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Coal – a burning issue for Britain's future



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Tony Lodge is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies. His new pamphlet, *Step Off the Gas – Why Overdependence on Gas is Bad for the UK*, is published by the CPS later this month.

AS a 10-year-old growing up in West Yorkshire, the events of the 12 months between April 1984 and March 1985 left a lasting and deep impression.

The miners' strike was not just any old industrial dispute, but a strike in which the stakes for the main parties concerned became so high that the price each was willing to pay exceeded anything seen in an industrial dispute in Britain since the war.

The miners' strike was waged between irreconcilable opponents. Because they could not be reconciled, they set no limits on their losses. Thus, the strike did, more than any other single event, mark a decisive break with a 40-year-old tradition of political and industrial compromise. It can be effectively argued that the strike changed Britain for ever, irrespective of one's political outlook.

Twenty-five years on, it is worth analysing, briefly, why events came to a head.

Something of a mystery surrounds the beginning of the miners' strike. Was it an accident or was it carefully planned by one side or the other? The most frequent version of the latter option – the conspiracy theory – is that the Government and the National Coal Board jointly planned to pull the miners on to the punch; that the closure of Cortonwood

Colliery, in South Yorkshire, coupled with the near-simultaneous announcement that 120 pits were to close in 1984-5 – over and above the 20 which had closed in the preceding 12 months – was a well-timed and well-executed strategy, with the specific aim of stimulating a strike which would then be smashed.

Today, I don't think that argument can be sustained. I think that senior government officials at the time were to be believed when they said, as they did, that no government would deliberately provoke a fight with the National Union of Mineworkers.

But there was clearly a strategy and the Government knew it would have to confront the NUM at some stage if it was to successfully bring output and demand into balance and restructure the industry.

Why had the confrontation become inevitable? The most obvious problem, by 1981, was the drop in electricity demand and, therefore, coal demand, after recession hit the economy in 1980.

The country still relied on coal for more than 70 per cent of its electricity. But coal production outstripped demand. In 1983, the year before the strike started, 119m tonnes of coal were produced but there was only demand for 111m tonnes. As a result, more and more coal was being

dumped at power stations and pitheads – reaching 58m tonnes in 1983.

Closing the gap between supply and demand, and restructuring a severe loss-making industry, was the challenge. The need to close loss-making pits, in order to invest in new prospects, was the task.

No matter how this is dressed up and no matter what your opinion of Arthur Scargill or the Coal Board, the real victim was the British coal industry and the damage that it suffered.

If the industry had been privatised at an early stage, when it was much larger than it was when it was eventually sold, and, perhaps, privatised alongside electricity so that pits could be grouped with power stations, I believe that certainty for the future would have been better secured. But we are where we are.

Today, Britain produces just under 18m tonnes of coal a year. The bulk of the market for 60m tonnes is met from imports from Russia, Colombia, the US and South Africa.

But there are positive signals for the future of the domestic industry. Clean coal technology will allow us to burn coal and slash emissions.

Britain enjoys large open-cast reserves, and new technology from Australia, pioneered by White Energy,

allows us to upgrade low-quality open-cast coal through a unique drying process.

Turning coal into hydrogen gas is the plan by Powerfuel, which has reopened the Hatfield Colliery, near Doncaster, scene of pitched battles in 1984, investing tens of millions of pounds.

Local mining apprentices are being recruited at the pit from surrounding villages. The pit sits on half of the UK's known coal reserves. UK Coal is looking seriously at re-opening Harworth Colliery as new large reserves have been identified.

Later this month, it is expected that Britain's first coal-fired power station will be approved at Kingsnorth, in Kent, 30 years since the last one.

Twenty-five years after the strike, the industry is a shadow of its former self. Throughout the recent extreme cold snap, however, coal provided 50 per cent of the electricity needed while other energy sources, such as wind, managed a risible 0.3 per cent supply on some energy intensive days.

Coal has an important role to play in our energy future. It is now time that those who wish to see the industry progress and embrace new opportunities look ahead and herald the new technologies that can help us exploit our coal reserves for the good of the country.

TOMORROW:

Tom Richmond