

Was the British Government's Handling of the 1984/5 Miners' Strike "Brilliant"?

Written by Fflur Elin

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FFLUR ELIN, APR 15 2015

Was Ian Gilmour right to argue that the government's handling of the 1984/5 miners' strike was 'brilliant'?

'Skillful negotiation'[1] is essential during any strike according to John Richard Hicks. However, during the 1984/5 miners' strike both sides entered the fray unwilling to back down. The catalysts for the strike were the National Coal Board's (NCB) announcement on March the 1st that Cortonwood colliery would be closed and a further announcement on the 6th that 1984 would see the closure of an additional twenty pits. Many miners began to strike and on the 12th of March, Arthur Scargill, leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), called a national strike that would last until the 4th of March 1985 and during which 26.1 million working days were lost.[2] During this period Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government had to handle not only unhappy miners but the threat posed by Arthur Scargill who was determined that the only result he would accept was that only pits which had no mineable coal left would be closed. Ian Gilmour, a left of centre Conservative, sees that the government handled the miners' strike and the threats posed by it 'brilliantly'. [3] Gilmour, believing firmly in 'one nation state' policies was critical of much of Thatcher's tenure in office and so it is significant that he praised the government's handling of the miners' strike.[4] Indeed, from a political and economic perspective there is much to be praised for the government entered the fray prepared, used the rhetoric of 'right to work' and 'economic rationality' coupled with demonising Arthur Scargill to gain public support and de-moralise miners, handled problems that emerged skilfully and used the police and the law effectively to emerge not only as victors of the strike but with weakened trade unions. However, from a social perspective there are those who criticise the government's handling of the strike as being ruthless and cruel for many miners and their families suffered during the strike. So was Ian Gilmour right to call the government's handling of the strike 'brilliant'?

One of the government's key successes regarding their handling of the strike was their preparation. Thatcher was determined that, unlike 1974 and 1981, they would be prepared for battle with the unions when the next strike came. An important aspect of their preparation was appointing appropriate people to positions of power that would be crucial during a strike. In 1983 Thatcher approved Ian MacGregor as the new Chairman for The National Coal Board. With regards to anticipating a future coal strike this was an excellent strategic choice because of MacGregor's past experience.[5] He had fought the trade unions successfully in the United States which was valuable experience to deal with any strike as unions often played a large part in industrial disputes. MacGregor had also successfully cut the British Steel Industry whilst chairman of the national British Steel Corporation between 1980 and 1983. Indeed, during his tenure he managed to cut the industry's annual losses from 1.8 billion to 265 million, largely through cutting staff from 166,000 to 71,000.[6] He was therefore a perfect candidate to oversee the cuts and closures that Thatcher wished to enact in the coal industry. Another tactically brilliant appointment regarding defeating the trade unions in a strike was Walter Marshall who replaced Glyn England as chairman of The General Electricity Board in 1983. Not only had England 'little stomach for a fight with the NUM'[7] but Marshall was a nuclear enthusiast.[8] The appointment of Nicholas Ridley as Secretary of State for Transport in 1983 also proved to be a key appointment with regards to winning the strike as he oversaw the stock-piling of coal in advance of the strike. It was also a wise decision as Ridley, like Thatcherites[9], believed in the power of market forces[10] and so wanted to see the defeat of the trade unions.

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Ridley's part in the government's preparation for the strike began long before 1983 as he headed the policy group who produced the Ridley Report that detailed how a Conservative government could defeat a coal strike.[11] Peter Dorey, a specialist on the contemporary politics and history of the Conservative party, believes that through following Ridley's suggestions the Conservative government had placed themselves in a strong position to fight the miners.[12] Following Ridley's advice they strengthened the police and stockpiled coal at power stations which proved to be vital during the strike as it enabled the government to maintain the production of power and diminish the strike's national effect in comparison to previous strikes.[13] The government also created favourable conditions for a victory by overseeing decent wage agreements for those in the power and transport industries in order to minimize the chances that they would join a strike – which indeed proved to be the case.[14] Again this ensured that Britain's power supply was maintained and that the effects of the strike were largely confined to mining communities.

The Ridley Report also suggested revoking benefits from those who were dependant on strikers and the government incorporated this into their strategy through Section 2, clause 6 of the 1980 Social Security Act. The Act decreed that in the event of a strike, strikers and their families would not receive the urgent needs payment and £12 would be deducted from their benefits to cover for the strike pay they were theoretically receiving from their unions.[15] By 1984 this sum had risen to £15 and in November the government increased it to £16.[16] This increase was criticised as cruel by the Labour MP Michael Meacher[17] during parliamentary debate however the government's preparation allowed the Conservative MP Norman Fowler to defend the move by arguing that the 1980 Act allowed the sum to be uprated when necessary.[18] This law proved to be a highly effective aspect of the government's handling of the 1984/5 strike as it made life extremely difficult for the miners and their families, contributing to the eventual return to work.

An additional law passed by the Conservative government as part of their strategy for handling a strike was the 1980 Employment Act which made striking more difficult as it banned secondary picketing. This proved to be effective during the miners' strike because it allowed the police to construct road-blocks and turn people away whom they suspected of going to picket illegally. Indeed, between March and September 1984 the police managed to stop around 290,000 picketers in this way.[19] This law, in addition to the 1982 Employment Act, also made striking legally difficult for it decreed that acts such as having more than two picketers by an entrance was illegal.[20] However, despite these civil laws being tailored for a strike such as the miners', Thatcher did not make much use of them. This was a brilliant move as she knew how unpopular they had been and feared that using them could be perceived as an attack by the government on the working class which could in turn have pushed other trade unions or non-striking miners to join the strike in a united front against the government.[21]

Instead of using the Employment Acts, Thatcher exploited the NUM's failure to hold a ballot before calling a strike. Scargill by-passed a vote because he had lost the last three consecutive ballots and feared that if he called one in 1984, it too would fail. Neil Kinnock, the Labour party leader during the strike, has since called this '...a cataclysmic decision..'[22].[23]The government handled the situation brilliantly through using the blunder to their advantage by encouraging individuals to use the labour laws to take the NUM to court on the grounds that without a ballot the strike was illegal. One of the ways in which they did this was through making excellent use of their ally David Hart; a wealthy right-wing libertarian who travelled between coalfields under the alias David Lawrence creating a network of unhappy and disaffected miners.[24] Although he was not part of the government, he was 'Accepted in the inner sanctums of the Tory right for well over a decade..'[25] and a recently revealed government document shows that he had a direct line to Thatcher's office and that they were in close contact during the strike.[26] The left-wing journalist Seamus Milne believes that Hart was crucial to Thatcher's victory[27], a view supported by Hart's success in orchestrating one of the most calamitous pieces of legal action that the NUM faced during the strike. He encouraged two miners who had been forced to stop working due to the strike to take the NUM to court on the grounds that they had not been able to vote. In September a High Court ruled that the strike was illegal which led to the sequestration of the NUM's assets, including their headquarters.[28] They also suffered in court at the hands of small businesses. One haulage company took the South Wales NUM to court on the grounds that picketers had obstructed their business which resulted in a fine of £50,000.[29] The government's use of Scargill's mistake to encourage individual attacks on the NUM certainly was a brilliant aspect of their handling of the strike.

Thatcher also used the NUM's lack of a ballot effectively as part of her 'Right to Work' rhetoric. This argument was

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that every individual should have the fundamental right to choose whether or not they wished to work, but that by bypassing a ballot the NUM had taken this choice away. The Nottingham miners were particularly angry about this and when they refused to strike Thatcher publicly supported their decision, calling them ‘..extremely brave..’ in an interview with the *Financial Times* in 1984.[30] Her portrayal of those returning to work as heroic and of the government as the guardians of democracy standing together against an un-democratic NUM was a key component in the government’s victory as it created a negative impression of the NUM. They also strengthened this by manipulating another of the NUM’s weaknesses; Scargill’s character. Although he was popular among the miners, Thatcher portrayed him as a revolutionary, militant Marxist who ruled the NUM like a dictatorship. Though this image was not a far cry from the one Scargill himself conveyed[31], the theory suggested by the socialist political theorist Alex Callinicos that the strike failed because its leaders were not militant enough[32] suggests that Thatcher successfully embellished her portrayal of Scargill in order to turn public support against him. Thatcher’s villainous portrayal of Scargill was also reflected by the media. Indeed the right-wing press attacked both his political credibility and personal integrity with headlines such as ‘Godfather Scargill’s Mafia Mob’[33] appearing in *The News of The World* and the *Sun* publishing the headline ‘Scargill’s Real Aim Is War’[34]. These two newspapers were owned by Rupert Murdoch, a businessman with whom Thatcher had built an alliance. Indeed in his study of the relationship between Thatcher, the strike and the media, sociologist David V Khabaz sees that ‘..the special relationship between Thatcher and Murdoch..’[35] did influence the press reports. Whilst historian Amy Whipple, whose research work has included analysing Thatcherism, agrees that the popular press became very right-wing as a result of Thatcher’s policies, she does criticise Khabaz for not sufficiently supporting his theory that the newspapers affected public opinion.[36] His theory is however supported by Granville Williams, a specialist on the relationship between the media, society and democracy, who sees that those who read the press coverage were ‘..left with a view that the strike was precipitated by the power-crazed antics of Arthur Scargill’.[37] This successful portrayal of the NUM as an un-democratic organisation led by a ruthless dictator reinforces the credibility of Gillmore’s analysis of the government’s handling of the strike as brilliant because this tactic enabled the government to gain public support.

In addition to demonising Scargill, the government also successfully dismissed his claims that the NCB were planning to cut 70,000 jobs. They reassured miners that this was untrue by sending a letter under MacGregor’s name, and personally approved of by Thatcher, to every miner’s home.[38] However, a recently revealed document from September 1983 reveals that MacGregor had plans to cut 64,000 jobs in three years.[39] A similar figure was mentioned during a meeting in January 1984 when MacGregor indicated that his aim was to cut 45,000 jobs in two years.[40] Had this information been widely known it could potentially have had calamitous consequences for the government as it may have encouraged others, such as other industries or the Nottingham miners, to join the strike. That the government were able to successfully hide the information whilst simultaneously discrediting Scargill was an excellent aspect of their handling of the strike as it helped them gain support.

Support was also gained by portraying the strikers as the enemy. Indeed in a speech made by Thatcher following the Orgreave Battle she declared that the picketers were attempting ‘to substitute the rule of the mob for the rule of the law..’[41], thus portraying them negatively as lawless criminals. This rhetoric, in combination with the ‘Right to Work’ argument, was certainly effective as a Gallup poll shows that whilst in July 1984 40% sympathised with the employers and 33% with the strikers, by December this had changed to 51% sympathising with the employers and only 26% with the strikers.[42] This shows that the majority of public support was not behind the strikers which was important to the government because had public pressure been put on them to end the strike it would certainly have made victory far more difficult, if not impossible.

Thatcher’s strategy of portraying the miners as the enemy during the strike in order to turn public support against them was also supported by Thatcherism. Eric J. Evans, an expert in modern British political history, sees Thatcherism as a ‘series of interconnected political attitudes rather than a coherent body of thought’[43], to each of which individualism was central, according to Shirley Letwin.[44] Individualism perpetrated the message that success was reliant on individual hard work. Letwin, a right-wing Thatcher sympathiser, believes that individualism’s tendency to pursue one’s own interest first is not only a basic human instinct, but also a component of ‘British Morality’.[45] Letwin sees that Thatcher harnessed this politically in a way that was appropriate for the Britain of the 1970s and 1980s.[46] The left wing journalist Hugo Young however was far more critical and believes that it led to the death of society and a ‘..mood of tolerated harshness.’ Both however support the theory that Thatcherism

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contributed to the creation of a climate in which the strikers incurred distaste rather than solidarity as individualism dictated that it was individual hard work, and not a reliance on unions, that should result in a higher wage.

Successfully creating a negative portrayal of the strikers also enabled the government to justify their use of the police. They emphasised that the police were not on any side but rather were defending the individual's right to work against violent strikers.[47] This was a message pushed by Thatcher during an interview with Sir Robyn Day on Panorama in April 1984:

'This is not a dispute between miners and government. This is a dispute between miners and miners...it is the police who are in charge of upholding the law...[they] have been wonderful.'[48]

By using this argument Thatcher not only distanced the government from the violence on the picket lines but also justified the police's tactics; tactics that had been honed in operations directed against black communities and in Northern Ireland.[49] These included using riot-trained police officers, being heavily armoured, using scare tactics such as raiding pubs within mining communities and engaging in many fierce battles with picketers.[50] Social historian David Waddington, whose expertise lies in two principal areas of research: the policing of public disorder and the social implications of the 1984-85 miners' strike, believes that during this time '...an ideological climate conducive to the harshest possible policing of the strike..' [51] was born, one in whose creation the government had played a starring role. This not only made picketing difficult and dangerous but also demoralised strikers. Being able to justify the police was also a crucial component in the government's successful handling of the strike because they performed another essential function; that of taking strike-breakers across picket lines.[52] This too demoralised those on strike and contributed to the continuation of coal production and so of power.

In addition to justifying the police's role in the strike, the government was also highly effective in justifying their plans for pit closures. Robert Miller and Bob Fine explain that they did this through using the reasoning of economic morality.[53] Ironically, this concept was used by Marxist historian E.P. Thompson to explain that the food riots in Britain during the 18th century were the result of the peasants uprising against the farmers to set food prices that were morally fair.[54] Thatcher on the other hand used it as a tool against the working class miners to emphasise that their demands to keep pits open were not economically beneficial to society, and so not moral. She explained that the plan to close pits was necessary in compliance with the law of the market for coal was an industry in decline. The miners were asking for something 'that could not be conceded'[55] because conceding would mean taking money from elsewhere, thus resulting in a loss for other members of society 'whether [it be] kidney machines or Trident missiles.'[56] In order to prevent this the plan to close pits, the plan of economic rationality, had to be seen through. The NCB[57] also played a crucial part in conveying this message. One of the ways they did this was by placing advertisements in newspaper that discredited the strike, as they did in one advert published in *The Daily Mirror* on the 4th of July 1984:

"Can the strike end the need to close uneconomic pits?" No—because it can't change a basic fact. Expensive coal is coal that can't be sold. By taking out our four million most expensive tonnes of production, we can get the average cost of our coal down—and thus make it easier to sell. [58]

Here the NCB portrayed themselves as the saviours of the coal industry and emphasised that the cuts they were proposing were necessary if the industry was to survive. Choosing to place this advertisement in the *Daily Mirror* was tactically brilliant as it was aimed at working class men and women[59] who typically supported Labour[60]. As mining areas were traditionally both working class and Labour strongholds there was perhaps more of a chance that the strikers, and crucially their wives, would read it. The argument presented to them in the advertisement, and elsewhere by the government[61] and the NCB, could have played a part in encouraging miners to return to work by convincing them and their families that returning was the only way to save the industry and so their jobs. This was important for it demoralised the miners still on strike, showed that the NUM was weakening and gave the government confidence that they could win – as indeed they did.

Whether or not Thatcher was right to close pits on economic grounds is a highly contentious point[62] but her use of economic rationale was brilliant. Indeed her emphasis on closing un-economic pits could have played a part in the

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Nottingham miners' refusal to strike. There was a more prosperous coal field than Yorkshire's and so they could feel more secure that it was not their pits that would be closed.[63] Nottingham miners not joining the strike coupled with a steady return to work rate meant that some coal production continued.[64]

Although coal production fell during the strike, it was still remarkably high considering that the NUM had called for a national strike. This played an important part in the government's victory because coal production meant that power could be produced too. Indeed at the beginning of 1985 The Secretary of State for Energy Peter Walker was able to announce that there would be no power cuts that year – an incident that left of centre historian Kenneth Morgan identifies as a positive turning point in the strike from the government's perspective.[65]

Another aspect of the government's handling of the strike that was brilliant was their willingness to meet and compromise when necessary, as they did with the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) in 1984. The NACODS had not joined the strike but on the 28th of September they announced that they had held a ballot with the result being 83% in favour of striking. Thatcher was concerned that MacGregor did not appreciate how serious the situation was and ordered him to negotiate. [66] This paid off for the NACODS agreed to accept a modified colliery review offered by the government. Political journalist Andy McSmith believes that it was at this point that 'The miners' last chance of victory had slipped away...' [67] which shows how important it was that the government dealt with the threat as effectively as they did. Another instance in which Thatcher compromised was when, on the 19th of February, she met with the leaders of the TUC to discuss the strike, despite not truly wishing to do so. The TUC left the meeting with hope and the next day Peter Walker drew up a proposal that would end the strike. However when the TUC presented the proposal to the NUM executives they refused to accept it.[68] Thatcher's willingness to meet with the TUC supported her argument that the government was on the side of democracy and fairness – thus helping to prevent other unions from joining the strike.

One of Thatcher's main aims during the miners' strike was to weaken the trade union movement because, during her time as an MP, she had witnessed the downfall of Heath's Conservative government in 1974 as a result of a miners' strike[69], she saw the problems that the mass striking during the winter of 1978/79 – 'The Winter of Discontent' – had caused for the government and she herself had to back down after a confrontation with the NUM in 1981 over pit closures. These incidents gave Thatcher a conviction that the unions had too much power and a determination to beat them.[70] A poll conducted in 1979 shows that a staggering 79% of the British population[71], and even 72% of manual workers[72], agreed with her and felt that the unions had too much power. Therefore, Thatcher aimed to handle the strike in such a way that the government would emerge victorious and leave the trade unions weakened. She did this by concentrating on defeating the NUM. Her memoirs reveal that during the dock strike in July 1984 her strategy was to bring it to a close as swiftly as possible so that she could focus on the coal strike.[73] A similar pattern emerges in her attitude towards the railway workers. Her memoirs reveal that she was prepared to negotiate pay with them should they show an inclination to strike, as their cooperation was crucial to winning the miners' strike.[74] This strategy theorised that as the NUM was one of the most powerful unions, to defeat them would be to weaken the unions as a collective. There are many theories as to why the miners' union was not only strong but prone to striking. Kerr and Siegel suggested that it stemmed from the difficult working conditions faced by most miners and that as a job which required specialised skills, miners had a restricted 'occupational mobility' and so unhappiness tended to be voiced through protest.[75] Although it is unclear how aware Thatcher was of such theories, David Howell, a Labour historian whose research has covered the NUM, believes that there was a myth about the '...industrial and potential political strength of miners...', one fed by Heath's downfall in 1974.[76] Thatcher's memoirs also show that she was aware that mining was an industry with a long history of striking and of relying on '...industrial muscle to keep themselves in work.'[77] Despite their reputation Thatcher did win the strike and Norman Tebbit accredited the victory to breaking '...not just the strike, but a spell...' as the unions' power was diminished as a result of the victory.[78] This supports Gilmour's argument that the government's handling of the strike was brilliant for they handled it in such a way that left them not only with a victory but weakened trade unions[79] – something they had promised to deliver in the 1979 Conservative Manifesto.[80]

However, whilst the government handled many aspects of the strike brilliantly, they handled one appallingly – that one being the humanitarian aspect. The strikers and their families faced numerous hardships during the strike and many suffered at the hands of the government's ruthless policies. Firstly, the picketers suffered both mentally and

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physically at the hands of the police, an institution which gained more power under Thatcher. [81] Accounts from those who stood on the picket lines describe how the police not only used brute force but also taunted the strikers.[82] Poverty was also an issue for the strikers and their dependents as they were not being paid and the government's decision to cut their benefits made their suffering worse. Not only did it result in many families going without heating or enough food but many were also unable to pay their debts which resulted in the re-possession of goods and being blacklisted by hire-purchase companies.[83] The extreme poverty also led to the deaths of three children who died whilst picking coal from pit-tips because their families could not afford to buy it.[84] The strike also caused tension in mining communities between friends, co-workers and even families when duties or beliefs found people on different sides.[85]

The level of human suffering endured during the strike has made it a highly contentious topic which critics of Thatcher use to highlight her callousness. However, the government did successfully handle the threat posed by a strike from a strong and determined union whose leader would not compromise by preparing effectively, using the arguments of economic rationality and the 'Right to Work', gaining public support, deploying the police efficiently and using the law to their advantage. It is then possible to conclude that from a political and economic perspective Ian Gilmour was right to argue that the government's handling of the 1984/5 miners' strike was 'brilliant' as they not only achieved victory but also achieved a political goal by weakening the trade unions.

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