberate provocation' theory is associated particularly with left-wing Labour and revolutionary socialist groups. Its main evidence is:

i) Government's detailed and far-sighted preparation for the strike as demonstrated in the Ridley Plan

ii) The openly provocative appointment of Ian MacGregor as chairman of the National Coal Board;

iii) The massive build-up of coal stocks prior to the dispute;

iv) The manner and the precise timing of the final twin sparks which set the strike in motion: the closure of Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire and the announcement of the NCB's closure programme on March 6th 1984;

v) government's frank declaration during the dispute of its willingness to pay any price to defeat the miners;

vi) Government's interference in negotiations to prevent any settlement favourable to the miners.

2. The Strike the Tories wanted.

This is very close to the first theory but is more subtle and flexible, needing to rely less on notions of conspiracy. It tends to lay more stress on government economic policy and less emphasis on the revenge factor. Nor does it need the element of deliberate provocation to be proved correct.

In essentials it says that Tory economic policy was almost inevitably going to lead government into conflict with trade unions, and most likely the miners. Government did not so much pick a fight as realise that

it had to be prepared for one. When confrontation came government was determined to fight it to the bitter end in the knowledge that it had to emerge as the manifest victor.

The adherents of this view encompass a wide political spectrum from Tony Benn and Andrew Gamble to the 'Economist' and the 'Financial Times'.

For Andrew Gamble, breaking the miners held a central place in the government's overall strategy. The Thatcher government's main aim was to re-establish the conditions for free markets by dismantling the public sector (hence curbing public spending) controlling inflation and attacking the restrictive practices of the trade unions. The miners, both because they were in a heavily subsidized part of the public sector and because they represented the militant wing of the trade union movement, had to be crushed. "Although it emerged fully only when the strike was already some months old, the importance of winning the strike and being seen to win it has been central to the government's strategy for its second term. Anything less would seriously compromise the whole Thatcher project, and even the continued leadership of Thatcher herself, as the press allies keep reminding her." (2)

For Tony Benn, the confrontation was inevitable not because a Thatcherite government was in power but because

capitalism was in crisis. The only way out of the crisis for capitalism is to reduce costs, and labour is chief among them. A Heath government would have been slicker but it would have done much the same things. 'The Economist' also took the view that confrontation was inevitable, if not overdue, and that government's victory was due to its deep-laid plans, first mapped out while in opposition.

The real argument was not between the miners and Mrs. Thatcher, said 'The Economist' in its summing up on March 9th, 1985. It was between the right and the wrong way of running a modern economy.

"Mrs. Thatcher's (1981) restriction on coal imports, the insistence that the Electricity Generating Board buy British coal and the heavy subsidies to coal mining itself were all consciously aimed at defeating a coal strike, which all felt was almost certain to come eventually. They need not now be repeated beyond the bounds of prudence. They are market distortions which increase industrial costs - and are hostages to the Scargills of the future. A vicious circle of subsidy, protection and uncompetitiveness was the true cause of this strike. It must now be broken, in coal as throughout the British economy. This is the real dispute, and there is no time to lose in resolving it."

In this view then the logic of government's economic policy was bound to force it into confrontation with

militant unions. Government knew that, made preparations and was determined to win. It may have been true that the final sparks - Cortonwood and the March 6th capacity cut announcement - were deliberately intended to provoke a strike at the most convenient time for the government. Whether or not that is true does not affect this theory.

3. Scargillism

This view believes that it was not so much Thatcherism or even MacGregorism that caused the dispute. It was Scargillism.

This is usually but not uniquely a right-wing viewpoint. It is argued that the move to the left in the NUM leadership, marked particularly by Scargill's succession to union president, brought a change in NUM policy on pit closures. It is argued that the NUM had, for years, accepted the closure of pits on economic grounds. For a time during the Labour government's period of office during the 1960s pits were closing at the rate of one a week with little sign of discontent from the NUM.

Consultation and cooperation between Board and Union, which had existed since nationalisation, reached a peak under Derek (now Lord) Ezra and Joe (now Lord) Gormley. That cosy spirit of cooperation started to disintegrate as

soon as Scargill became NUM president which was before the so-called 'provocative' appointment of MacGregor.

Roy Ottey, former NUM executive member, recalls the enormous difference in attitude between Gormley and Scargill. At one of Scargill's first meetings as president he confronted Board chairman Norman Siddall with the question of pit closures. According to Ottey, Scargill demanded sight of the NCB's "hit-list" of proposed closures. When Siddall did not admit to the list Scargill led a walk-out of the NUM executive. "I was incensed by Arthur's behaviour at this meeting: here he was demanding a list at national level, instead of accepting the chairman's invitation to sit down, with the NCB and the unions, and discuss the problems of the industry as we had since the earliest days of nationalization. The events of this meeting left me in no doubt that the aim within the NUM was to inflame the situation by rousing the passions of the membership." (3)

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and most of the 1970s the NUM complied with the Board over the closure of uneconomic pits. It was not until the 1980s that the NUM started to issue strong signals that it would be prepared to fight for its pits.

"The most significant factor of the 1984/5 miner's strike against pit closures was not the substantial minority of workers who continued to work throughout the dispute,

nor the number of men who 'drifted back to work', but the fact that a strike over pit closures could have been pursued on a national basis at all. Pit closures are ... a divisive phenomenon: not all miners or all coalfields are affected by them to the same extent. Prior to the 1980s, such a strike would not have been possible. An attempt to implement an overtime ban in 1976 over the impending closure of the 'uneconomic' Langwith colliery in Derbyshire, for example, had failed to get off the ground. The fact that a line of resistance could be adopted by the miners in the 1980s owes a great deal to the development of counter hegemony within the union itself" (4)

The increased militancy of the NUM under Scargill on the question of pit closures is a factor largely ignored by the first and second theories.

The right-wing view is that Scargill was clearly spoiling for a fight as is evidenced by the two strike ballots in his first year as president, both of which came out decisively against strike action. Scargill led an open political attack on the government whose only proper response could be to fight back.

Further evidence for the 'Scargillism' theory comes also from the course of the negotiations. 'The Economist' noted on March 9th,1985:

"Even without broader union support there were occasions

last summer and autumn when only Mr. Scargill's personal obduracy prevented him from securing half a victory. The Coal Board, and by association, the government gave ground steadily in negotiations. It was Mr. Scargill who handed triumph to Mrs. Thatcher by tactical errors and ultimate intransigence. A shrewder leader could have won a bankable fudge."

The real motives working on government were, not some long-term strategy to smash militant unionism, but the imperatives of the market. The industry was clearly over-producing coal, the expansionary targets laid out in the 1974 'Plan for Coal' were now wildly out of touch with current demand, and government was being forced to subsidize the industry to the tune of more than £1 billion a year. Any government would have had to do something about it.

'Scargillism' obviously pays less attention to the Ridley Plan than the other theories. It is not denied that the leaked Ridley Report was a genuine document. Rather it is argued that the kind of proposals contained in Ridley could have been drafted by any sensible civil servant with access to rudimentary intelligence of the left-wing drift inside the NUM and the likely downturn in the market.

Background to the dispute

The Conservative government came to power in 1979 armed with a mandate to tackle the power of the trade unions. The experiences of the two miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, coupled with the 1978/79 'Winter of Discontent', had made it seem that the country could not be governed without the cooperation of the unions.

Keeping the unions in check was a central plank in the government's economic policy which was designed to re-establish the forces of the free market by: rolling back the state, cutting public expenditure, selling off public industry, cutting taxes and breaking labour monopolies and restrictive practices. It is, and was clear, that such a programme was likely to lead to conflict with the unions, particularly within the nationalized industries. It is within this context that the significance of the oft-quoted Ridley Plan should be seen. Nicholas Ridley, now Minister of Transport, drew up his report on nationalized industries when the Conservatives were in Opposition. The report was leaked to 'The Economist' magazine which printed details in May 1978. It recommended ways of making nationalized industries more commercially viable and advised denationalization in certain sectors, and in coal the ending of the NCB's statutory monopoly.

The Ridley Plan would probably be forgotten by now, however, if it were not for the annexe to the report

which discussed how to counter any "political threat" from "the enemies of the next Tory government". It predicted a major challenge within one or two years of election in a dispute over wages or redundancies. The report feared that such a dispute would occur in a "vulnerable" industry such as coal, electricity or the docks. It recommended: 1. Rigging return on capital figures so that above average wages could be paid to "vulnerable" industries; 2. The eventual battle should be on a ground chosen by the government (railways, British Leyland, civil sevice or steel); 3. Every precaution should be taken to avoid confrontation in electricity and gas. Coal was picked out as the most likely battleground. The report urged Thatcher to build up coal stocks especially at power stations; make contingency plans for the importation of coal; encourage the recruitment of non-union lorry drivers by haulage companies; introduce dual oil/coal firing in power stations. It further urged a future Tory government to cut off the money supply to strikers and make the unions finance them; and to prepare a large, mobile squad of police equipped to uphold the law against violent picketing. These, especially the last three, proved to be remarkably accurate predictions.

The uncanny accuracy of the Ridley Plan provides the most essential evidence for theories that government had prepared well for the miners' strike.

1. Coal Stocks

Stocks held by the NCB and the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) were at record high levels. They built up from 37 million tonnes in 1980 to 58 million tonnes in 1983. That is a massive stockpile when you consider that the total UK consumption of coal for the whole of the year 1983 was 111 million tonnes. It is also nearly three times the amount of coal stockpiled before the 1972 strike (21 million tonnes).

2. Coal Imports

Coal imports were at the centre of a row between government and the NUM in 1980. But the NUM won concessions from the government in 1981 when the then Energy Secretary David Howell declared government's commitment to the 1974 'Plan for Coal' and agreed to keep imports to a minimum. (5)

Coal imports more than doubled throughout the strike however. The 'Financial Times' (March 4th 1985) estimated the figure at 10 million tonnes by the end of 1984.

3. The introduction of dual oil/coal firing at power stations.

In its annual report (released August 1st 1985) the CEGB put the cost of the miners' strike at £2,020 million. Most of that, £1,769 million, was accounted for by the additional cost of burning oil instead of coal. The CEGB is by far the largest consumer of coal in

the UK. In 1983 it used 81 million tonnes of coal, 8 million tonnes of nuclear and 2 million tonnes from hydro-electric plants. During the strike oil became the major source of fuel for the electricity supply. The 'Financial Times' (November 28th 1984) noted that "oil is being burned not only in large oil-fired stations such as Isle of Grain and Littlebrook on the Thames ... but also in the coal fired stations." It reported that the CEGB burnt more oil in six weeks of the strike than during the whole of 1983.

There is evidence that government prepared for the switch from coal to oil.

"In 1982 Glyn England found that his contract as head of the CEGB was not renewed. His departure was widely interpreted as the sack. In the same year (as coal stocks increased) oil imports increased by 3.1 million tonnes to 12.5 million tonnes. England had been directly instructed to substitute oil for coal in the power stations to accumulate coal stocks ready for the impending battle. He was reported to think this view "hysterical". (6)

England was replaced by Sir Walter Marshall who is closely associated with the atomic energy lobby

Marshall is on record as being a supporter of government's stated energy policy to diversify sources of supply and he has also spoken of the need to reduce the Electricity Board's dependence on British coal.

4. Cut the money supply to Strikers.

This measure was implemented in 1980 through the two Social Security Acts which prevented any striker from claiming benefit and, through Clause 6, meant that any benefit payable to strikers' dependants was automatically reduced by £16 a week.

5. Prepare a large force of police to deal with picketing.

The police capacity to prevent the success of the flying pickets is one of the most important differences between the 1984/5 dispute and the 1972 strike.

Thus the Ridley Plan anticipated much with great precision. A great deal has been made of the plan in analyses of the government's role in the strike, particularly and not surprisingly by miners.

But as proof of the government's willingness to do battle with the miners it seems likely that Ridley's significance has been overplayed.

Ridley has been overrated for two main reasons. Firstly, because it is not widely recognised that contingency planning of the Ridley type is common to all modern governments. The Civil Contingencies Unit , which is a standing committee of the Cabinet, exists precisely to predict where trouble, including industrial trouble, is likely to emerge and to plan measures to deal with it. (7). The second reason is the ironic one that compared to her predecessors in government Mrs. Thatcher had a "relatively insouciant" attitude towards contingency planning in her first 18 months in office. (8)

It is a fair question to ask: if Ridley was taken so seriously, why was the government so unprepared to deal with the threat of a miners' strike in 1981? Government's climbdown then when David Howell effectively scrapped his own Coal Industry Act is commonly seen as government's major industrial defeat of its first term. Yet, the threat of the strike occurred almost exactly as Ridley had predicted, in the coal industry within two years of a Tory government taking office.

Following this defeat, however, government <u>did</u> start planning in earnest. The Prime Minister commissioned an ad hoc committee, MISC 57, chaired by civil servant Robert Wade-Gery to map out measures to deal with a coal strike.

"As a result of the Wade-Gery report ministers adopted

early in 1982 a three-point strategy:

. Bigger coal stocks at the power stations might discourage the NUM from taking industrial action. Cash limits on the CEGB were eased to enable this, and deliveries from pits to power stations were stepped up.

. If the deterrent failed, the stockpiles would ensure that the miners suffered hardship during a protracted dispute. This would encourage a drift back to work and put pressure on miners' leaders to settle.

. During the strike there would be a switch from coal-fired to oil-burning power stations where possible. If the railwaymen backed the miners coal stocks would be replenished by convoys of private hauliers.

"This piece of contingency planning led one senior civil servant to remark as the miners' strike collapsed in March 1985 that Wade-Gery...deserves a peerage." (9)

Thus government did indeed plan for the dispute but not in the way that the "deliberate provocation" theorists believed. This is not to deny that Ridley's plan has some significance but it clearly cannot be relied as evidence of a deep-laid plan to tackle the NUM.

Events within the coal industry during the late 1970s were mostly suggestive of a looming confrontation.

The 1974 'Plan for Coal' was drawn up in the aftermath

of the successful miners' strike, the Tory defeat at the polls, a new Labour government and an oil crisis. It proposed a target capacity of 150 million tonnes of coal in 1985 - up from the NCB's output of 113 million tonnes in 1974.

Up until 1980 the Plan did not look too bad, what happens thereafter is deep recession and slumping demand for coal.

Coal consumption reached 129.4 million tonnes in 1979 slumping to 111 million tonnes by 1982. Coal production exceeded demand - 130 million tonnes in 1980 down to 119 million tonnes in 1983. Consequently stocks of coal piled up - 27 million tonnes in 1979 up to 58 million tonnes in 1983. This coal was held either in the NCB yards or by the CEGB.

These stocks turned out to be crucial for government's victory. But there is a contradictory aspect to the build-up which is this: after the strike ministers were to claim credit for the stock piling as the product of deliberate planning. Yet, before the strike ministers and NCB officials sought production cuts precisely because of the costs of stockpiling. Indeed it was because the industry was producing coal which it couldn't sell that the NCB demanded the closure of pits.

At the end of the Ezra era pits were starting to close at

a faster rate. When Norman Siddall succeeded Ezra in June 1982 he was determined to cut back on capacity and that year he told the NUM conference that the plain facts were that the market for coal had shrunk and that "it could take several years to get coal stocks back to a sensible level." In Siddall's year as chairman some twenty pits closed.

Siddall was succeeded by Ian MacGregor in September 1983. Government is reported to have asked Siddall to stay on as chairman but he declined on grounds of ill health.

The appointment of MacGregor "the butcher of British Steel" is frequently cited as a clear provocative act. And certainly it looks that way.

MacGregor came to the NCB with an anti-trade union history in the United States and he had just presided over the creation of a wholly impotent trade union movement at British Steel.

Not just to the unions but also to the management he was an outsider. Previously most NCB management had come up through the industry. Siddall from the pit bottom, Ezra through the industry ranks. Lord Robens although he had been a shop worker was at least of the Labour movement.

MacGregor was a far-right wing republican, friend of Reagan, a capitalist who felt that unions at best are only mechanisms for negotiating pay increases. Unions had no place in the massive and somewhat unwieldy consultative structures of the NCB.

Given the traditions of the Board and the knowledge of the left-wing movement of the NUM the appointment of MacGregor was either foolish or provocative. Certainly, MacGregor's appointment only a few months after the Tories' crushing victory was greeted by the NUM as a provocative act. (10)

Michael Crick in his book 'Scargill and the Miners' gives further credence to the provocation thesis (page 96):
"By the summer (1983), with a 141 seat majority behind her, Mrs. Thatcher seemed to be preparing for a battle which looked increasingly inevitable. In the post-election Cabinet re-shuffle Nigel Lawson was replaced at the Department of Energy by Peter Walker who as Industry Secretary under Heath had been involved in the coal disputes of 1972 and 1974. 'Peter, I want you to go to Energy', Walker is said to have been told by the Prime Minister the day after the election. 'We're going to have a miners' strike'"

Why did the government appoint McGregor?

It was widely interpreted that the 1980 Coal Industry Act failed not simply because of NUM hostility but also because the NCB under Ezra was hostile to government financial objectives. (11)

It was not the first time that a Tory government felt that the NCB management was working against its objectives. Joe Gormley's accounts of the 1972, 1974 and 1981 strikes, for example, make it clear that the NUM had a large measure of support from the Coal Board and the battles were not so much with the Board but with the government. It was important, therefore, for the government to appoint a chairman who was in broad agreement with their overall economic goals. The fact that MacGregor was an 'outsider' may even have been to his advantage from the government's point of view. (12) MacGregor shared the government's view that the industry should be run as a 'business' in line with the needs of the market it served. In an interview with the 'Financial Times' he complained that for too long the industry had operated as though it was isolated from the community as a whole. (13)

Another important area of agreement between MacGregor and government was privatization. That government was and is considering privatization is clear. (14) MacGregor himself described the idea of handing pits to miners as 'wonderful'.

Perhaps the most important of the shared objectives was the need for cheap fuel. It has been reported that Nigel Lawson, when he was Energy Secretary, used to boast that government did not have an energy policy. (15) Energy, like all other commodities and services, was governed by the operation of market forces. However, ministers on various occasions have outlined the main features of the policy as:

1. Realistic prices
2. Diversity of fuels (coal, oil, natural gas, and conservation)
3. Flexibility in the energy systems
4. Competition between fuels
5. International cooperation to solve energy problems (16)

The two key features of the policy were 'realistic pricing' and diversity of fuels. It was crucial that the price of energy to British industry should be no more than that paid by international competitors. Moreover, the competitive pricing policy was to be held within government's overall strategy of not increasing government subsidy.

The need for diversity in essence means the growth of nuclear power. (17) Government predictions on the growth of nuclear generating capability are that by the year

2,000 about 43% of Britain's electricity needs would be supplied by nuclear power. (18) There is not space here to fully explore the implications of such a policy which is complicated partly by government reticence to give details of coal/nuclear projections and partly by conflicting calculations. (19)

Complications notwithstanding the appointments of MacGregor at the NCB and Sir Walter Marshall (now Lord Marshall) at the CEGB dovetailed with both this energy policy and the overall economic strategy.

It is quite conceivable, however, that government could have pursued these policies without appointing someone as obviously unpopular as MacGregor. Lord Robens, for example, a man of the labour movement, had presided over a programme of pit closures on a much grander scale than anything suggested by MacGregor.

The explanation suggested from Michael Crick's extract earlier is that following Thatcher's handsome victory at the polls government began a conscious preparation for confrontation with the miners. It is possible, however, that government believed that the coal industry could be rationalised without a major confrontation with the NUM. Not only was government popularity high (in contrast to the position in the 1981 dispute with the miners) but also in the six months before the general election the miners

voted against strike action on pit closures in two separate ballots. Together with this there was also evidence of increasing disarray within the labour movement as a whole. The Trades Union Congress was split on the question of relations with the government and its leadership was pushing for a 'new realism' which would take account of the lessons of the general election.

Thus it is possible, perhaps even likely, that while government realised MacGregor would be provocative, they thought they could get away with it with minimum of industrial unrest, as indeed they had with the run down of the British Steel Corporation.

The final two points to look at before moving on to deal with the strike itself are the two 'sparks': the closure of Cortonwood and the March 6th 1984 closure programme.

The evidence suggests that the NCB did not believe the closure of Cortonwood would cause much of a fight. The reason for this was that two pits in Scotland, Polmaise and the Bogside, had both been announced as due for closure on 'economic' grounds. The miners at Polmaise had come out on strike in February but had been largely left unsupported. Further, in January the 'anti-overtime ban' candidate John Walsh had been only narrowly defeated by left-winger Peter Heathfield in the ballot for NUM secretary. Additionally Cortonwood, although a South

Yorkshire pit, did not have a reputation for militancy.

On its own the closure of Cortonwood would probably not have prompted a national strike. When the miners of Cortonwood appealed for support from colleagues in South Yorkshire only four out eleven pits answered the strike call. The working pits were only closed by flying pickets.

But five days after the announcement of the closure of Cortonwood the Board revealed to the three mining unions that it was seeking a four million tonne production cut in 1984-5: 20 pits and 20,000 jobs would have to go. The NUM executive reacted by giving official backing to the Yorkshire and Scottish strikes and to sanction action by any other area under rule 41.

By March 6th the NCB must have realized that there would be opposition because of the strikes already happening in Scotland and Yorkshire. If it had wanted to provoke a strike then spring was the perfect time with summer coming up and the NCB and CEGB loaded with stocks of coal.

Just two days later, on March 8th the Board announced new and vastly improved redundancy terms for miners - an offer of £1,000 for each year of service for miners between the ages of 21-49 (with a minimum of five years service). The Sunday Times Insight Team has suggested that the NCB

deliberately delayed announcement of the redundancy package until after the March 6th meeting. It is suggested that the delay was part of MacGregor's bullish way of dealing with Scargill.

The Strike

The purpose of this section is not to lay out a chronological history of the strike but to look at key features with a view to testing the initial theories. The key areas to look at are:

a) The mechanism of government monitoring of the dispute - MISC 101;

b) The rhetoric - the public statements of government ministers;

c) The extent of government involvement in the negotiations;

d) The extent of government involvement in the policing.

a) A Cabinet committee MISC 101 was set up in the first weeks of the strike and met thereafter every Monday and two or three times a week in addition to that. It was chaired by the Prime Minister and its members were Leon Brittan (Home Secretary), Nigel Lawson (Chancellor), Peter Walker (Energy), Norman Tebbit (Industry), Tom King (Employment), Nicholas Ridley (Transport) and Sir Michael Havers (Attorney General). Brigadier Tony Budd, chairman of the CCU and David Goodall, also of the CCU, attended the

meetings in an advisory capacity. This committee was the key government body throughout the strike. Since government did not need to declare a state of emergency the full CCU with its network of regional emergency committees was not called into action. MISC 101 was the quick reaction committee responding to the daily twists and turns and keeping a close watch on the news bulletins.

"All this rubbish in public about government keeping its hands off was crazy. They watched every twitch," commented Peter Hennessy, one of the country's leading authorities on secret Cabinet committees (20). Investigations by Hennessy, author of States of Emergency, left him in no doubt that it was here that crucial decisions of tactics and strategy were made. That strategy involved support for the police in holding the picket lines, support for the working miners with a heavy investment in the "drift back", isolation of the NUM from other unions and increasingly after the first few months, attacks on the political motivation of the NUM leadership, particularly Scargill. The kind of decisions MISC 101 made were how to fix the tone of public statements, what offer should be made to the NUM, whether the TUC be taken seriously on its offer to conciliate, what the NCB should be told etc.

Most days the first questions were whether the police lines had held and what were the numbers of miners

returning to work. "It was almost like the conduct of a war in the sense that they didn't know whether the strategy was going to work." (21) According to Hennessy there was no stage until close to the very end that the planners had any confidence that government would win. For a long time they were unsure that the "drift back to work" would succeed. They were never completely confident that the NUM would not be able to stage a repeat of its Saltley Coke Depot triumph in 1972 and overpower the police on the picket lines. Nor for a long time were they able to judge just how far the trade union movement would be willing to back the miners.

It is impossible to be precise about the work of Cabinet committees because of the secrecy surrounding them. Even their very existence is frequently kept secret. Thus there are obviously many important questions left unanswered. For example, it is not clear how far government instigated aspects of the strategy or how far it simply responded to events. The two key tactics of the policing and the "drift back" are cases in point. The policing will be looked at later but it was the drift back which ultimately ended the strike. It seems clear that the impetus for the working miners' campaign started with the miners themselves. There was also a high degree of initiative on the part of NCB regional management. In particular Ken Moses and John Northard (North Derbyshire and Western area directors) pursued diligent campaigns and were rewarded with

promotion at the strike's end.

The rhetoric

The significance of ministers' public statements will be seen better in conjunction with the conduct of the negotiations. But it is possible and useful to outline a pattern of government rhetoric.

It started with an insistence on government non-intervention, coupled with a commitment to the future of the coal industry, condemnation of picket line violence and intimidation and stress on the need for a national ballot. The Sunday Times Insight team has argued that Walker's major tactic in the early days of the strike was to press the NUM into a ballot in the belief it would lose a strike vote. Certainly the tone of government's early statements was relatively calm. Walker tended to avoid outright attacks on Scargill even when offered the opportunity by questions put to him in the House. The opportunity was there also because from the outset Scargill made no bones about it being a "political" dispute and spoke openly about the miners' power to bring the government down.

The rhetoric of non-intervention[1] gradually disappeared from about mid-June and in response to the mass picketing at Orgreave condemnations of "mob violence" were stepped

up. The Prime Minister started to use the language of "no surrender", first with reference to the question of uneconomic pits (The Times June 14th 1984) and then with reference to "mob violence".

Around mid-July the statements took a decisive turn. Tebbit accused the miners of thuggery, Walker began attacks on Scargill's leadership, and in a speech to the 1922 Committee Mrs. Thatcher drew a parallel between the dispute and the Falklands War, calling the miners' leadership the "enemy within" (The Times July 20th). King called Scargill a threat to parliamentary democracy and at the end of the month Lawson told the House that the money spent resisting the strike was a worthwhile investment.

After a lull in August, Walker opened September with another scathing attack on Scargill and at the end of the month Thatcher warned that the government would be prepared to sit the strike out for a year and insisted that there could be no compromise on uneconomic pits. (The Times September 20th and 27th). The attacks on Scargill were maintained and peaked during the Conservative Party conference in October. With the collapse of the peace talks at the end of October government stressed the futility of negotiations unless the NUM shifted its ground on uneconomic pits and it consistently urged the fairness of the NCB's final offer - "the best offer since nationalization".

As it became more obvious that the miners could not win, so the government's involvement became more obvious. In January even Scargill dropped talk of victory. Walker had been told that the coal stocks were sufficient to prevent the necessity of power cuts throughout the whole of 1985. Any NUM hopes of support from other unions were long ago dashed and the drift back continued relentlessly. Government made no effort at all to deny involvement. Thatcher ,made a "no fudging" speech in the middle of promising talks between NCB and NUM officials. As the miners tried to salvage something she gave some of her most uncompromising speeches, accusing the leadership of Luddism and maintaining the strike only by intimidation.

The impact of government on negotiations will dealt with. But there is one part of the rhetoric which can be immediately dispatched: non-intervention. From the outset there was such widespread cynicism that one wonders why governments bother to use it. This is one of the similarities between the Thatcher and Heath governments and in both cases the rhetoric has been proved ficticious. In addition to the evidence already adduced there are many clear instances. MacGregor himself has complained of weals all over his back as a result of government interference. Walker is commonly believed to have held secret talks with both the TUC and Peter McNestry of NACODS. (22) And after the Daily Mirror leak of June 6 1984 the Prime Minister's press officer admitted that she had agreed a relatively

high pay offer to the railwaymen to keep the miners isolated. (The Times June 7)

Negotiations

Government's conduct in the negotiations should provide the decisive proof one way or another of its intentions towards the NUM. It is reasonable to suppose that a government bent on crushing the union would have been prepared to sit the strike out and would have done its best to prevent any settlement favourable to the miners.

Government did appear to do precisely that at times when a settlement seemed most likely: that is during 'peace-talks' of the summer and autumn of 1984 and again in January 1985 when private talks between Peter Heathfield and Ned Smith (then the Board's industrial relations director) promised an 'honourable' conclusion. The much reported government dissatisfaction with MaGregor, for example, was said to be because MacGregor seemed in danger of conceding too much.

There were, however, times when the dispute was desperately close to agreement. In particular, in July and October when the NUM and NCB were only arguing about one or two words in the draft agreement. The NUM rejected deals which, as we have seen 'The Economist' later labelled a "bankable fudge". And even some of the

most ardent adherents of the "deliberate provocation" thesis accept that there were times in May, June and July when government appeared willing to compromise. (23) If that is true it does not square well with the notion that government wanted the strike in order to demonstrate its power to smash the unions.

Throughout the strike there was a total of seven formal rounds of talks between NCB and NUM negotiating teams some of which involved Acas. The first series of talks started on May 23rd 1984 and the last ended on October 31st. After that, the Smith/Heathfield talks notwithstanding, there were no further formal negotiations.

The aims of the NUM were:

1. Total withdrawal of the March 6th closure programme.
2. That five named pits threatened with closure should be kept open. They were Polmaise, Herrington, Cortonwood, Bulcliffe Wood and Snowdown.
3. That the definition of exhausted pits should be in line with the 'Plan for Coal' (24)

The NCB's attitude to the 'Plan for Coal' was influenced substantially by the June 1983 report of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. The report saw the main problem as high cost "unprofitable" pits and urged immediate action to reduce their numbers otherwise "the industry's ability to invest in modern capacity in the short and

medium term will be jeopardised." (25)
The effect of the MMC Report, which MacGregor called his bible, was to shatter the expansionary targets of the 1974 Plan for Coal. These were targets which the NUM believed had been reaffirmed by government in 1981. If the MMC Report was MacGregor's bible, the Plan for Coal was the NUM's.

That is the general background to the talks. The more precise setting for the first round was in May after all the strike ballots had been held in the areas which decided to vote. Nottingham came out decisively against striking and not one of the ten areas which voted got the 55% majority needed for a strike. By May the power unions had agreed a 5.2% pay increase and the leaders had made it clear that they were not enthusiastic about supporting the NUM. On the plus side for the NUM some 80% of its members were on strike and the rail and seamen's unions had agreed to halt the movement of coal. Additionally by the time the talks started government was involved in a series of negotiations with other unions including railway workers, teachers, nurses and civil servants and the possibility of a dock strike was looming on the horizon.

At this stage government's public stance was that of non-intervention as indicated by Walker, a commitment to the future of the coal industry and support for the police dealing with picket line violence.

After the first meeting on May 23rd which ended abruptly after just one hour MacGregor was persuaded that his negotiating style was causing problems and his deputy James Cowan led the Board's side. Cowan immediately wrote to the NUM offering talks on the basis of the 'Plan for Coal'. By the end of May 'The Economist' (June 2nd) reported that the Board was "aching" for a settlement. MacGregor had told journalists that the 4 million tonne closure programme was flexible and the Board would be willing to accept almost any fudge which allowed it to close the tail of high cost pits. At that stage Mrs. Thatcher was reported to have called Cowan's offer "very wise". (26) There is some conflict however as to how far government supported MacGregor's conciliatory moves and it seemed that the battles on picket lines at Orgreave in the last week of May caused government to adopt a harder line. On June 1st 'The Times' quoted Mrs. Thatcher saying that she did not see an immediate end to the strike. The June 2nd 'Economist' noted: "Even before this weeks mayhem at Orgreave ministers were concerned that a deal between Mr. Scargill and Mr. MacGregor might look like surrender. The violence there has only strengthened that feeling. Mr. Peter Walker, the Energy Secretary may be an economic wet but he is adament about winning a political as well as industrial victory over Mr. Scargill. On Wednesday he had to come out condemning the violence, blaming a mob of Marxists and praising the police response

- riot gear, horses and all."

Commentators have picked out Orgreave as the turning point which marked a significant hardening in the public attitudes of both MacGregor and government. After Mrs. Thatcher's comment that there was no immediate prospect of a settlement, 'The Times' published an interview with MacGregor (June 12th) in which he re-affirmed his commitment to the closure of uneconomic pits in order that this "business run properly". Scargill countered that MacGregor was intent on butchering the industry and the talks collapsed acrimoniously.

The available evidence suggests that government was anxious to avoid a deal that could be construed as surrender particularly in the heat of the clashes at Orgreave. What is not clear is just how much of a shift in attitude the tougher rhetoric represented. There were certainly more speeches condemning mob violence but ministers had been pushing that line since flying pickets went into Nottingham in March. As early as March 16th Leon Brittan had told the Commons that working Nottinghamshire miners were the victims of mob rule. It could be argued that the condemnations of mob violence simply increased in direct proportion to the picket line violence.

One noticeable change was a distinct shift in tempo to

attacks on the political purpose of the NUM leadership, more particularly of Scargill. The major onslaught against Scargill, however, (including the "enemy within" speech) did not really start until after July 18 by which time another series of talks had brought settlement close. These talks were held before and during the dock strike which started on July 9th.

The reason for the break-up of the talks this time was a hardening of position not by government but by the NUM. "The NUM held a special conference and 12th and 13th July. It had probably been called to approve a deal. Instead it hardened the miners' terms, demanding no pit closures except on the grounds of exhaustion, a four-day week and a £30-a-week pay rise. On July 18th talks between the miners' union and the NCB ended in stalemate." (27) Had the strike on the docks been solid and lengthy it would no doubt have strengthened enormously the NUM bargaining position. But it cracked at Dover on July 19th and the first docks strike ended on July 21st.

The next time a settlement looked possible was in October. By the time these talks took place the dock strikes were over; the TUC had pledged support at its 1984 Congress but crucially three key unions the electricians, power engineers and steel workers rejected the call for support. Legal action by working miners had led to a court ruling that strikes in Yorkshire and North

Derbyshire were unlawful. On October 10th Scargill was fined £1,000 for contempt of that ruling and the NUM fined £200,000. On October 23rd the NUM's assets were seized.

The October talks were complicated by the involvement of NACODs, the pit deputies union, which took issue with the Board in August over a directive to cross NUM picket lines and then in September recommended strike action to oppose the Board's proposed pit closures. On October 16th NACODs called the strike threat off after the NCB conceded all of its demands. The NUM rejected the NACODs deal. On October 29th Walker told the Commons that the NACODs agreement was the final offer. The talks broke down on October 31st.

There are two key features of the October talks: one is just how close the two sides were on the draft agreement; and secondly the open exposure of tensions within the NCB over the handling of the dispute.

In this offer the NCB agreed:

1. To re-examine the March 6th closure proposals and revise objectives for the individual areas.

2. The five collieries named by the NUM would continue in operation. Further decisions on closures were to be dealt with in accordance with certain guidelines. 3. The closure guidelines were on grounds of

exhaustion, geological difficulty or other reasons following investigation "in line with the principles of the 'Plan for Coal' under the Colliery Review Procedure". 4. The review procedure was to be amended to include as a final stage an independant review body which would act in an advisory capacity.

The NUM rejected the offer objecting to the words "the principles of". It argued that a pit's future should be decided simply "in line with the 'Plan for Coal'.

Asked later why the NUM rejected the deal, Scargill replied:
"The deal was an absolute sham. The only thing the NCB offered was to provide an additional body which would listen to the arguments on whether a particular pit should be opened or closed. We don't see any point in arguing about the future of one pit as opposed to another, because we oppose the pit closure programme in totality." (28)

The thrust of the NUM's negotiating stance was to rescue the 'Plan for Coal' from attacks on it by the NCB's determination to cut uneconomic capacity. The NUM, however, did accept an element of "economics" in its definition of exhaustion, while the Board for its part accepted that by "uneconomic" it meant chronically rather than occasionally unprofitable. (29) It was quite untrue to suggest as Walker did consistently from the summer

onwards that "the only disagreement is the insistence by Mr. Scargill that every pit, no matter how uneconomic, must be retained for eternity." (30)

John Lloyd in his pamphlet notes that the differences between the two sides were such that an agreement would have almost certainly been found in the pre-MacGregor/Scargill days. The "inability to do so in 1984/85 indicated that for both sides the conditions had changed."

The other key feature was the rift in the NCB ranks which became manifest during the October after the appointment of Micheal Eaton as the NCB's spokesman. The indications are now that government was behind the appointment of Eaton because they were concerned that the NCB's case was being badly handled in public. After the strike Eaton was sent back to his old job as director of the North Yorkshire coalfield, ostensibly because the development at Selby had fallen behind. "Insiders say the real reason was that Eaton had become altogether too close to Mrs. Thatcher's advisors at No. 10 for MacGregor's liking." (31)

After the NACODs deal Walker warned that there would be no further concessions and nor were there. At the Conservative Party Conference Tory leaders launched their most explicit attacks yet on "Scargillism". By this time government's bargaining position was the strongest it had been

throughout the strike.

The police had won the decisive battles on the picket lines, the working miners were able to get to work, key unions particularly the power workers were openly hostile to support for the miners, coal stocks were still high, the Labour Party Conference had rejected a general strike call in support of the miners and additionally legal action taken by working miners was beginning to bite. The drift-back-to-work campaign was pursued with renewed vigour and by Christmas the miners chances of victory looked grim indeed.

The final serious attempt at a negotiated settlement came in January through informal talks between Heathfield and Smith. According to the 'Observer' report on the talks Smith had the "reluctant authority of MacGregor who told him to give it a go". (32) Heathfield met Smith and his deputy Kevin Hunt and made rapid progress, and were reportedly optimistic about a settlement. However at Downing Street political correspondents were being briefed with the line that Scargill must be made to surrender. Later that week when the NUM executive met in Sheffield they received a "bombshell" in the form of a statement from the NCB that it would require a written guarantee from the NUM that the union would negotiate the closure of pits on economic grounds.

Why the NCB switched to a harder line is a matter for speculation. The 'Observer' suggested that the initiative came from Thatcher to MacGregor through their mutual advisor David Hart. Certainly that week Hart wrote an article in the 'Times', "Nothing Short of Victory", while Mrs. Thatcher said there would be no fudging. The Prime Minister was accused by Neil Kinnock in Westminster of personally intervening to sabotage the talks. She did not directly deny the claim but instead insisted that after seven rounds of talks it was important "that the next round is conducted on a clear basis so that there can be no fudging." (33)

The 'Guardian's' political editor Ian Aitkin reported that, "Senior Cabinet Ministers with a direct involvement are ready to acknowledge that the Prime Minister intends to smash Mr. Scargill if she can, in the belief that the destruction of so charismatic a figure will be as effective a warning to lesser militants in the trade union movement as the severed heads which used to be on display at either end of London Bridge." (34)

There was a further attempt at a negotiated settlement through Norman Willis, TUC General Secretary who dealt directly with the Prime Minister. The draft agreement which made specific mention of the need to close uneconomic pits was naturally rejected by the NUM.

By the end of February with more than 50% of miners working the NUM agreed to accept the Nacods settlement but the executive were told by Kevin Hunt that the deal was no longer negotiatable.

The evidence suggests that there were differences between Thatcher, MacGregor and Walker as the strike came to a close. It has been suggested that government, Walker included, were concerned that MacGregor was giving away too much in negotiations during 1984.

But it was not always so clear whether government interference was from the hard or the soft side of MacGregor. It seems that Walker was pressing MacGregor to a firmer stance last summer. Yet during the January talks Walker was distinctly equivocal about the need for written guarantees while Thatcher was openly explicit. It was Walker also who stressed the "no-gloating" line as soon as the strike ended yet less than a month later the Prime Minister was boasting in a speech in Kuala Lumpar about "seeing off" the miners.

The Police

Perhaps the single most important difference between this dispute and the 1970's coal strikes was the ability of the police to prevent successful picketing.

Government's ministers always fought shy of any questions which might suggest that government was in any way responsible for the police tactics. The 'Ridley Plan' had made mention of mobile police support units to deal with pickets but Peter Hennessy could find no evidence from the civil contingency planners of any of the kind of detailed planning on policing that there was on coal stocks.

More important for the creation of the type of police tactics we saw were the urban riots in 1981. The National Reporting Centre swung into action during the riots but most significantly the disturbances resulted in a huge rethink.

It resulted in the police becoming better equipped and trained to deal with large and hostile crowds. By 1984 virtually all the police forces had riot training drill and it was that training that they put into action on the picket lines.

Early in the strike it was a matter for public comment that government was not using its own Employment Acts to deal with the problem of mass secondary picketing. Police Federation spokesman Tony Judge noted that the Nottingham pits had been kept open "almost soley because of the presence of the police force". There was clearly a decision to use the criminal law, via the police, rather

than the civil law, via the Employment Acts. But on the question of the tactics the police employed it is suggested that government had not mapped out advance plans. The suggestion is that the government links with police went along these lines: the police were asked if they could deal with the pickets and they replied "yes" provided they had solid government support. This, of course, is necessarily conjecture. But it would explain why styles of policing varied in some areas.

There is in any event evidence that some chief constables shared the government view that massed picketing almost invariably led to breaches of the law. In the area where the policing was most intense, Nottingham, the Assistant Chief Constable Edward Griffith in an affidavit to the Lord Chief Justice explained that the "main cause of violence on the picket lines is excessive numbers".

But if the tactics were developed independently by the police it is unlikely that they would have been used without the government's authority. The support of government was unwavering, providing central funds, refusing public inquiries and finally admitting, through Nigel Lawson that the priority of policing the strike had meant that other crime detection had suffered.

Conclusion

It would be impossible so soon after the strike to reach any satisfyingly solid conclusion, partly because of a lack of reliable information about Cabinet committee discussions and partly because new revelations are filtering out all the time. But, it seems reasonable from what has emerged to cast considerable doubt on both the "deliberate provocation" and "Scargillism" arguments. Both contain elements of truth. The strongest support for deliberate provocation comes from the appointment of MacGregor. Everything else is arguable. The Ridley Plan - overused and underexamined - is unreliable as evidence, the "twin sparks" were always in doubt and in the event were conceded early in the negotiations. The NUM's opportunities to settle for a fudge also argue against it.

At the end of the dispute it was clear that Thatcher wanted nothing less than total surrender. Even the NACODs deal which she had been urging on the NUM since October was eventually withdrawn. It would be a mistake, however, to read backwards from this and assume too much about the beginning from what happened at the end. It is worth remembering also that Thatcher has carefully cultivated a tough Iron Lady image and her rhetoric should be viewed in this light.

The "Scargillism" argument has been only indirectly addressed for the reason that the essay was more

concerned with government than with the NUM. Walker, in particular, used the Scargill factor to some effect in his rhetoric. The militancy of Scargill was at best awkward for the Labour Party and TUC leadership if not downright alarming. Scargill's challenge to the authority of a duly constituted government was also more than David Owen could bear. The effect of Scargillism in terms of forcing government's hand is an unknown quantity. As an account of the reason for the strike, however, it is clearly inadequate because the economic policies of the government were already leading it into confrontation with the NUM before Scargill became president. Nor can the appointment of MacGregor be adequately explained by the "Scargillism" theory.

The most likely explanation, then is the second theory. The Tories were not prepared to make an economic u-turn and a significantly large section of the NUM led by Scargill were pledged to fight pit closures. It did not need the vision of a genius to predict impending trouble if neither side backed down. It is not so clear, however, that once the strike started government immediately determined to sit it out to the bitter end. Government's conduct could with more reason be explained as determination to avoid any settlement which looked like surrender, coupled with a need to see "law and order" triumph over potentially lawless picketing.

Notes

1. Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons The Great Strike p.39.

2. Andrew Gamble New Socialist April 1985.

3. Roy Ottey The Strike p.41.

4. Royce Turner Political Quarterly April-June 1985.

5. Giles Shaw, Under Secretary of State for Energy told the House in a Written Answer (February 28th 1984): "The question of coal imports have been given careful consideration in discussions with NCB and the CEGB. Since 1981 coal imports to the generating board have been limited and only 1% of its current annual requirement of coal is imported." Total coal imports for 1983 were 4.4 million tonnes.

6. Huw Beynon and Peter McMylor Digging Deeper p.37

7 See Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy States of Emergency,

8. Ibid p.254.

9. Peter Hennessy 'The Secret World of Cabinet Committees' (to be published in Social Studies Review).

10. Roy Ottey op. cit. p.51.

11. See Martin Holmes The First Thatcher Government pp.140-141.

12. Sunday Telegraph August 4th 1985.

13. Financial Times August 8th 1984.

14 See the privatization section in John Lloyd's pamphlet Understanding the Miners' Strike.

15. Quoted in Digging Deeper p.204.

16. Taken from a speech given by Hamish Gray, then Minister for Energy, at St. Andrews University October 31st. 1980.

17. David Howell statement to the Select Committee on Energy July 30th, 1980.

18. Projections given to Nuclear Energy Agency. Quoted in The Guardian July 10, 1985.

19. The NUM calculates that the nuclear programme will push 55 million tonnes of coal off the market by the year 2000 unless industrial production increases from present levels.

20. Interview with Peter Hennessy.

21. Ibid.

22. Sunday Telegraph July 28th 1985.

23. Callinicos and Simon op.cit. pp.96-98.

24. As told by Scargill to the Guardian January 10th 1985.

25. Monopolies and Mergers Commission Vol.1 p.369.

26. Quoted in Callinicos and Simon p.97.

27. Ibid p.137.

28. The Guardian January 10th 1985.

29. John Lloyd op.cit. p.29.

30. Taken from Walker's speech at Cults, Aberdeen June 30th 1984.

31. Sunday Telegraph August 4th 1985.

32. Observer January 27th 1985.

33. Hansard January 24th. 1985.

34. The Guardian January 25th. 1985.