



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/ehr/cez001](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cez001)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Vinen, R. (2019). A War of Position? The Thatcher Government's Preparation for the 1984 Miners' Strike. *The English Historical Review*, 134(566), 121–150. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cez001>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## 'A War of Position? The Thatcher Government's Preparation for the 1984 Miners' Strike.\*

### Abstract.

It has sometimes been suggested that the Thatcher government approached the miners' strike of 1984/5 with plans that had been conceived long in advance. This article argues that Conservatives did discuss the prospect of a strike from the mid 1970s. However, they did not have clearly worked out plans or much confidence in their ability to win and they became even more cautious after their humiliating retreat when faced with the threat of a strike in February 1981. Stockpiling coal was, initially, designed to deter a strike rather than to 'win' one. Only slowly did some Tories reconcile themselves to the prospect that there was likely to be a strike and that 1984 was the least bad time to face it. Furthermore, Thatcher herself was not always keen to take the miners on and many of those who did most to prepare and execute government strategy in this area were not Thatcherites; some of them were civil servants rather than politicians.

.....

There is very little prospect of the Government and the Board inflicting total defeat on the NUM either now or later.<sup>1</sup>

Nigel Lawson (Secretary of State for Energy) to Margaret Thatcher, 8 January 1982

---

\* I am grateful for comments on drafts on this article from Tim Bale, David Edgerton, Tom Hurst, Tom Kelsey, Helen Parr, Paul Readman, Robert Saunders, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and three anonymous referees.

<sup>1</sup>Thatcher Foundation Website (TFW) 135923, Lawson to Thatcher, 8 Jan. 1982. This article draws on documents from the National Archives at Kew as well as some at Churchill College Cambridge, in the Conservative Party Archives in Oxford and at the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University. Many documents at Kew and Cambridge are available on the Thatcher Foundation Website and, when this is the case, I have given the identifying number for the website rather than the original archive classification.

I continue to be apprehensive about future pay and other demands by the miners ... In the foreseeable future it will never be safe to assume that a confrontation can be 'won'.<sup>2</sup>

Robin Ibbs (outgoing head of Central Policy Review Staff), 23 March 1982.

Events have not, however, challenged the post-war impression of their [the miners'] invincibility for we have yet to beat a national stoppage.<sup>3</sup>

Bernard Ingham (Prime Minister's press secretary), 10 March 1983.

The miners' strike of 1984-5 – widely recognized as the single most important episode in the domestic politics of the Thatcher government - has been the subject of numerous studies. However, some of these publications have neglected, perhaps obscured, important questions. This is because the strike has been largely seen from the point of view of the miners or their supporters.<sup>4</sup> It has also often been seen in social and cultural, rather than political, terms. Indeed, some scholars assume that the political prelude to the strike has already been established and consequently emphasize their own challenge to 'the dominant narratives of the strike, which remain wedded to high politics'.<sup>5</sup>

Little has been said about the light that official documents released since 2010 might shed on the 'high politics of the strike'. These documents include a long report by Central Policy Review Staff

---

<sup>2</sup>TFW 123002, Ibbs to Thatcher, 23 March 1982.

<sup>3</sup>TFW, 138796, Ingham to Vereker, 10 March 1983.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Adeney and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike, 1984-5: Loss without Limit* (London, 1986); Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: the Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London, 2009); Andrew Richards, *Miners on Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Oxford, 1996); Peter Gibbon and David Steyne (eds), *Thurcroft: a Village and the Miners' Strike, an Oral History* (Nottingham, 1986); Tony Parker, *Redhill: a Mining Community* (London, 1986); Roger Seifert and John Urwin, *Struggle without End: The 1984/5 Miners' Strike in North Staffordshire* (Newcastle, Staffs, 1987); David Waddington, Maggie Wykes and Chas Critcher, *Split at the Seams: Community, Continuity and Change after the 1984-5 Coal Disputes* (Milton Keynes, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Jim Phillips, 'Material and Moral Resources: the 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Scotland', *The Economic History Review*, (2012) LXV, 256-276.

(CPRS) in July 1981, the existence of which seems to have been unknown to the authors of the official history of the CPRS,<sup>6</sup> the proceedings of an 'Official Committee on Coal', which was established in 1981 and met up to, and during, the strike, and numerous notes by ministers and officials: one civil servant, John Vereker, wrote at least twenty four such notes, four of them addressed to the Prime Minister. This neglect is part of a more general phenomenon. Documentary releases have had relatively little effect on interpretations of the Thatcher government - perhaps because the first, often contemporaneous, accounts of it were painted in such compellingly vivid colours. With particular regard to the miners' strike, two views, first expressed during the 1980s, remain influential. The first is that 'deep-laid Conservative plans'<sup>7</sup> or an 'open conspiracy',<sup>8</sup> dating from the 1970s, 'provided much of the basis for the Conservative government's strategy in decisively defeating the 1984-85 miners' strike.'<sup>9</sup> The second is that planning for a miners' strike was a specifically Thatcherite project and that, indeed, it was associated with Margaret Thatcher personally.

In his authorized biography of Margaret Thatcher, Charles Moore advances a more nuanced view about the timescale on which the government planned for a miners' strike. For him, the plans were formulated not in the 1970s but in the aftermath of the government's retreat in the face of a threatened miners' strike in February 1981. All the same, Moore believes that long-term plans underlay the government's strategy. Furthermore, like earlier writers, though with a different moral spin from most of them, Moore lays a heavy emphasis on Thatcher's personal role.<sup>10</sup> Oddly the fact that he draws on interviews with the great and good sharpens his focus on Thatcher. The civil servants and ministers who surrounded her tend to disappear from view because we are looking through their eyes rather than at them. Moore says little about how far such people

---

<sup>6</sup>Tessa Blackstone and William Plowden, *Inside the Think Tank: Advising the Cabinet, 1971-1983* (London, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons, *The Great Strike: the Miners' Strike of 1984-5 and its Lessons* (London, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>John Saville, 'An Open Conspiracy: Conservative Politics and the Miners' Strike 1984-5', *Socialist Register*, 22 (1985/6), pp. 295-329.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Dorey, 'Conciliation or Confrontation with the Trade Unions? The Conservative Party's 'Authority of Government Group', 1975-1978', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 27/28 (Spring/Autumn, 2009), 135-51.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher, the Authorized Biography, II: Everything She Wants* (London, 2015) pp. 143 and 181.

might have been actors in, rather than merely observers of, the making of policy.

This article will argue that preparation for the coal strike was more complicated than either Moore or earlier commentators have suggested. It will draw on recently released documents. It will, however, be stressed that extensive documentation does not produce certainty. People sometimes wrote most when they were least sure of what to do. Equally, records are least extensive for the period after September 1983, when the government seemed most resolved to face a strike. Much planning was secret. Some documents found their way into the archives even when their authors had written 'we dare not risk the enclosed note getting into the official machine',<sup>11</sup> but one assumes that others were destroyed and there were times, particularly in the period immediately preceding the strike, when a deliberate decision was taken not to record some discussions.

My argument is narrowly framed in two respects. First, it focuses the years leading up to the beginning of the strike in March 1984 and discusses the events of the strike itself only insofar as they reveal something about pre-strike planning. Since the notion of a government plan that was worked out before the strike plays such an important role in the literature on the strike, government planning during this period deserves particular attention. Secondly, this article is mainly about the government. It discusses the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and, for that matter, the National Coal Board (NCB), which had been created by the nationalization of the mines in 1947, only in so far as beliefs about these bodies informed government action. 'Government' in this context is taken to mean ministers but also political advisors and civil servants, who were more than just the executors of policy decided by their political masters. Many of those civil servants and political advisors who were most active in this domain derived their influence partly from their relations with the Prime Minister, though this does not necessarily mean that they expressed Thatcher's own opinions, which were sometimes inscrutable.

I will argue that ministers and officials anticipated and, to some extent, prepared for a strike from an early stage. However, this does

---

<sup>11</sup>TFW 151044, Gow to Thatcher, 14 November 1980.

not mean that they had clearly-worked out plans for achieving their victory over the NUM in 1984/5. The very fact that a potential strike was discussed so much reflected uncertainty about what would, and should, happen. There were multiple plans – some of which, such as the quixotic suggestion that enthusiasts who ran narrow-gauge railways might be recruited to drive coal trains,<sup>12</sup> bore little relation to what the government ultimately did. The making of policy with regard to the miners was not the preserve of Thatcherite radicals. It involved former Heathites as well as many who were not members of the Conservative party at all. In any case, no one faction controlled policy making in this area because dealing with a strike required multiple agencies, which was one of the things that had made the government less quick on its feet than the NUM during the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> When the strike finally came, almost half of Cabinet ministers were members of the committee that coordinated policy.<sup>14</sup>

An understanding of how the government prepared for conflict with the miners also has implications for broader debates about ‘Thatcherism’. First, and not surprisingly, the Thatcher government was more cautious and pragmatic in the implementation of policy than the rhetoric of both Thatcherites and their opponents implied. Secondly, and related to this, historians have sometimes studied what Thatcherites said more than what the Thatcher government did. The difference between words and deeds was partly a difference between opposition and government but it was also associated with the shift in gear that came after the 1983 election. The second Thatcher government was more confident than the first and placed a greater emphasis on action rather than reflection. Thirdly, not all policies of the Thatcher government were ‘Thatcherite’. Some fitted into a consensus that commanded wide support among the establishment. Finally, in case it is not obvious, I should stress that

---

<sup>12</sup>London, National Archives (TNA) CAB 130/1173, Official Group on Coal, report by secretaries, 10 July 1981.

<sup>13</sup>TFW 111390, Authority of Government Group, 21 July 1976, Lord Armstrong expressed concern ‘that the chain of command on the Government side was very much longer than the chain of command on the union side.’

<sup>14</sup>The Ministerial Group on Coal (MISC 101) was chaired by Whitelaw (Deputy Prime Minister) and generally included the Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Energy, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State for Employment and ministers representing the Scottish Office, the Ministry of Defence, Transport and the Department of Trade and Industry. This committee, established during the strike and made up of politicians, is not to be confused with MISC 57, made up of civil servants, that prepared for a strike.

my title is slightly mischievous - since one of my aims is to turn attention away from the Gramscian emphasis on ideological hegemony, which has sometimes characterized writing on Thatcherism,<sup>15</sup> and to emphasize a more quotidian sort of politics.

## I

Since Edward Heath, Thatcher's predecessor as leader of the Conservative party, had been brought down as Prime Minister by a miners' strike in 1974, Thatcher and her colleagues always knew that the NUM posed a threat.<sup>16</sup> Discussions of the matter were conducted with discretion: 'political realism at a delicate point in the NUM/Conservative party relations required that any consideration of the restructuring of the industry be kept secret.'<sup>17</sup> In spite of this, parts of two confidential documents that touched on relations of a future Conservative government with the NUM were leaked to the press. The first of these was a report on the 'Authority of Government' that met from 1975 to 1977. It was chaired by Lord Carrington, a Tory frontbencher since the 1960s, who was to be Thatcher's first Foreign Secretary. The report's tone was pessimistic. Carrington himself remarked: 'there might be advantages in saying in our report that the Government cannot win a miners' strike, but it can make sure everyone else suffers from it ... if you could not win, then you should not try'.<sup>18</sup>

The second discussion of the miners came in the 'Ridley report' of 1977, part of which was leaked to *The Economist* in 1978. This was, in fact, an annex on 'countering the political threat' to a report on

---

<sup>15</sup>Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', *Marxism Today* (June 1987).

<sup>16</sup>Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, this edn. 1995), p. 340.

<sup>17</sup>Oxford, Bodleian Library, Conservative Party Archives CRD 4/11/1m, meeting of Energy Group, 18 March 1976.

<sup>18</sup>TFW 111380, Authority of Government Group, 22 October 1975. William Waldegrave leaked the outlines of this report to the journalist Peter Hennessy – though Waldegrave, a member of the committee, came to believe that it had been chaired by Prior rather than Carrington: an illustration of how Prior came to be blamed for almost every sign of weakness that the Tories displayed in dealing with the unions. William Waldegrave. *A Different Kind of Weather: a Memoir* (London, 2015), p. 201. The full record of meetings of the Group was kept by another member, George Younger, and is now available on the Thatcher Foundation Website.

nationalized industries prepared by a committee that was chaired by the Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley. It described the mines as the 'most likely' area for conflict between a future Conservative government and the unions and it anticipated some tactics, the circumvention of rail transport by road hauliers or the deployment of a more centralized police force, that were used in 1984.<sup>19</sup> The Ridley report, or at least that part of it that had been leaked, became notorious during the strike and was often presented as a blue print for government action. One historian has suggested that: 'The ... more 'positive' analysis and recommendations of the Ridley Report were wholly in accordance with Thatcher's own ideological views and political instincts' and that it supplanted Carrington's report.<sup>20</sup> It is true that the Carrington committee was largely made up of men who had been close to Heath while Ridley was close to Thatcher, and bitterly hostile to Heath. However, it would be simplistic to see the two reports in terms of 'Heathism' versus 'Thatcherism'. Carrington was senior to Ridley, even after Thatcher became leader, as were several members of Carrington's committee. There is, in fact, little evidence that, once they were in power, Conservatives referred back to the Ridley report; indeed, Conservative Central Office had trouble finding a copy.<sup>21</sup> In any case, only a partial reading of the Ridley report could present it as a blue print for government policy in 1984. Ridley anticipated a confrontation that would occur within a year or eighteen months of a Conservative election victory. He also suggested that the government parry the threat of a strike by buying off powerful workers and that it might 'provoke a battle in a non-vulnerable industry where we can win.' Coal was not regarded as a 'non-vulnerable' industry. Indeed the tone of the Ridley report seemed to anticipate the government's humiliation in February 1981 (see below) rather than its victory in 1985.

Far from coming to power with a plan to defeat the miners, Thatcher's tenure in office began with a mood of gloom on this topic. Officials told ministers that any industrial action by miners, even short of an outright strike, would force restrictions on the use of electricity: 'There are no other steps which can be taken to brighten

---

<sup>19</sup>TFW 110795, Report of Nationalised Industries Policy Group, 30 June 1977.

See also Cambridge, Churchill College Archives Centre, Papers of Lord Hailsham, HLSM 2/42/2/55, 'Interim Report'.

<sup>20</sup>Dorey, 'Conciliation or Confrontation?', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 27/28 (2009), 135-51.

<sup>21</sup>Adeney and Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike, 1984-5*, p. 73.

that picture.’<sup>22</sup> John Hoskyns, the head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and a political appointment who regarded himself as a Thatcherite, wrote in July in terms that were similar to those that Carrington had used a few years previously: ‘though we can’t win a strike against them [the miners] ... we will definitely make the strike long and expensive (i.e. a negative sum game) because that is the only deterrent open to us.’<sup>23</sup>

There was one domain in which government policy was informed, from the first, by the prospect of having to deal with a miners’ strike. Conservative ministers were interested in nuclear power partly because, as some of them noted in 1979, it would ‘have the advantage of removing a substantial proportion of electricity production from the dangers of disruption by industrial action by coal miners or transport workers.’<sup>24</sup> Nigel Lawson, Energy Secretary from 1981 to 1983, recognized that the government’s enthusiasm for nuclear power (which he came to regard, in retrospect, as economically unwise) owed much to the perception that it might be ‘a means of emancipation from Arthur Scargill’ and that ‘diversification’ of energy sources was ‘code for freedom from NUM blackmail.’<sup>25</sup> However, in a curious way, reference to the nuclear industry illustrated government pessimism about the prospects of defeating the miners. Nuclear power would only have an effect in the very long term. As it turned out, the government did not manage to commission a single new reactor until after the end of the 1984/5 coal strike. Nuclear power featured little in the detailed discussions of how to manage a strike that began after February 1981 (see below).

In 1980, the government discussed ways to reduce the losses incurred by the Coal Board. The Energy Secretary – David Howell – put forward plans that anticipated closing the least productive pits but balancing this with investment in more profitable mines. However, demand for coal declined because of a general economic recession and the Coal Board began to accumulate stocks of coal, which, at that stage, it did not want. In February 1981, a list of pits

---

<sup>22</sup>TFW 116623, note by deputy chairman of the Civil Contingencies Unit, attached to note signed by Armstrong and others, 30 November 1979.

<sup>23</sup> Cambridge, Churchill College Archive Centre, Papers of John Hoskyns, 2/125, Hoskyns to Duguid, 23 July 1980.

<sup>24</sup>TFW 116497, Ministerial Committee on Economic Strategy, 23 October 1979.

<sup>25</sup>Nigel Lawson, *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (this edn, London, 1993), pp. 166, 168.

that the Coal Board proposed to close was leaked and some miners walked out. A national strike seemed likely and stocks of coal would not have lasted for long. Within a week, the government backed down. Plans to close pits were abandoned and the government sought to reduce coal imports by pressing other nationalized industries to use great quantities of expensive British coal. It was a humiliating defeat. A civil servant noted that it 'left the NUM with the initiative on all fronts'.<sup>26</sup>

The Cabinet was bitterly divided in early 1981, particularly over the forthcoming budget, and this may have contributed to the sense of political weakness that made Thatcher reluctant to pick a fight with the miners. However, conflict between 'wets' and 'dries', over monetary policy, only partially overlapped with that between 'hawks' and 'doves' over trade unions. In private conversations, Thatcher blamed the most important Cabinet dove, Jim Prior, the Employment Secretary, for the climb down,<sup>27</sup> and her entourage seems to have relayed this impression to Fleet Street,<sup>28</sup> but Cabinet minutes record 'unanimous support' for the decision.<sup>29</sup> Insiders attributed responsibility to Thatcher herself. Some of them admired the speed with which she decided to 'cut and run',<sup>30</sup> though a normally loyal minister complained that the Prime Minister was 'all piss and wind'.<sup>31</sup>

After February 1981, the battle lines were drawn. The government could only stop the Coal Board from being a drain on public finances

---

<sup>26</sup>TNA CAB 184/527/1, Lankester to Ibbs, 12 May 1981.

<sup>27</sup>Warwick University, Modern Records Centre, archives of Confederation of British Industry, MSS 200/C/3/DG4/13, Terrence Beckett (the head of the CBI) met Thatcher on 11 March 1981. He recorded: 'The climb down advocated by James Prior on the miners, the fact that this had to be paid for and that some members of her Cabinet including James Prior did not support a tough budget had obviously incensed her.'

<sup>28</sup>Prior extracted damages from the *Daily Express* when it alleged that he had met the leader of the NUM before the climb-down. Jim Prior, *A Balance of Power* (1986), p. 169. Prior and Gormley had met some weeks earlier – though apparently to talk about general issues rather than a potential miners' strike. See Joe Gormley, *Battered Cherub: an Autobiography* (1982), p. 181. David Howell reported that Gormley had tried to reach him by telephone in mid-February 1981 but, having failed to do so, had spoken to Prior instead. TFW 126038, Lankester to West, 17 February 1981.

<sup>29</sup>TFW 127194, Cabinet minutes, confidential annex, 19 February 1981.

<sup>30</sup>Charles Moore, *Everything She Wants*, p. 143.

<sup>31</sup>John Hoksyns, *Just in Time: Inside the Thatcher Revolution* (London, 2000), p. 280, remarks made by Cecil Parkinson.

if it closed pits, but the miners would resist closures. Furthermore, the problems in the industry lay with management as well as the union.<sup>32</sup> This was partly because the government saw the Coal Board management as excessively prone to co-operate with the union. It was, more generally, because the Coal Board – even more than other nationalized industries – enjoyed a monopoly. Nigel Lawson, then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, wrote in April 1981 about the need to ‘build a successful coal industry independent of government subsidies; to de-monopolize it and ultimately open it to private enterprise ...we will make no progress towards our aim until we deal with the problem of monopoly union power.’<sup>33</sup> The Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, wrote: ‘the NCB see their interest in many respects as coinciding with the NUM’s for example in maximizing coal production ... without regard to profitability.’<sup>34</sup>

However, knowing where the battle lines were did not mean the government showed immediate enthusiasm to attack. On the contrary, in the aftermath of February 1981, ministers and civil servants seem, for a time, to have abandoned the idea that structural reforms might make the coal industry more efficient in the near future. One result of this was that they concentrated on the limited goal of holding down pay, a matter of particular concern because of the risk that high wages for miners would stimulate demands by workers in other industries: ‘Present thinking is that over the next two years, at least, pay is the top priority. To confront the NUM over closures, imports and investments, as happened last February, would merely increase the chances of greater militancy over pay.’<sup>35</sup>

The government also sought to extend the length of time that it would be able to endure a miners’ strike, but this did not mean that it was seeking one. On the contrary, some hoped that ostentatious preparedness might deter the miners from striking,<sup>36</sup> or even thought that it was worth ‘exaggerating the stock position’<sup>37</sup> Deterrence and other incentives not to strike might go together. An

---

<sup>32</sup>TFW 135946, CPRS report ‘NCB/NUM problem’, though dated on the Thatcher Foundation website to March 1982, this report seems, in fact, to have been finished on 31 July 1981.

<sup>33</sup>Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p. 142.

<sup>34</sup>TFW 126077, Howe to Thatcher, 5 June 1981.

<sup>35</sup>TNA CAB 184/527/2, Turner to Beauman, 13 July 1981.

<sup>36</sup>TFW 126501, Vereker to Duguid, 18 November 1981.

<sup>37</sup>TFW 126477, note by Julian West, 5 August 1981.

official wrote of ‘deterrence at the margin under circumstances of a reasonable offer.’<sup>38</sup> The government might offer a generous pay rise while underlining that the alternative to accepting such an offer would be the unattractive prospect of a long strike. In this complicated world of bluff, some talked of ‘poker’, ‘gamesmanship’,<sup>39</sup> and even, to use a metaphor that was never far from anyone’s mind in the early 1980s, mutually assured destruction: ‘The main value of a willingness to take on the miners is its deterrent effect: just like the nuclear bomb, you hope never to have to use it.’<sup>40</sup>

## II

Cabinet ministers, and, a fortiori, the Prime Minister herself, were too busy with the day-to-day business of government to give sustained attention to the miners. Detailed planning meant turning to civil servants and/or political advisors. Since a miners’ strike was regarded as a matter of high importance, planning for it took place at the commanding heights of the British state among those who provided direct advice to the Prime Minister and/or the Cabinet. The Prime Minister’s own civil service private secretaries were closely involved. In addition to this, the matter was discussed by the Number 10 Policy Unit. This was small: in 1980, it contained three people. It had been composed of political appointments, people paid by the public purse but appointed on a temporary basis because of their sympathies for the government. In the autumn of 1979, to Thatcher’s disquiet, a career civil servant was also attached to the Unit.<sup>41</sup> Alongside this was the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), which had been established in 1970, it was part of the Cabinet Office and existed to provide advice to the whole Cabinet rather than just the Prime Minister. It employed between fifteen and twenty people. Appointments to it were not explicitly political and it contained civil servants on temporary postings as well as those who had been seconded from outside government. After the government climb-down of 1981, a new committee – MISC 57 or the Official Committee on Coal – was established to discuss a possible miners’ strike. This met for several years. It was chaired by Robert Wade-Gery, a

---

<sup>38</sup>TFW 126501, Vereker to Duguid, 18 November 1981.

<sup>39</sup> TNA CAB 184/572/2, Bailey to Beauman, 13 July 1981.

<sup>40</sup>TFW 126057, Hoskyns to Thatcher, ‘Lessons of the NUM Strike Threat’, 27 March 1981.

<sup>41</sup>Hoskyns, *Just in Time*, p. 119.

diplomat attached to the Cabinet Office, until April 1982 and, thereafter by Peter Gregson, an official of the Department of Trade and Industry also attached to the Cabinet Office.<sup>42</sup>

In theory, there was a sharp distinction between the apoliticism of career civil servants and the explicit commitment of political advisors: a distinction that was much discussed in the 1980s when radical government policies seemed to cut across the established routines of the civil service. John Hoskyns, the first head of Thatcher's Policy Unit, was bitterly hostile to 'Whitehall'. He told Thatcher that 'dissidents' were as 'uncomfortable to the Civil Service as Solidarity is to the Polish government'.<sup>43</sup> Hoskyns' successor as head of the Policy Unit, Ferdinand Mount, was to write that 'the higher reaches of the Civil Service which was almost entirely antipathetic to her [Thatcher] personally and to her economic policy.'<sup>44</sup>

In reality, the distinction between political advisors and civil servants was more blurred than official etiquette, and Thatcherite rhetoric, implied. Civil servants appointed to serve alongside political advisors in the Policy Unit – Andrew Duguid, Andrew Vereker and Nicholas Owen – were particularly important in discussion of a potential miners' strike. Hoskyns and Mount wrote approvingly about these officials as though they were exceptions that proved the rules about Whitehall – though, in fact, Hoskyns and Mount worked amicably with many civil servants during their time in Downing Street. The Policy Unit worked with the CPRS on planning for a miners' strike and, when the latter body was dissolved in 1983, the Unit seems to have taken on some of its functions, as well as one of its members.

---

<sup>42</sup>Wade-Gery's own account of his career can be found in his interview with Malcolm McBain for the British Diplomatic Oral History Project (BDOHP) <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/bdohp/>. Wade-Gery recalls that he was entrusted with preparing for a miners' strike within weeks of the 1979 election at a meeting involving Thatcher and Whitelaw. A similar interview seems to inform Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher, the Authorized Biography, I, From Grantham to the Falklands*, (2013), p.537. I have found no trace of such a meeting in the archives but the meeting to which Wade-Gery alludes sounds like the one that occurred on 14 April 1981 (TFW 126063), which led Whitelaw to produce a report on 'Withstanding a Coal Strike' on 22 July 1981 (TFW 126468).

<sup>43</sup>TFW 122722, Hoskyns to Thatcher, 10 January 1982.

<sup>44</sup>Ferdinand Mount, *Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes* (2008), p. 308.

Some civil servants, especially in the Department of Energy, were promoted because they were seen as sympathetic to the government's programme.<sup>45</sup> There is, however, little evidence of such intervention in the Cabinet Office or among the civil servants in Downing Street. Thatcher herself was nervous of anything that might be construed as direct intervention in civil service careers. Many officials had already been in place before Thatcher's election. Robert Wade-Gery – the civil servant who did the most detailed planning for a miners' strike - was admired by the Thatcherite Nigel Lawson and worked well with Thatcher herself: it was he who relayed the order to sink the Argentinian ship *The General Belgrano* during the Falklands War. He was, however, a stereotypical mandarin – a Wykhamist and a fellow of All Souls. He had served in the CPRS during the Heath government and had been appointed to the Civil Contingencies Unit of the Cabinet Office under the Labour government of the late 1970s. His appointment as a Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet Office had been decided before the 1979 election.<sup>46</sup> If he had a political patron, it was not Lawson or Thatcher but William Whitelaw.<sup>47</sup> Wade-Gery was more discreet than some of his civil service colleagues in that the written record reflected his concern to work within the terms of reference laid down by ministers - though he seems to have been less inhibited about the expression of his own views in oral communications.<sup>48</sup>

The convergence between civil servants and politically appointed advisers did not necessarily reflect government imposition on the civil service. Officials, especially the young and ambitious officials in Downing Street and the Cabinet office, welcomed the action and excitement that went with a radical government and were perhaps simply affected by the general atmosphere of the 1980s. Tim Lankester, a civil servant since the 1960s, was bequeathed to Thatcher as a private secretary by her Labour predecessor James Callaghan. Nonetheless, Lankester remarked that he found the

---

<sup>45</sup> Lawson, *The View from No 11*, p. 134/5.

<sup>46</sup> TFW 118847, Hunt to Thatcher, 5 April 1979.

<sup>47</sup> On the relation between Whitelaw and Wade-Gery see the interview with the latter (BDHOP).

<sup>48</sup> TFW 126074, Duguid to Lankester 29 May 1981: 'Robert Wade-Gery is himself very conscious of the limitations of terms of reference ... of his ... group to examine wider questions of policy towards the NCB. He therefore welcomed John Hoskyns's proposal that a group be set up to look at these questions urgently.' Wade-Gery told Hoskyns in August 1981 that the Department of Energy was 'not to be trusted.' Hoskyns, *Just in Time*, p. 325.

challenge to orthodoxy that came from the Policy Unit to be 'electrifying'<sup>49</sup> and was himself, in 1981 to take a secondment to that quintessentially 1980s merchant bank: S.G. Warburg.

Commentators often presented the Thatcher government as pitching radical ministers against cautious civil servants – one thinks of Sir Humphrey Appleby in the 1980s-television series *Yes Minister* who can think of no more damning comment than that a proposal is 'bold.' However, it was politicians not civil servants who had most reason to feel nervous about facing down the miners. Making the wrong move could bring political disaster, as Heath had learned in 1974. Not surprisingly, it was often ministers, and especially the Prime Minister, who backed away from confrontation. Civil servants, by contrast, could afford to think over a longer term and had less reason to fear political consequences. Robert Wade-Gery had returned to the Foreign Office and been posted as ambassador to Delhi before the strike began. He recalled:

When it actually happened, I was sitting in India, simply listening to the radio, and fascinated to see that they followed the plans almost to the letter. In a way, I suppose, I had the best of it. I didn't have the anxieties of actually going through the strike itself. I had all the stimulus of making the plans.<sup>50</sup>

Officials approached the task of preparing for a miners' strike with particular relish, different from the dutiful resignation with which they implemented, say, government policy on controlling the money supply.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, they sometimes urged action on reluctant ministers. Sir John Herbecq, of the Treasury, recalled:

In July 1979, Christopher Foster ... and I were having private meetings with one or two other outsiders and Michael Portillo (who was special adviser to David Howell at the Department of Energy) about a miners' strike. It actually took until the scare of the spring of 1981 to get the government to grapple with

---

<sup>49</sup>Hoskyns, *Just in Time*, p. 184.

<sup>50</sup>BDHOP, Wade-Gery interview.

<sup>51</sup>Lawson described Douglas Wass, of the treasury, as a 'non-believing monetarist'. *The View from No 11*, p. 45.

preparing for a miners' strike, which conservatively we reckoned would take two years.'<sup>52</sup>

Peter le Cheminant, an official from the Department of Energy attached to the Cabinet Office, urged the government to take on the miners in February 1981. He recognized that doing so might be an intrusion 'into the substance, as opposed to the handling of policy issues' and he expressed himself in vivid terms: '[I]f there has to be blood-letting in the mining industry the present timing and issue are the best the government could have hoped for.'<sup>53</sup>

Civil servants may simply have shared the general distaste for trade union power that was felt by much of the upper middle class in the early 1980s, but some of them had special reason to feel concerned about the power of the National Union of Mineworkers. Many had served Edward Heath in the early 1970s and had felt particularly engaged by Heath's style of government. For them, the power cuts of 1972, which had left officials drafting documents by candlelight, were more than the result of an ordinary strike and the 'who governs Britain election' of 1974, which brought Heath down, was more than just the defeat of a political party. Both reflected a crisis of the state. William Armstrong had been Cabinet Secretary in 1974 and had suffered a nervous breakdown during the miners' strike. The fact that he had given evidence to a secret Conservative committee in the 1970s reflects the extent to which thinking by officials and thinking by the Conservative party had moved in parallel during the 1970s.<sup>54</sup> Peter Gregson, who succeeded Wade-Gery as chair of MISC 57, had been a private secretary to Heath and felt 'deep depression' at the defeat that the miners had inflicted on Heath in 1972.<sup>55</sup>

Robert Armstrong (no relation to William), had been Heath's Principal Private Secretary and, with tears in his eyes, accompanied

---

<sup>52</sup>Sir John Herbecq, 'The Civil Service Reforms of the 1980s: the 1981 Civil Service Strike', seminar held 17 November 2006, Centre for Contemporary British History, <http://icbh.a.uk/downloads/civilservicereforms>, p. 40. In his unpublished memoirs, Herbecq says 'it took a massive direct challenge from the miners to provoke firm action against union militancy'. Cambridge Churchill College Archive Centre, Herbecq Manuscript, p. 275.

<sup>53</sup>TFW 126037, Le Cheminant to Robert Armstrong, 17 February 1981.

<sup>54</sup>TFW 111390, Authority of Government Group, 21 July 1976.

<sup>55</sup>Moore, *Everything she Wants*, p. 143.

Heath to present his resignation as Prime Minister.<sup>56</sup> Robert Armstrong became Cabinet Secretary in 1979 and head of the home civil service, when the civil service department was abolished, in 1981. Partly because of his links with Heath, Thatcherites felt uncomfortable about Armstrong – both Hoskyns and Mount cited him as the incarnation of everything that they disliked about Whitehall - and Armstrong was sceptical about some government projects, such as the banning of trade unions at the Government Central Communications Headquarters. On one issue, however, Armstrong differed little from the most hawkish ministers. He wrote in June 1981: ‘There are few more important questions for the government than how best to cope with the problems posed by the miners.’<sup>57</sup>

### III

There are two big general questions to be asked about government attitudes to the prospect of a coal strike. The first of these is: how much did they know about the NUM or, for that matter, about the NCB? The security service reports provided details about the political opinions of members of the National Executive of the NUM. The government understood that there was not always a clear-cut division between ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’ in the NUM leadership and that Communists, in particular, might sometimes be a force for restraint, though not always an effective one. A civil servant in the Department of Employment wrote in 1981:

The NUM think of a Conservative government as a natural enemy and believe that the Tory party has scores to settle ... This make its members particularly paranoid and partly explains why, in February, the S Wales delegate conference overturned the measured strategy of its Communist leadership.<sup>58</sup>

The results of successive ballots on strikes gave ministers and their advisors a sense of the political geography of the miners. They knew that the NUM was not a homogeneous and that its federal structure

---

<sup>56</sup>TFW 110605, Robert Armstrong, ‘Events leading to the resignation of Mr Heath’s administration on 4 March 1974: note for the record’, 16 March 1974.

<sup>57</sup>TNA CAB 184/527/1, Armstrong to Hoskyns, 2 June 1981.

<sup>58</sup>TNA CAB 184/527/2, Douglas Smith ‘The NCB/NUM Problem: a Definition’, undated but obviously July 1981.

gave great power to regional leaders. They also appreciated that productivity varied sharply from area to area and that miners might have different economic interests. In April 1981, the civil servant Andrew Duguid recognized the benefits if ‘men in different regions came to see their regional self-interest as differing from the interests of miners in other regions.’<sup>59</sup> However, Duguid recognized that effecting this would be a long-term project, and one that would require high wages for miners in the most productive regions. The CPRS report of 1981 on the ‘NCB/NUM problem’ said that breaking up the National Coal Board into regional components would risk weakening management while leaving the union intact. The only way to ‘split the NUM...would be to form, or bring in, another union. We do not believe this is a serious possibility.’<sup>60</sup> No one, on the government side, envisaged the divisions among miners that would emerge in 1984/5.

What the government lacked was much sense of grass roots opinion in the coal fields or of the way in which that opinion might be changed by new pay structures, threats to jobs or general social change. Reports to ministers described the miners as being marked by high levels of solidarity – such reports, in fact, had something in common with the sentimentality about miners that was shown by much of the left. The CPRS report of 1981 noted: ‘Part of the NUM’s strength in industrial disputes rests on the isolation of many members in small communities wholly dependent on the mining industry.’<sup>61</sup> It recognized that mining communities were changing but described these changes as ‘long-term and marginal influences.’ The report also recognized that much information available to the government was ‘anecdotal’ and called for more systematic research into the opinion of miners,<sup>62</sup> though this research seems never to have been done. It was symptomatic of the dependence on anecdotal information that Bernard Ingham – the Prime Minister’s press secretary and a man who derived his knowledge of the matter from his own roots in Yorkshire and, perhaps, from his experience as a journalist specializing in industrial relations – predicted the result of

---

<sup>59</sup>TFW 126059, Duguid to Lankester, 2 April 1981.

<sup>60</sup>TFW 135946, CPRS report ‘NCB/NUM problem’, though dated on the Thatcher Foundation website to March 1982, this report seems, in fact, to have been finished on 31 July 1981.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

the miners' ballot of early 1982 better than did the Secretary of State for Energy.<sup>63</sup>

The government and its advisers often talked of the NCB and NUM as though they were a single entity and, in practice, their knowledge of the Coal Board was not always much better than the knowledge of the union. They had some inside information. Jennifer Youde had worked for the Board from 1977 until her secondment to the CPRS in 1981 – though her comments on the matter seem mainly to have related to the NUM rather than her former employer. Malcolm Edwards, the marketing director of the NCB, held a secret meeting with Ian Gow, Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary, in September 1982. Given that Thatcher's ministers so often blamed the Coal Board for appeasing the miners, it is interesting that Edwards urged the government to stand firm on miners' pay in the hope that this might make it easier to protect the industry as a whole. He sought to stiffen ministerial resolve on this issue because he worried that 'the government's fear of the NUM will lead to a mounting cost for coal that will make its long term competitive position completely untenable.' He added that if the Coal Board were left free to 'develop a tough line it will carry conviction with the workers who are a very different proposition from the period ten years ago which he thinks still obsesses your colleagues.'<sup>64</sup>

Ministers paid relatively little attention to the regional element of the NCB. They tended to see the Coal Board as a centralized body – sometimes referring to it by the name of its London headquarters at Hobart House – and they assumed that the key question about the Board was simply who should be its chair. They did not have much sense that area directors of the NCB were already conducting different kinds of policies with regard to labour relations. They did not comment, for example on the differences between the policy of the area director in Wales, relatively close to the NUM,<sup>65</sup> and his colleague in Scotland, who had a more aggressive management

---

<sup>63</sup>Lawson had predicted that 60% of miners would vote for a strike. See TFW 135925, Scholar to Hallyday, 13 Jan. 1982. Ingham predicted, correctly, that they would not, TFW 135929, Ingham to Scholar, 15 Jan. 1982

<sup>64</sup>TFW 151101, Harris to Gow, 21 Sept. 1982.

<sup>65</sup>Ministers followed the action of Weekes (the South Wales area director) as he confronted the threat of a strike over pit closures in February but their exchanges do not comment on his relatively close relations with the NUM. See TFW 138752, Moore to Howe, 22 Feb. 1983.

style.<sup>66</sup> The Area Director for South Yorkshire was less assured than most of his colleagues and provided the spark for the 1984 strike partly by seeking to close the Cortonwood pit without the normal process, but he seems to have attracted no attention from government until after the strike had begun, when ministers were forced to explain his actions to questioning Labour MPs.<sup>67</sup>

The second big question with regard to a possible miners' strike is: how did the miners fit into the attitude of the government towards unions in general? Ministers had denounced 'over-mighty' unions during the 1979 election, and they brought forward laws in 1980 and 1982 to limit union power. These laws provoked division in the Cabinet (largely about the speed rather than direction of travel) that made the chairman of the party worry about the prospect of ministerial resignations.<sup>68</sup> However, policy towards the miners was, to a large extent, treated separately from other questions regarding trade unions. The government understood that the NUM might ally with other trade unions – particularly the steel workers and the railway men, with whom the NUM formed the 'triple alliance'. Ministers and their advisors also believed that the miners were 'pace setters' for pay negotiations in other industries, but both these things became less important as time went on. Alliance with other trade unions became less likely after Arthur Scargill replaced Joe Gormley as leader of the NUM in 1982 (see below) and increasingly the radicalism of miners was seen to be focused around the prospect of pit closures rather than pay. Under these circumstances, the NUM was less likely to be seen as the leading element of working class militancy and more likely to be seen as a free-standing problem. A number of studies were commissioned into the prospect of 'withstanding strikes' in key sectors,<sup>69</sup> but the NUM received more sustained attention than any other union. A miners' strike was a more frightening prospect than a strike in other sectors – a steel strike had passed off with relatively little political damage in 1980. Indeed, the government was often keen to separate the miners from other workers and, for this reason, was generous, in the run up to the strike, in its treatment of railway men, steel workers and electricians

---

<sup>66</sup> David Howell, 'Defiant Dominoes: Working Miners and the 1984-5 Strike' in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), Making Thatcher's Britain (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 148-164.

<sup>67</sup>TFW 133334, Walker to Lawson, 11 May 1984.

<sup>68</sup>TFW 151134, note by Richard Ryder 12 Feb. 1980.

<sup>69</sup>TFW 137978, Armstrong to Thatcher, 4 May 1982.

who might have allied with the miners, or whose support was necessary to keep power stations open during a coal strike.

When it came to the miners, the government had little faith in the efficacy of its own legislation. In 1981, the CPRS believed that such measures [new labour laws] might play a useful role in dissuading other unions, e.g. NUR, from sympathetic activity; but they are not likely to have any great impact on miners' action. They would not cope with intimidatory mass picketing as seen at Saltley Coke Depot in 1972 ... where the problem is one of enforceability rather than what the law permits.<sup>70</sup>

The 1983 Conservative manifesto raised the possibility of new laws to restrict strikes in 'essential services'. Ministers and their advisors discussed these proposals for the next few months, and were still discussing them as the miners' strike began. However, most felt that including miners in the list of those to be regulated would be a mistake,<sup>71</sup> and that approaches that did not involve a change in the law – notably building up coal stocks – would be more effective.<sup>72</sup> Some ministers did propose the use of new union laws during the strike of 1984/1985 but, in effect, this option had been ruled out on the government side before the strike began.

#### IV

In September 1981, Nigel Lawson replaced David Howell as Secretary of State for Energy. Many of Lawson's former colleagues were later to give him the credit for the defeat of the NUM.<sup>73</sup> In his autobiography Lawson claims that Thatcher herself told him, on his appointment, 'We mustn't have a coal strike'.<sup>74</sup> He presents himself as more resolute: 'on the coal front, I subordinated almost everything

---

<sup>70</sup>TFW 135946, CPRS report 'NCB/NUM problem', though dated on the Thatcher Foundation website to March 1982, this report seems, in fact, to have been finished on 31 July 1981. See similar wording in TNA CAB 184/527/2, Mackenzie to Ibbs, 14 July 1981.

<sup>71</sup>TFW 134194, Mount to Thatcher, 14 Nov. 1983

<sup>72</sup>TFW 134193, Gregson to Thatcher, 11 Nov. 1983.

<sup>73</sup>See, for example, Heseltine's view in Hugo Young, *The Hugo Young Papers: Thirty Years of British Politics of the Record* (2008), p. 281.

<sup>74</sup>Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p. 140.

to the need to prepare for and win a strike. It was not that I was seeking one. But it was clear Arthur Scargill was, and I was determined that he should lose it when it came'.<sup>75</sup>

In some ways, Lawson's position as Secretary of State for Energy involved a reversal of the one that he had taken in his previous position as Financial Secretary to the Treasury. Until he took the Energy portfolio, he had been mainly concerned, like all Treasury ministers, to reduce the amount of public money spent by the NCB and to introduce competition into the industry. Now the measures that he took to avoid, deter or win a strike often involved spending money and, at least in the short term, impeding competition. To avoid provoking the miners, and against the opposition of the Treasury, he sought to limit coal imports, and asked that that the Central Electricity Generating Board should be compensated for agreeing to do so.<sup>76</sup> In addition to this, he turned away from structural reforms of the coal industry – notably the privatization of open cast mining – that had been discussed as means to break the monopoly power of the NCB.<sup>77</sup> This brought him into conflict with John Vereker, one of the civil servants attached to the Policy Unit, who argued that: 'the only long-term measure for dealing with the NUM monopoly is to get rid of the monopoly.'<sup>78</sup> A year later Nicholas Owen, also a civil servant and Vereker's successor at the Policy Unit, was equally blunt:

The draft objectives for the NCB which Mr Lawson has just circulated are not satisfactory as they stand ..... long term profitability should be specified more precisely... particularly in regard to the timescale within which the NCB should bring its capacity into line with profitable sales.<sup>79</sup>

Lawson continued and accelerated the build-up of coal and other materials at power stations. In April 1982, to help this along, he replaced the head of the Central Electricity Generating Board, Glyn England, with Walter Marshall. Marshall, a former head of the Atomic Energy Authority and champion of nuclear power, was more sympathetic to the government but less interested in the government's ostensible aim of making nationalized industries

---

<sup>75</sup>Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>76</sup>TFW 138726 Brittan to Lawson, 14 Feb. 1983.

<sup>77</sup>TFW 136134, Vereker to Scholar, 11 March 1982.

<sup>78</sup>TFW 135952, *ibid.*, 2 June 1982.

<sup>79</sup>TFW 138759, Owen to Scholar, 17 March 1983.

function according to commercial logic and, consequently, more willing to accept the high cost of storing coal at power stations. Lawson also cultivated leaders of trade unions, notably Frank Chapple of the electricians, who might have been in a position to help the miners during a strike.<sup>80</sup>

Lawson sought to exploit the 'political geography' of the coalfields. In the ballot of January 1982, miners from Scotland, Wales and part of the North had voted in favour of a strike. Almost three quarters of those from the Midlands had voted against: 'Part of any strategy for coal must be to maintain, and if possible, to increase their relative importance [i.e. that of miners in the Midlands] in the overall picture, by ensuring that the necessary run down in the industry occurs less rapidly there than elsewhere.'<sup>81</sup> To gain the continued acquiescence of miners from the Midlands, Lawson, himself a Leicestershire MP, conducted delicate negotiations to ensure that, against the wishes of many local Tories, a new coal field in Belvoir in Leicestershire was exploited.<sup>82</sup>

There were two keynotes to everything that Lawson did. The first was discretion. His public statements, and even his written exchanges with fellow ministers, were anodyne but he gave a more robust brief to directors of the Coal Board and oral instructions to the chairman of the board.<sup>83</sup> The second keynote was flexibility. Lawson sought to keep the widest possible room for manoeuvre. He dissuaded the Prime Minister from saying in December 1981 that a strike could not be contemplated at all in the following year,<sup>84</sup> but refusing to rule out a strike did not mean that he wanted one. A month later, as the miners voted on a proposal to authorize a strike, he wrote: 'Despite Sir Derek Ezra's [the chairman of Coal Board] request for clear guidance now, I am sure we should not try to reach final decisions until after we know the outcome of the ballot'.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup>Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p. 148.

<sup>81</sup>TFW 122730, Lawson, 'The Politics of Belvoir', attached to note to Ian Gow, 27 Jan. 1982.

<sup>82</sup>TFW 138310, Lawson to Thatcher, 16 Sept. 1981.

<sup>83</sup>TFW 135954, West to Scholar, 10 June 1981 and TFW 135956, Scholar to West, 14 June 1982.

<sup>84</sup>Hoskyns, *Just in Time*, p. 361.

<sup>85</sup>TFW 135923, Lawson to Thatcher, 8 Jan. 1982.

Timing mattered. Though Lawson did not rule anything out, he wanted to avoid confrontation with the miners before the government was ready. Equally, however, there was no point in very long-term projects, such as the conversion of power stations to use oil as well as coal, which would 'come to fruition beyond the timescale within which we were likely to be faced with a strike.'<sup>86</sup> Lawson seems to have calculated that a miners' strike was most likely to come in the medium term. Increasing coal stocks would take some time to take effect but it could not go on for ever. In April 1982, Lawson anticipated that coal stocks might be reduced 'once two autumns have passed' – i.e. in spring 1984.<sup>87</sup>

The fact that Lawson's approach was, in the short-term, so tentative may have been influenced by the fact that his tenure at Energy coincided with an interregnum on both sides of the coal industry. The government blamed Derek Ezra, who had been Chairman of the Coal Board since 1971, for complicity with the NUM and Lawson did not renew Ezra's contract in 1982 – an ungracious move in view of the fact that Lawson had actually rejected Ezra's desire to take a firm line with the NUM at the beginning of that year.<sup>88</sup> Instead he appointed Ian MacGregor. MacGregor had been chairman of British Steel and had helped to turn it into a more commercial entity, preparing the way for its privatization in 1988. Revealingly, a civil servant had written in July 1981 'One cannot yet do a MacGregor on the coal industry.'<sup>89</sup> However, MacGregor could not take over immediately and Norman Siddall – another Coal Board manager - stood in for a year; he could not serve for longer because he was in poor health. Lawson approved of Siddall, who was less emollient than Ezra but more subtle than MacGregor and who managed to close twenty pits during his brief tenure without causing a strike.

There was also a parenthesis at the NUM. Its president, Joe Gormley, was due to retire in 1982. Gormley had led successful strikes in 1972 and 1974, but he preferred to achieve concessions without strikes if possible, which was what he had done in 1981. For years, it had been expected that the left-wing leader of the South Yorkshire miners, Arthur Scargill, would succeed Gormley. Scargill had long featured in Conservative demonology. Lawson had written to Geoffrey Howe as

---

<sup>86</sup>Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p. 151.

<sup>87</sup>TFW 135951, Vereker to Scholar, 2 April 1982.

<sup>88</sup>TFW 135923, Lawson to Thatcher, 8 Jan. 1982.

<sup>89</sup>TNA CAB 184/527/2, Turner to Beauman, 23 July 1981

early as July 1981: 'The problem is essentially a political one, centring around industrial relations in general and outmanoeuvring Arthur Scargill in particular.'<sup>90</sup>

In the short term, Scargill's looming presence had curious effects. Ministers understood that divisions in the NUM were complicated and that 'the maverick right' might seek to prove their toughness in order to compete with Scargill,<sup>91</sup> but they made concessions to Gormley because they hoped to shore up his position and that of 'moderates' against Scargill and the 'extremists'. This partly underlay the climb down of February 1981.<sup>92</sup> The Prime Minister herself believed that 'the NCB would have to go along, to a large extent, with whatever Mr Gormley proposed in order to ensure that the militants did not regain their ascendancy.'<sup>93</sup> Even after the government climb down, Howell, the Secretary of State for Energy, asked what might be done to 'keep the temperature down so as to strengthen further Gormley's position and to frustrate Scargill?'<sup>94</sup>

The early part of Lawson's time at the Department of Energy coincided with a period during which the Scargill succession had become all but certain (his formal election came in December 1981) but during which Gormley remained leader of the union: he did not step down until March 1982. Gormley openly opposed his successor, calling for miners not to strike when they were balloted on the matter in early 1982. Lawson and Gormley were surprisingly close – perhaps it was easier for a Thatcherite to deal with the leader of the 1973/1974 strike than it would have been for a Heathite to do so – and it was Lawson who secured Gormley a peerage. The two men also had, at least in the short term, some interests in common. Both wanted to avoid an immediate strike, and both wanted the CEBG to buy large amounts of British coal – though one assumes that Gormley did not share Lawson's understanding that coal stocks might one day be used to increase endurance during a strike.

Scargill was more aggressive than Gormley, and, in some ways, this simplified the government's position. Complicated debates about

---

<sup>90</sup>Lawson, *The View from No. 11*, p.142.

<sup>91</sup>TFW 126500, Lawson to Howe, 13 Nov. 1981.

<sup>92</sup>TFW 126047, Howell to Thatcher, 25 Feb. 1981.

<sup>93</sup>TFW 126045, Record of conversation Thatcher, Howell, Moore, Maitland and Monger, 20 Feb. 1981.

<sup>94</sup>TFW 126086, Howell to Thatcher, 18 June 1981.

long-term planning and about whether the government was seeking to survive a strike or deter one mattered less once it was clear that the leader of the NUM was determined to lead a strike. Scargill was also, unlike Gormley, unpopular outside his own union. The effect of Scargill's accession was not, however, immediate – partly because he failed to get the required majority for a strike in ballots 1982 and 1983.

Most importantly, preparations for a miners' strike were associated with the electoral cycle. The coincidence of a miners' strike and general election had proved fatal to Edward Heath. Officials recognized that the approach of an election towards the end of the first Thatcher government would make it increasingly difficult to take on the miners.<sup>95</sup> Correspondingly, though, a government which had just won an election – particularly one with the large majority of 1983 – was in a strong position to confront a miners' strike. In January 1983, Lawson, writing to the Prime Minister, suggested that, for the time being, the NCB should 'pursue the fastest programme of closures which is consistent ...with the probable avoidance of a strike', but he added that a more aggressive policy would be possible in the future: 'However, the time to embark on it is as soon as possible after an election, and not in the year immediately preceding one.'<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps Lawson had more personal reasons for wishing to avoid confronting the miners before an election – especially if, as seems likely, he guessed that he was to be promoted after it. He was still a junior member of the Cabinet and one who owed his rise to Thatcher's personal favour. In 1981, Thatcher had illustrated her capacity for blaming other people if things went wrong. Being the minister charged with managing a miners' strike would have entailed high risks for a man who had ambitions for his future.

## V

After the 1983 election, Lawson became Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was replaced at the Department of Energy by Peter Walker.

---

<sup>95</sup>TFW 135916, Wade-Gery to Thatcher, 16 Dec. 1981. He suggested that an advantage of a strike that winter rather than the following one lay in the fact that 'parliament's life is further from its natural end.' See also TNA CAB 184/527/2, Turner to Beaumont 13 July 1981.

<sup>96</sup>TFW 138768, Lawson to Thatcher, 21 Jan. 1983.

Walker had been close to Heath and was not a natural ally of Thatcher. Walker regarded his appointment as a demotion, having previously been Minister of Agriculture, and only accepted it because Thatcher told him that she needed a minister to take on Arthur Scargill.

Whereas energy had been Lawson's first Cabinet office and the beginning of a brilliant career, Walker's best days were clearly behind him:<sup>97</sup> he had nothing to lose. Walker was also – beneath the soft voice – more ruthless than Lawson. Indeed Lawson, who had lost money through unwise investments, had written ruefully in the 1970s about the fear aroused by Walker's activities as an asset-stripping businessman.<sup>98</sup> Walker was, in short, a front-line commander – calm under fire. Lawson had been a staff officer – a good man to prepare the ground but one whose patrician accent, brusque manner and impulsiveness might have been awkward in a strike.

Did Thatcher appreciate that a strike was imminent when she appointed Walker? The brief notes that survive suggest that relatively little attention was given to the appointment. The head of Thatcher's political office wrote to her about ministerial appointments in June 1983:

If you feel you can't ditch Peter Walker, who has done a good job, Energy is one of the few places he could go. He is shrewd, and is unlikely to misjudge the industrial relations situation. You might need occasionally to toughen him up, but that is better than having an optimist at energy who doesn't see trouble coming!<sup>99</sup>

It may be that Walker's appointment was almost accidental but that he then approached his job with a degree of resolution that changed policy.

---

<sup>97</sup>Churchill, Hoskyns 2/296, 'Cabinet Reshuffle', 21 March 1981. Hoskyns proposed sacking Walker.

<sup>98</sup>TFW 110312, Lawson, 'Thoughts on the Coming Battle', 15 Oct. 1973 – attached to memorandum on 'Stepping Stones', 15 Jan. 1978.

<sup>99</sup>TFW 131085, Wolfson to Thatcher, 10 June 1983.

Understanding Walker's motives is hard because, partly to maintain secrecy, he committed little to paper.<sup>100</sup> The flood of reports on a potential miners' strike dried up. To the exasperation of civil servants, Walker refused to give colleagues a document on his policy towards the miners.<sup>101</sup> There was no ministerial discussion of pit closures between September 1983 and January 1984,<sup>102</sup> and, when a discussion did take place, Walker briefed ministers orally and only gave a written account to the Prime Minister herself.<sup>103</sup>

Ian MacGregor, who had been appointed during Lawson's time at the Department of Energy, did not take up his post as chairman of the Coal Board until September 1983, by which time Walker had succeeded Lawson. MacGregor considered himself close to Thatcher, which did not endear him to Walker. There was also a difference of style. MacGregor was much given to claims about what he could and would do. This meant that, in private meetings, he gave figures for the numbers of pits that could be closed – though he gave different figures at different times and does not, in fact, seem to have had a consistent plan.<sup>104</sup> Walker, by contrast, avoided promises until he was certain that he could honour them.

Did the ministers know how many pits they wanted to close? The honest answer would probably have been 'as many as we can get away with.' Insiders understood that the government had long-term ambitions to reduce coal production that went beyond anything that had been admitted in public. John Vereker noted that one of his colleagues from the Department of Energy regarded a strike over pay as more likely than one over closures. He added, drily, 'This may of

---

<sup>100</sup>TFW 133118, Gregson to Scholar, 8 Sept. 1983 'The Secretary of State... may be reluctant to do this [to circulate a paper] because of the extreme sensitivity of the subject and the Prime Minister will no doubt have similar anxieties.' Someone, perhaps Thatcher herself, underlined 'sensitivity' and wrote 'NO' by a suggestion that a paper might be given limited circulation.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid: 'it would be desirable to place a very firm obligation on the Secretary of State for Energy to come forward with his views on closures strategy not later than mid-October. It would also be desirable to get something on paper so that the Ministers primarily concerned can think about the matter'.

<sup>102</sup>TFW 133133, Gregson to Thatcher, 18 Jan. 1984.

<sup>103</sup>TFW 133131, 'NCB Manpower', 'Note for the Record', Turnbull, 12 Jan. 1984

<sup>104</sup>In Sept. 1983, MacGregor anticipated the closure of 75 pits and the loss of 55,000 jobs, TFW 133121, record of meeting at Downing Street, 15 Sept. 1983. In Jan. 1984, he anticipated the loss of 45,000 jobs. TFW 133712, 'Coal Policy', 19 Jan. 1984.

course simply reflect that he has more modest assumptions than we about the likely extent of closures.’<sup>105</sup>

Underneath Walker’s veil of silence, outlines of government policy can be discerned. First, some officials began to challenge the assumption, which had pervaded the first Thatcher government, that decisions on coal could not be taken on the basis of conventional business logic and that dealing with the miners would require large expenditure – either to buy off the miners, to deter a strike or to endure one. A civil servant wrote to the Prime Minister in September 1983 that the NCB would be bankrupt if it was a private company. He did not share the view, which had often been expressed by ministers, that miners needed to be paid well in order to buy their acquiescence in pit closures: ‘Firmness on pay surely goes hand in hand with firmness on pit closures. The logic of the market says that if an employer needs fewer employees he needs only offer lower or no increases in pay.’<sup>106</sup> Thatcher’s private secretary said that his ‘new year’s resolution’ for 1984 was to persuade the Prime Minister to stop the CEGB from buying coal above market prices.<sup>107</sup> This implied a break with measures that had been taken to appease the miners in February 1981. It also implied unease about the cost of the large coal stocks that had been accumulated as ‘insurance’ against a miners’ strike and, perhaps, the feeling that it was time to cash in this policy. It was noted at a meeting convoked by the prime minister in November 1983 that ‘increasing endurance would run into diminishing returns.’<sup>108</sup> Stocks by this stage were, in fact, so high that officials did not worry about the overtime ban that the NUM instituted in late 1983.<sup>109</sup> One wrote: ‘I regard any further extension of power station stocks as unlikely to change appreciably the risks of the NUM striking. And I believe the benefit of high stocks consists more in its deterrent value than in the extension of actual endurance once a strike has broken out.’<sup>110</sup>

The very fact that Walker was so reluctant to circulate written plans suggests that he knew that he was moving towards (though not

---

<sup>105</sup>TFW 138793, Vereker to Mount, 22 Feb. 1983.

<sup>106</sup>TFW 133120, Owen to Thatcher, 14 Sept. 1983.

<sup>107</sup>TFW 133132, Turnbull to Thatcher, 18 Jan. 1984.

<sup>108</sup>133128, record of conversation, Thatcher, Walker, Lawson, Gregson, 2 Nov. 1983.

<sup>109</sup>TFW 133129, Turnbull to Thatcher, 1 Dec. 1983.

<sup>110</sup>TNA EG 26/36 Priddle to Metz, 18 Oct. 1983.

necessarily seeking) confrontation with the NUM. The new mood went with an increasingly hard-headed approach. Walker turned away from the abstract, almost academic, tone in which a miners' strike had previously been discussed. The word 'strategy' had been used almost obsessively in earlier discussions of the miners. Walker, by contrast, emphasized tactics. Some of those who had been involved in the discussions of the previous Thatcher government resented this. Lawson wrote in July 1983 that: 'Officials should be asked to refine the endurance options when we have decided our strategic approach.'<sup>111</sup> Peter Gregson, of the Cabinet office, regretted the absence of an 'agreed, explicit strategy for closures' but conceded that

The discussion could start from the commonsense assumption (unrelated to any particular strategy) that it would be prudent to plan for a strike occurring at any time over the next three years or so and that we ought to concentrate on options which might yield some benefit within that timescale, rather than the longer term options.<sup>112</sup>

In some respects, the turn from strategy to tactics fitted with broader changes in government style. Hoskyns, the most enthusiastic proponent of 'strategy', had left Downing Street in April 1982. As for the CPRS, closely involved in policy to the Coal Industry since the Heath government and the source of the longest report on the NCB/NUM problem in the early 1980s, it was simply abolished after the 1983 election. Its demise owed something to Thatcher's sense that its reports had been 'too general ... she found it difficult to derive specific points for practical action from them.'<sup>113</sup> By late 1982, government thinking had changed. There was less interest in long-term solutions – such as the cultivation of alternative energy sources – to the problems posed by the miners.<sup>114</sup> The large majority of the 1983 election brought more emphasis on immediate action.

From the 1983 election, government attention was increasingly focused on the simple question of how it would survive a strike in the short term and all other questions were discarded. Ahead of a

---

<sup>111</sup>TFW 133115, Lawson to Thatcher, 28 July 1983

<sup>112</sup>TFW 133122, Gregson to Scholar, 21 Sept. 1983.

<sup>113</sup>TNA PREM 19/1045, note of meeting between Armstrong and Sparrow, 30 Nov. 1982.

<sup>114</sup>TFW 133126, note by Turnbull, 28 Oct. 1983.

meeting with ministers, Thatcher agreed with civil servants that: ‘Mr Walker should be invited to give only the barest background on closures, merely indicating that there was a real risk of a strike in the next two years.’<sup>115</sup> At the meeting itself, the Prime Minister summed up the conversation by saying that: ‘the first priority should be to concentrate on measures which would bring benefit within the next year or so.’<sup>116</sup>

Even after the 1983 election and Walker’s appointment, however, ministers did not choreograph events. A civil servant summed up the mood in September 1983. He said that a strike over pit closures was more likely than one over pay and that ‘there would be a better prospect of withstanding it than in the past.’ He thought that there was only modest scope for extending endurance by November 1984 and concluded:

[T]his analysis suggests that there is no case for making a special effort to avoid a miners’ strike this year in particular, or for adopting a weak line in the pay negotiations because of fears of a strike. On the other hand it would probably not be sensible for the NCB to go out of their way to provoke a strike.<sup>117</sup>

On 7 March 1984, Thatcher herself told a meeting simply ‘the position was substantially different to that in 1981.’<sup>118</sup>

Most importantly, the government had not anticipated the particular kind of strike that they faced in 1984/5. It was much longer than they had expected. Much of their planning revolved around a comparatively short strike after which both sides would retire to lick their wounds. Some ministers had thought it possible that there would be two strikes in 1982.<sup>119</sup> By 1984, increased coal stocks made it possible to endure a strike for longer than ever before, but planners still talked of an endurance of not much more than six months. An official at the Department of Energy wrote in October

---

<sup>115</sup>TFW 133127, record of conversation, Thatcher, Armstrong, Gregson, 31 Oct. 1983.

<sup>116</sup>TFW 133128, record of conversation, Thatcher, Walker, Lawson, Gregson, 2 Nov. 1983.

<sup>117</sup>TFW 133119, Gregson to Thatcher, 14 Sept. 1983.

<sup>118</sup>TFW 133168, Minutes of Cabinet, 8 March 1984.

<sup>119</sup>TFW 135926, Vereker to Scholar, 13 Jan. 1982. Ministers did not rule out the chance of two strikes – though the NCB thought it unlikely.

1983: 'The NCB and the Government would wish to settle a strike within a few weeks to avoid a legacy of bitterness which could prejudice the future success of the coal industry.'<sup>120</sup> Officials would hardly have regarded a strike beginning in the spring as so advantageous if they had realized that it would last for a year.

Furthermore, for most of the period that they were preparing for a strike, most on the government side imagined that it would begin after a ballot.<sup>121</sup> The government also expected that the order to strike would be observed by all miners and that men would only return to work when the union executive ordered them to do so.<sup>122</sup> Ministers had worked to 'decentralize' mining and to emphasize the prosperous future of the Midlands coal field, but they had done so because they hoped that Nottingham miners would oppose a strike in a ballot.<sup>123</sup> They do not seem to have anticipated that there would be no ballot and that a substantial proportion of miners would stay at work or that the union would ultimately split. A civil servant wrote, days before the first miners walked out:

[A]national strike could not begin without a national ballot and there has been no talk of this so far. The indications are that the union wish to avoid the test of a national ballot which they are not confident they could win. It is likely that their preferred strategy will be to encourage local action.<sup>124</sup>

The split in the miners' union meant that the government could hold out for longer. It also changed priorities in other ways. Much pre-

---

<sup>120</sup>TNA EG 26/36 Priddle to Metz, 18 Oct. 1983.

<sup>121</sup>Ministers knew that Scargill might try to circumvent the electoral rules of his union by supporting an action that began at local level but did not think his chances of succeeding in such an attempt were high. See TFW 138749, Moore to Howe, 21 Dec. 1982.

<sup>122</sup>TNA CAB 130/1173, report by MISC 57, presented to meeting 27 May 1981: 'A national strike would begin only after a pithead ballot had demonstrated the support of at least 55% of miners voting.... The outcome would be conclusive. There is a deep tradition of unity of action and purpose, which owes nothing to its formal expression in the closed shop ... an official strike would be supported from the outset.... It must also be expected that the strike would continue until another ballot ... The possibility that the miners' ranks would break (i.e. that a partial return to work could be visualized) before such a point was not realistic.'

<sup>123</sup>TFW 122730, Lawson, 'The Politics of Belvoir', attached to note to Ian Gow, 27 Jan. 1982: 'The only way to defeat Scargill ... is ... to create the conditions in which a majority of miners themselves refuse to follow him in a pithead ballot.'

<sup>124</sup>TFW 133140, Pascall to Turnbull, 7 March 1984.

strike planning had revolved around the need to maintain large stocks at power stations rather than at pits. However, as it turned out, much of the coal that the Electricity Board burnt during strikes was not only at pits at the start of the strike but was, in fact, underground. Now the key was not coal stocks in themselves but effective policing, which would prevent pickets from closing pits or impeding the movement of coal. Policing had always played a role in planning for a strike but few had anticipated the huge importance that it would assume. A civil servant, reflecting after the strike, told the Prime Minister: 'The key point was probably right at the start on Wednesday 14 March [i.e. after the strike had begun] ... you galvanized the Home Secretary, who in turn galvanized the police into keeping the entrances to the pits open.'<sup>125</sup>

The government had anticipated and prepared for a strike. Ministers knew that the spring of 1984 was probably the least bad time to face one and they were no longer making assiduous efforts to avoid confrontation. However, for all their preparations, they were still uncomfortable when the strike began. They knew that dealing with a strike was a complicated operation and that plans for such operations often went wrong. Even in 1984, there was no certainty that the government would win and there were moments during the strike – when it seemed likely that dockers or colliery overseers would strike – that caused them alarm.

Shortly after the strike, Thatcher's private secretary commented on a secret report thus:

[It] tends to present the strike as a uni-directional struggle in which the Government gradually overpowered the miners. It does not convey the fluctuating fortunes and how near, on occasions, the Government came to disaster ... the outcome did not become inevitable until the return to work picked up in the New Year.<sup>126</sup>

## VI

What general points about the Thatcher government can be derived from the study of preparation for the miners' strike? The first is that

---

<sup>125</sup>TFW 136462, Turnbull to Thatcher, 24 May 1985.

<sup>126</sup>ibid.

even the extensive archives that have now been released with regard to this episode do not tell us everything. They reveal, for one thing, remarkably little about the personal role of the Prime Minister. Her written interventions on this, and most other matters, rarely amounted to more than brief remarks scribbled on documents that had been presented by other people. From things that other people said to her or about her, we can conclude that Thatcher personally was in favour of a quick withdrawal when faced with the threat of a miners' strike in 1981 and that she would have preferred, against the wishes of the Secretary of State for Energy, to rule out all discussion of facing a strike in 1982. Both these things suggest that she was more cautious than some of those who advised her. This not surprising. A Prime Minister, who needs to consider the whole span of government activity and every risk on the horizon, might be expected to move more slowly than a minister, who only has to think about one area of policy, or, a fortiori, an official who is relatively insulated from the consequences of political failure. One should add, however, that many around Thatcher did give her personal credit for the defeat of the miners. Perhaps this was simply because they believed that she was particularly determined once she had accepted that a strike was inevitable. Perhaps something more subtle was at work. Many commented on the way in which Thatcher created a certain mood. One thinks of her private secretary's remark about her 'galvanizing' effect during the early days of the miners' strike. Perhaps Thatcher's ministers and officials felt that her style of government gave them a licence for radicalism even if she herself was sometimes nervous when it came to implementing that radicalism.

The information revealed by archival release is also uneven. In particular, there are fewer documents relating to the period between the 1983 election and the strike than there are relating to the years between February 1981 and May 1983. This may simply be because Peter Walker was less interested in general discussion than his predecessor. It may be because secrecy, always a matter of concern on the government side, became even more urgent as the strike approached.<sup>127</sup> It may, in fact, be that there was an inverse relation between words and deeds. Discussion was, by definition, a sign of

---

<sup>127</sup>TFW 152779, on 21 Oct. 1983, Ferdinand Mount wrote to Thatcher insisting that ministers advance plans for privatization. He recognized that 'Peter [Walker] may argue that these issues have to be handled with great secrecy'. The last four words have been underlined, presumably by Thatcher.

uncertainty. Long reports and extensive exchanges came when the government was deciding what to do. By the summer of 1983 the decisions seem to have been taken and the government was reconciled to facing a strike.

The division between words and deeds relates to wider question about how Thatcherism has been studied. An emphasis on 'Thatcherism' can sometimes obscure what the Thatcher governments actually did in power. Interpretations of Thatcherism developed before official documents were released. Indeed the word 'Thatcherism' was used before the 1979 election and interpretations often emphasise opposition rather than government: one scholar has argued that 'Thatcherite hegemony' was most marked in the winter of 1978/9.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, writers often make much of what inhabitants of the 'Think Tank Archipelago', such as Alfred Sherman, said, rather than what ministers did.<sup>129</sup> Looking at preparation for a miners' strike raises questions about these interpretations. Radical thinkers continued to bombard the Prime Minister with ideas; at the beginning of the 1984 strike, Sherman suggested, apparently in all seriousness, that the whole mining industry might be converted to an enterprise in landscape gardening to repair the aesthetic damage done by heavy industry.<sup>130</sup> But such ideas had little impact on policy. Sometimes radical ideology could become the enemy of practical action. John Hoskyns, for example, combined obsessive concern for 'strategic' thinking with an absence of concrete short-term proposals.

The move from words to deed – from abstract plans to concrete action – sometimes went with a move from opposition to government but it also went with shifts that happened while Thatcher was in office. The first Thatcher government was often marked by pessimism about what could be achieved in the short term and curiously this encouraged ambitious but abstract plans about what might be done in the long-term future. As time went on, however, there was a shift towards thinking about things that might be done in the short or medium term. The resignation of John Hoskyns, in 1982, and the dissolution of the CPRS in 1983 both went

---

<sup>128</sup>Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology* (1996) XXX, pp. 253-272.

<sup>129</sup>Ben Jackson, 'The Think-Tank Archipelago: Thatcherism and Neo-Liberalism' in Jackson and Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain*, pp. 43-61.

<sup>130</sup>TFW 136533, Sherman memo to Thatcher, 'In Place of Mining', 19 March 1984.

with a diminishing interest in long-term thinking. This was partly because, especially as victory in the 1983 election seemed increasingly likely, the government was better placed to take concrete action.

How does all this relate to the nature of Thatcherism? The achievements of the first Thatcher government, particularly during its first two years in office, were largely related to monetary and fiscal policy. It often seemed that Thatcherism came primarily from the Treasury and that it was driven by small number of key ministers in economic departments, who were able to impose policies in these areas with comparatively little help from their colleagues and in the face of scepticism from civil servants. The power of the NUM was inconvenient to the Treasury because it made it difficult to limit public spending but preparing to face down a miners' strike meant, at least for a time, turning away from normal Treasury priorities – a move that was all the more striking because it was partly undertaken under the aegis of Nigel Lawson, who had come from the Treasury in September 1981 and who was to return to its head in May 1983, but who sometimes came up against his former Treasury colleagues during his time as Secretary of State for Energy.

Was preparation to take on the miners Thatcherite at all? It is true that one minister associated with the preparation, Lawson, also saw himself as an important exponent of Thatcherism – though, as has been suggested, his policy at Energy did not always fit with what he had done in his previous office. It is also true that a number of those who thought of themselves as 'Thatcherite' presented debate about the miners as one that pitted Thatcherites against their enemies. Jim Prior, Employment Secretary until May 1981 was an object of particular hostility for Thatcherites in this context. Thatcher herself had blamed him for the climb-down of February 1981. John Hoskyns believed, at the time, that Prior's replacement by Norman Tebbit, along with Lawson's arrival at Energy, would create a 'more positive'<sup>131</sup> climate with regard to the miners and he wrote, in retrospect: 'If Prior had stayed at employment we might have been defeated by Scargill, and the Thatcher project could have fizzled out.'<sup>132</sup> It is possible that Prior made some intervention in February

---

<sup>131</sup>TFW 135911, Hoskyns to Thatcher, 11 Dec. 1981.

<sup>132</sup>Hoskyns, *Just in Time*, p. 335.

1981 that has left no trace in the archives and it is possible - just as Thatcher was seen to have a 'galvanizing effect' - that Prior conveyed a mood of pessimism that was separate from any specific proposal that he made. However, the evidence for Prior impeding government action is thin. Tebbit's proposals with regard to the miners were not, in fact, very different from those of his predecessor.<sup>133</sup> Prior himself was to make a distinction in his memoirs:

Generally speaking, I believe that the terms 'win' or 'lose' should never be used in relation to an industrial dispute. The miners' strike of 1983-4 [sic] is, however, the exception which proves the rule. In this case, Arthur Scargill's motives seemed to be concerned with the defeat of the democratically elected government as much as they were with the issue of pit closures. Neither the National Coal Board nor the Government were left with any alternative but to fight it through to the bitter end.<sup>134</sup>

Some of the ministers who did most to prepare for a strike were not Thatcherites. This was true of Whitelaw, the man who launched planning for the strike, and Heseltine, who, as Environment Secretary, permitted mining in the Vale of Belvoir. Most of all it was true of Peter Walker - Thatcher's most dogged Cabinet opponent on economic policy but also the man who, as Energy Secretary from May 1983, was responsible for policy during and immediately before the strike.

There were bitter exchanges within the government about the miners' strike. However, acrimony sometimes sprang from competition rather than conflict. All regarded beating the miners as important and all were keen to exercise control over the policy and to claim credit for successes. Sometimes, policy on the miners was a battleground rather than a *casus belli*: it provided a topic on which conflicts that really involved other issues were fought out. Hoskyns,

---

<sup>133</sup>TFW 135913, Tebbit to Thatcher, 14 Dec. 1981: 'In providing for endurance, we must avoid providing Scargill with the argument that we are preparing for confrontation ... It might just be possible to secure coal stocks of 27 millions tonnes without it becoming a potentially explosive issue. But we cannot be sure and there are clear risks.' For Prior's opinions on these matters, see his letter to Thatcher, TFW 126061, 13 April 1981: 'this [build up of stocks] would prove highly provocative. ... The gain in endurance would be very marginal.' Lawson recalled that Prior had opposed the build up of coal stocks again in Feb. 1982 - *The View from No. 11*, p. 150 - though I have found no record of this.

<sup>134</sup>Prior, *Balance of Power*, p. 256.

in particular, sought to use discussion of the NUM to carve out a role for the Number 10 Policy Unit, which brought him into conflict with ministers, civil servants and other advisors. The suspiciousness of some Thatcherite ministers and the habit of some in Number 10 of briefing against ministers exaggerated the impression of division. Prior was blamed for the climb down in 1981 when it was Thatcher herself who had taken the decision. Walker was blamed for having sought to impose a settlement on MacGregor in March 1985 when he had, in fact, prevented MacGregor from making a settlement.<sup>135</sup>

The desire to beat the miners was not confined to Thatcherites or to Conservatives - there were times when the government considered the help that it might extract from centrist politicians such as the Liberal Jo Grimmond.<sup>136</sup> It was also not confined to politicians and political appointments. The civil service was particularly important in planning for a miners' strike. This was partly because such planning was too complicated to be managed without help from officials but it was also because they seem at times to have sought to prod their political masters into action. This was seen in Herbecq's recollections of his meetings from 1979, in Le Cheminant's intervention against the February 1981 climb down and in the new year's message that Thatcher's private secretary sent to her in 1984 urging her not to support 'the lifestyle of the miners' at the expense of large electricity users.<sup>137</sup> Some of the civil servants involved in this process were seen by the Thatcherites as being rebels who were not bound by civil service convention. Three of the men concerned - Duguid, Vereker and Owen - were attached to the Number 10 Policy Unit which meant that they worked directly with political appointments - though one should stress that these men remained civil servants and unlike, say, Bernard Ingham, they eventually returned to regular duties. Similarly, some of those civil servants closely attached to Downing Street (Lankester or Turnbull) may have found the atmosphere around Thatcher to be conducive to radical thinking but they did not think of themselves as having ceased to be officials - Turnbull was to rise to be head of the home civil service. Most strikingly, Robert Armstrong - the man that Thatcherites most often identified as the representative of civil service obstruction - seems to have been an energetic executant of policy with regard to

<sup>135</sup>TNA COAL 31/438, Walker to MacGregor, 12 Feb. 1985.

<sup>136</sup>TFW 151091, Harris to Gow, 12 Jan. 1982.

<sup>137</sup>TFW 133132, Turnbull to Thatcher, 16 Jan. 1984. For interventions by Heberg and le Cheminant, see above.

the miners and it seems likely that this energy owed much to his memories of the Heath government.

Far from being the product of a revolution, which brought a new view of what was desirable, policy to the miners reflected an evolution as Conservatives, and senior civil servants, gradually changed their view of what might be possible. This did not mark a radical break with the Heathite past. The government groped its way to 1984. It did its best to prepare for a strike but it did not anticipate the particular form that the strike would take and, even when ministers and officials had decided that a strike might be the least bad option, they remained nervous. Ministers never felt in complete control and often saw themselves as reacting to events rather than initiating them.

In 1986, a left-wing historian wrote about the strike. His aim was to answer the criticism levelled at Arthur Scargill, but his words might have struck a chord with some of those on the government side: 'The very idea of executive power is problematic when applied to an industrial dispute. A strike is not a controllable process, but a huge wave of happenings, in which emergency succeeds upon emergency.'<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup>Raphael Samuel, introduction in Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Bonas (eds), *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984* (London, 1987), pp. 1-39, p. 17.