

## **The Welsh Political Archive Annual Lecture**

**4<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

**Rt. Hon. Ann Clwyd MP**

I was trapped thousands of feet underground, cold and hungry and very, very tired. But each time I curled up into a ball on the hard, dusty floor of the coal mine to try and get some sleep, representatives of the Coal Board would spot me through the fire doors and wake me up.

It was illegal to sleep underground, they said. It was not illegal to eat and drink but they refused us that as well. 'Thank goodness for Jean' I thought, not for the first time in my political life! My long-standing constituency secretary had once worked at Tower Colliery and practical as ever she had stuffed my pockets with Mars bars before I set off on my protest.

I don't even like Mars bars, but they soon became the proverbial manna from heaven. I was determined to hold out and force the National Coal Board into negotiation, but there was a limit to how long I could physically manage.

How ironic was that? Years championing the case of miners whose health had been wrecked working underground and now I was counting the hours underground.

I think it was only anger that kept me going: anger at the Coal Board's stance and anger at the decades of injustices suffered by miners in this and other pits.

Tower Colliery was the last deep mine in the Cynon Valley and, despite its rich seams, was earmarked for closure by the Coal Board. As the local MP I felt it my

responsibility to do all I could for the people who worked there and the community which depended on it.

As the debate raged, the local NUM lodge suggested that, as a final effort, I might want to go underground to meet the men and stage a 'sit-in'. We travelled light on the journey; there would be food and blankets waiting for us at the bottom and it was important to move quickly before the Coal Board got wind of our plans.

But we didn't move quickly enough; they were able to cut us off before we could reach the other miners which was why I was now on my second day underground with no food, no warmth and no sleep.

The Tower sit-in took place in 1994, but even when I was elected MP for the Cynon Valley in 1984, it didn't take a prophet to work out that issues concerning the coal industry would play a large part in my professional life. I arrived at Westminster, during one of the most bitter industrial disputes the UK had ever seen and my maiden speech highlighted not only the suffering of the striking miners and their families but the on-going suffering of those whose health had been ruined pulling coal out of the ground.

But my association with the mining communities went back much further. My grandfather's family had first-hand knowledge of the difficult working conditions and exploitation, endemic in the slate quarries of North Wales, where working conditions were exploitative and treacherous and industrial diseases such as silicosis widespread.

Working as a young BBC broadcast journalist in Cardiff, I had been one of the first reporters on the scene of the Aberfan disaster in October 1966, one of the greatest examples of corporate negligence that's ever been seen in this country.

Back in those days it was common practice to dump mining debris in huge tips, we had grown up having picnics on the lead mining tips, on Halkyn Mountain, in Flintshire. The South Wales Valleys were dotted with much larger coal tips and they too were part of the landscape, children regularly playing on and around them.

In Aberfan, though, there were concerns about the size of the tips right above the village and school, but the National Coal Board had largely ignored concerns, raised by the local authority.

On the morning of 21 October 1966, everything changed. When I arrived I wasn't actually sure what had happened. I heard that there had been an accident as I was driving towards Cardiff so I turned around and headed to Aberfan. I could see that part of the tip had fallen away and there was a big crowd of people walking around. It turned out later that we were walking on the disaster scene itself. It took ages to comprehend that underneath all of that, was a primary school.

The atmosphere was both electric and sombre; men worked in silence trying to get beneath the rubble. I remember the feeling of shock as the scale of what was happening became clear but I had a job to do, to report what was happening.

At first I worked on my own, putting together an early report, and then reinforcements arrived from Cardiff and we worked as a team.

The children's parents had, of course, been first on the scene, frantically trying to move earth with their bare hands. Then the police arrived, and soon miners from Merthyr Vale Colliery. As news spread, hundreds of miners, health workers and ordinary people arrived to try and help. It was total mayhem.

I remember the noise of the heavy diggers brought on to the site to try and help move the debris and also the eerie silence when they stopped to enable the rescuers to listen for any noise. After a while everyone realised that no one else was coming out alive.

I stayed for hours in the mist and the rain, rooted to the spot hoping against hope for some good news, my instinct to bear witness, to tell the world about this unimaginable tragedy to hit a small mining community.

Over the next few days, it would become a media feeding frenzy and there was plenty of criticism of intrusive reporting by some of the national newspapers.

But, on that first day, I can only recall reporters like me, standing with tears in our eyes, as we realised there was not going to be good news, as the exercise moved from a rescue, to the recovery, of the bodies, of 116 primary school children and five teachers.

I was only involved on that first day, but over the ensuing weeks, months and years I followed closely the inquests, inquiries and protracted compensation battles which highlighted the “callous indifference” (that’s how the official Tribunal Report described it) of the National Coal Board.

In the summer of 1973 I met John Emlyn Evans, he was 65 years old but looked nearer 80. His wife told me she was often mistaken for his daughter. John suffered from pneumoconiosis, a respiratory disease also known as Miners Lung. His eyes were drawn back into his skull, his shoulders curved and his skin had the colour and feel of a taut and empty sausage skin.

Once he'd had a 44-inch chest, blond hair, and, said his wife, "sang like a nightingale". The day I met him he sat in his armchair at his Bridgend home with a bottle of oxygen at his side. He hadn't been able to sing for years. Talking was an effort and his wife had to do most of it.

She told me that they hadn't shared a bed for years, he rarely slept more than three hours a night, the rest of the time he was coughing and spitting, and it was too disruptive. But she didn't sleep well anyway, if she couldn't hear him coughing and wheezing she would creep out of bed to check he was still alive.

John qualified for a hundred per cent disability benefit, but when pneumoconiosis had been first diagnosed almost twenty years previously, it had qualified him *for only ten per cent* benefit. He had carried on working underground to support his family, a decision that had undoubtedly contributed to his current position.

At the time the Industrial Injuries Council, was recommending downgrading pneumoconiosis as a disease, threatening benefits to anyone less than fifty per cent disabled. Meanwhile miners with breathing problems, not caused by pneumoconiosis, such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema, received *no* benefit, as these conditions were not even classed as industrial diseases.

Seeing at first hand the suffering of John and his many counterparts across South Wales brought home to me the human price the men paid for hauling coal out of the ground. I wrote a substantial feature on the subject for *The Guardian* newspaper which attracted the attention of the National Union of Mineworkers' who reprinted it as part of their campaign. For me, it was the beginning of a long relationship with the union.

The first time I went underground was in 1974, again writing a piece for *The Guardian*. I can still remember how nervous I was having to crawl to the coal face,

wriggling flat on my front through tight, constrained spaces. My local photographer had enough and flatly refused to wriggle any further, until I said "I'm going anyway!"

When the piece appeared, dozens of readers wrote in, the gist being that the then Prime Minister Ted Heath and his Tory friends ought to go underground too and see the conditions for themselves!

When I fought the 1984 by-election for Cynon Valley we were still campaigning for a broadening of the category, to include emphysema and chronic bronchitis, incurred while working in dusty industries.

The rate of respiratory disease in the Cynon Valley was some twenty-five per cent higher, than England and Wales as a whole, and it was a heart-breaking experience to see a miner gasping for breath, even while using an oxygen mask, yet not getting a penny in compensation.

It was not just wrong, it was cruel and unjust. Despite years of campaigning on this issue I was not prepared for the scale of suffering that I encountered when canvassing; it seemed that at every other house, there was either a former miner with an oxygen tank, or a bereaved widow.

*What angered me then, and angers me now, is that vulnerable people are forced to fight the system. Surely 'the system' is there to support those who need it, it should not rely on those who shout the loudest or begrudge every penny spent. Common sense and common decency should make campaigning unnecessary.*

*Coal was the lifeblood of the Cynon Valley. Like most of South Wales, its communities had grown up to service the mining of precious anthracite coal that had powered an Empire and its industries.*

Not just mining but the engineering workshops, craftsmen and hundreds of shops, pubs and small businesses that indirectly depended on the miner's pay packet.

At the industry's peak in the 1920s over twenty thousand men worked in the Cynon Valley mines, places such as Tower, Ynysybwl and Penrhiwceiber, as well as others in neighbouring valleys. But by the time I became the Labour party candidate for the constituency in 1984, the writing was already on the wall.

The Cynon Valley by-election took place in the middle of what would become the final Miners' Strike. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was determined to break the Trade Union Movement in general and the powerful NUM in particular. If the cost was a criminal waste of natural resources, the end of a way of life for communities across the British coal fields, and - with little or no planning - the dumping of thousands of men on the scrap heap. Well so be it!

From the 1960s onwards successive Conservative Governments massacred the coal industry for chiefly ideological reasons. Churchill set the tone in November 1910, when he sent in troops to break up the riots in Tonypandy with the command to "drive the rats back down their holes". It was an aggressive and provocative act which ensured he was viewed with ill-feeling in South Wales for the rest of his life.

The miners epitomised class struggle in Britain, from the Great Strike in 1926, to the defeat of the Heath Government in 1974, and the governing party in 1984, was in no mood to forgive and forget.

On St David's Day, March 1st 1984, it was announced that twenty coal mines would close with the loss of twenty-thousand jobs. South Wales was the only producer of anthracite in a Britain which was short of this premium coal by a million tonnes a year.

Yet, the NCB planned to close the anthracite mines. The Margam steelworks at Port Talbot is situated next to the largest untapped reserve of prime coking coal in western Europe and yet coking coal pits were scheduled for closure and investment in a new mine at Margam refused, in favour of the *import of a million tonnes a year of foreign coking* coal into Port Talbot alone. *The Government should have been investing in coal, not closing mines.*

It is easy with hindsight to say that many people recognised this as a fight to the death. NUM leader Arthur Scargill's abrasive and combative style might not have been to everyone's taste, and it certainly did not help smooth a path to conciliation with the Coal Board's equally confrontational Ian MacGregor, with whom I had previous dealings concerning the steel industry.

Scargill believed the twenty closures were only the tip of the iceberg, claiming they were part of a bigger plan to close over seventy pits. This statement was vehemently denied at the time by Ian MacGregor, but Cabinet papers released in 2014, eventually revealed that MacGregor actually wanted to close seventy-five. The bottom line was, that Scargill was right in his prediction of Armageddon for the industry.

Scargill visited the Cynon Valley several times during the strike and was greeted as a hero. I walked alongside him on a march and shared a platform with him and South Wales leader Emlyn Williams at a packed rally in Aberdare. He was a good old-fashioned rabble rouser, somewhat egotistical, but then again most fighters are. However, even had the NUM been led by Mother Teresa herself, the Coal Board and Thatcher were going to kill it off.

MacGregor had been hired to do a job and I think many of his lieutenants were uncomfortable with his position. Certainly in Wales, Phil Weekes, who had risen

through the ranks to the top job, was perceived as having 'gone native' in his empathy for ordinary miners. Relations with his boss were rumoured to be icy.

It was a long and bitter strike that saw the miners, their families and their communities suffer. History is never far away in Wales and the mining community was only too aware of the fact their predecessors were starved back to work in 1926. Time and time again my constituents told me that they would not let it happen again.

The striking families were supported by friends and relatives, they cashed in insurance policies, raised second mortgages on their homes, sold their cars and determined to fight on but they were struggling. The hardship on the faces of the children was particularly hard to witness.

A hallmark of this strike was *the role of women*. If the Government and the largely hostile media had expected the miners' wives to urge their men back to work, they were very much mistaken. Women's committees were part and parcel of the struggle whether it was fundraising, food distribution or standing shoulder to shoulder on the picket line. Ann Scargill epitomised this new-found voice by staging an underground sit-in with her women's group.

It is ironic that, as with Greenham Common, women were on the front line of opposition to Britain's first female Prime Minister.

The women in my constituency decided that if everyone could have one hot meal a day, the men couldn't be starved back to work and established no fewer than thirteen strike feeding committees.

They established support groups where they could meet regularly to share their experiences, have a bit of a cry, but also a lot of laughs, read out letters of support

and the poems that many wrote. Out of the hardship came a great deal of creativity and also a realisation of what they were capable of. Many women from the Cynon Valley, credit the empowerment that came in the 1984 strike, to their later achievements.

As the strike wore on I think many outside the trade union movement became embarrassed at how the miners were being treated; food parcels came in from all parts of the country.

Traditional supporters within the Labour movement did their bit and constituency parties in non-mining areas 'twinned' with mining constituencies to support them. The results weren't always what we expected.

The Cynon Valley Constituency Labour Party was twinned with Islington CLP, and a group of them, led by their MP Jeremy Corbyn, came by bus to Aberdare for the day and provided the struggling community with a much needed fillip involving clowns, fire eaters, Turkish kebabs and all-day entertainment. It is an event still remembered locally with affection.

As a newly-elected MP it was an exhilarating and busy time. I was in London most of the week, but also involved in meetings that organised soup kitchens and the distribution of food and clothes, as well as joining the picket lines.

The sense of community was strong. Only one miner went to work in the Cynon Valley, a man called Paul Watson from outside the Valley who was driven to the Phurnacite smokeless fuel plant in Abercwmboi every day, by his wife. Every time the car went past, huge numbers would come out shouting 'scab', leading to an equally large police presence.

Throughout the strike there were allegations about police intimidation, a matter I raised several times in Parliament after witnessing it first hand in my constituency. I saw women pinned to the wall, men herded into groups and frogmarched backwards through the street to humiliate them.

Just being in the vicinity of a picket line was dangerous. I was threatened with arrest simply for standing on a pavement with local councillor Margaret Evans. Nearby, a man was pulled off a wall by the police and dragged along the floor causing facial injuries.

His wife, who went to help him, was kicked in the stomach. The intimidation was not only physical, it was often psychological.

I witnessed them baiting the protestors, waving the wedges of money they were earning while the strikers were starving. This was Britain in the 1980s and the behaviour of the police then drove a wedge between themselves and the communities they were policing, a breakdown in trust which would have implications for decades to come.

And in the week that MPs and others have been calling for a public inquiry into events surrounding Orgreave in Yorkshire there is a lot of sympathy – more of the later!

After a year with no wages, March 1985 saw a delegate conference of the NUM vote to abandon the strike and call for an organised return to work. Throughout South Wales, indeed throughout all the mining areas, miners marched back to work behind their brass bands with heads high and banners aloft. It was a sign of defiance.

I walked alongside the Tower miners who were cheered as heroes all the way along the emotionally-charged route up the Cynon Valley to Hirwaun. When we reached the pithead there were hundreds of people.

It was like something out of a film set. Recalling the scene later I wondered what happened to all those extravagantly embroidered banners; they were living history and I felt they ought to be collected together for posterity.

In South Wales the NUM tried to get those sacked during the strike reinstated, but the Coal Board held the upper hand and was in no mood to be conciliatory. As far as the Thatcher Government – who memorably described the miners as ‘the enemy within’ - and the Coal Board were concerned, this was only the beginning of the end. A widespread programme of pit closures soon followed and within a decade the British coal industry was privatised.

Nearly ninety per cent of the workforce in the British coal industry was shed during the first ten years after the strike. By March 2005 the now privatised coal industry employed less than seven thousand people, only four thousand of them at the eight remaining collieries.

I have no doubt whatsoever that the South Wales mining industry was deliberately punished in the aftermath of the strike, by starving it of any investment. We were told that the coalfield would not receive any capital investment until its losses were wiped out.

However, it was a ‘catch-22’ situation because without investment, it was condemned to outdated units, inferior machinery and an undermanned workforce. It was an ideological nonsense.

In its hey-day there were thirty-nine pits in the Cynon Valley; by the time I became MP in 1984 it had been reduced to three and eventually only Tower Colliery remained - the last deep pit in South Wales.

From 1992 onwards we fought hard to save Tower. Debates, rallies, delegations, petitions – you name it, we did it. Should the mine close there was little prospect of other jobs; unemployment in the Cynon Valley was running at 30 per cent and would rise to nearly 40 per cent if Tower closed.

Two years later, just before Easter, I marched with them to the Department of Trade and Industry in London with another petition, calling on Michael Heseltine to come and face us.

Not normally publicity-shy, he hid inside while his civil servants gave us the thumbs up at the windows. Days later lodge officials were told the pit was earmarked for closure. I could not believe it had actually happened.

Tower was profitable to the tune of £28 million over the previous three years and only months earlier John Redwood, the Secretary of State for Wales, had been congratulating the miners for improved productivity. British Coal, as the privatised organisation was now called, claimed 'geological' problems and, when that was refuted, 'market forces.'

I was in constant touch with the local NUM lodge. Late one night I was in the House of Commons when my phone rang. It was Lodge Secretary Tyrone O'Sullivan asking whether I was prepared to stage an underground 'sit-in.' Very early the next morning, Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> April, I drove down to Aberdare not knowing whether or not the protest would take place but when I arrived at 06:30 am I was told it was action time.

Retired miner, Glyn Roberts, now sadly dead, would accompany me underground. Our aim was to force the issue into the national media. Glyn had been chosen because he had retired and so could not be sacked by anyone.

On the mountain top, in the dark, above Hirwaun, I put on my safety kit and, as dawn broke, I pretended to pose for a photograph. As soon as the man on duty turned his back, Glyn and I disappeared into the pit, passing two bemused miners, before plunging into the darkness below the Rhigos Mountain.

It was like being sucked into a wind tunnel at high speed and, struggling to keep my balance, I slithered and stumbled to the bottom. Half an hour later we saw lights, the manager had sent pit deputies to intercept us and tell us we were trespassing. We tried to move on but were physically restrained, the air doors held fast against us. We were trapped in the cold section of the pit, unable to meet up with the other miners.

Glyn and I sat on a trunk containing first aid equipment and a blanket, which the deputies later snatched from us. They were particularly unpleasant, taking it in shifts to make it as uncomfortable as possible for us, refusing us food, drink or blankets and ensuring we got no sleep. We dubbed them 'the guards'. The hours ticked by.

To try and get warm we curled up on the floor near the vents, but that was blowing clouds of dust around. It cannot have been good for our lungs. It was a hard, long night.

In the meantime the Labour Party had issued a pre-arranged press release on my behalf. I said I intended to remain underground until Neil Clarke, the Chairman of British Coal, put the colliery into the Modified Review Procedure and, while the review was taking place, honoured its obligation to the miners.

I was fed up with Neil Clarke who had, within the space of a week, said the pit was closing the next day, would go into review procedure, and that it would remain open with the miners taking a wage cut. I felt he was playing a game with people's lives and needed him to understand he had a fight on his hands.

The next morning we were able to speak to Tyrone on the pit phone and he told us to come up and out. The lodge had voted against closure, by twice the majority of the previous week and British Coal said it would 'lift the axe'. Two hours later Glyn and I got into the cage and flew up to the surface. We were out, slightly disorientated, and facing the world's press.

It was at this stage, that I realised I was wearing the Manager's safety helmet, as we faced the cameras for what would become an iconic photograph. Everyone was clamouring for a comment, but I was guarded, I kept thinking that it had been too easy. In response to the question "Have you won?" I replied "I'll wait and see!"

By the way, the coal dust was real – I did not colour my face, as some subsequently claimed!

Sure enough, the following Monday British Coal reneged on Friday's promise. They produced a list of every man in the pit with a draconian pay cut, half of their salary, noted next to their names. The men were told that alternatively they could take a redundancy package, with a deadline of 6pm the following day.

Just before I walked into Employment Questions in the House of Commons, I was told the men had voted for closure. I was devastated. The dishonest manoeuvrings of the Government and of British Coal, had killed the last deep mine in South Wales.

Tyrone said that when he signed the papers on behalf of the NUM he felt emotionally drained. He said he felt a similar level of despair as when, as an eighteen-year-old, he had heard the news of his father's death in an underground roof fall at Tower.

But that was not to be the last chapter in the Tower story, the men were not done yet. Within ten days of the pit closing they had put together an audacious bid to buy the pit as a Workers' Cooperative. Over two hundred men contributed £8,000 each to own a share of the mine. When they reopened, they were also able to take on trainees and contractors.

When the news broke, Michael Heseltine sent one of his ministers, Tim Eggar, to the tea room of the House of Commons to give me a message. I was asked to tell the miners to "throw in the towel". I answered: "tell them yourself". To his credit, John Redwood, pledged his support to the buy-out and the rest, as they say, became history.

*Tower continued, as one of the largest employers in the Cynon Valley for a further fourteen years. Having mined the northern coal seams the colliery officially closed in January 2008. Planning permission was then won for open cast mining on the surface workings and Tower still continues to play an important role in the community.*

The Tower miners took a brave and important stand. They showed that the Coal Board's assertion that the pit was being closed because it was uneconomic, was patently untrue. They showed that they and their colleagues were hardworking responsible men whose motivation was the dignity of work for themselves and the next generation. When the seams were finally exhausted the whole community celebrated, with one last march behind the famous banner.

The men invited me to cut a red ribbon to mark the occasion and there were so many people present I had to bawl through a loud-hailer to make myself heard. I had marched with them at the end of the strike, I marched with them when Tower re-opened and I was proud to be on that last march too.

For me their attitude was summed up by their concern about what happened to the Tower site in future. They wanted to leave a legacy, jobs and houses.

I always think of Tower as an inspirational story – so perhaps I was less surprised than many, when it was turned into an opera by the eminent Welsh composer Alun Hoddinott featuring one of Tyrone's memorable sayings.

*"We were ordinary men, we wanted jobs so we bought a pit."* I was at the opening night in Swansea, a roaring success, before the production moved on to tour Wales funded by the Arts Council of Wales – exactly the sort of thing they should be doing. The company was approached to put the production on in London, as well as a European Tour, but further funding was not forthcoming.

Tower also opened a visitor centre, telling the story of coal in the Valley and the fight to preserve the colliery. The original ambitious project was scaled down and eventually forced to close. It was a great shame, on a number of levels, not least because it had been earmarked as a suitable home for a project I felt passionate about.

My memories of the beautiful Union banners held aloft on the march back to Tower remained with me and I determined to do something about this. When I was made Shadow Heritage Secretary in 1992 I seized my chance and launched a campaign backed by the late John Smith and Jack Jones, former General Secretary of the TGWU. There were, literally, thousands of banners all over the country.

Some stored in museums, others in cupboards, garages and even garden sheds. Some were tenderly cared for, others sadly neglected. In the past no march, no rally would have taken place without them. They were part of the history of the Labour movement but also works of art.

One of the most beautiful ones was that of the Penarth coal trimmers which had been painted by the Cardiff artist W. E. Britton. As news of my intended campaign began to circulate in the trade union movement offers of help came in. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation lent me their 1920 silk and watercolour banner, used in the General Strike, as a backdrop for the campaign launch.

The late John Smith thought it an excellent idea and agreed to join the embryonic Trades Union Banner Board, which also included Jack Jones and a number of prominent trade union leaders. We appealed for news of surviving banners to enable us to catalogue them and their location and also to help with conservation and restoration.

The letters poured in from trade unionists from all over Britain supporting the concept and also providing us with details and photographs of local banners.

I felt that what was really needed was a home where the banners could be restored and exhibited and where better than the Cynon Valley!

At the time Cynon Valley Borough Council, as it then was, was pursuing plans to create a major museum development in Aberdare and the Chief Executive, Tony Roberts, was keen to include the banners. He commissioned a report from Coopers & Lybrand to investigate costing and funding.

John Prescott formally launched the idea of a National Centre for the Preservation of Trade Union Banners, in the Cynon Valley, at the Labour Party Conference in 1995. A detailed study was commissioned from the National Museum of Labour History; grants applied for and a potential home identified. The former stables at Aberaman Colliery met most of our criteria and we began negotiation with the Coal Board supported by Elfed Morgan, Leader of the local council.

Then we were approached by the Tower Colliery Trust, which was working with the National Trust, to establish a visitor centre and the Trade Union Banner Board agreed that it would be the ideal home for our centre. It was not to be however.

The Tower Visitor Centre didn't materialise in the way it was envisaged. Local Authority reorganisation merged Cynon Valley into Rhondda Cynon Taff and I moved on from the National Heritage brief. I think everyone involved was still supportive but there was no one left to drive the project.

Unfortunately, frustration is often the order of the day for an MP and something I have had to learn to live with. But I never give up. A major part of my role has been to champion people's claims for compensation, they probably run into thousands, by chasing the relevant government department, local authority or Coal Board.

Bureaucracy can be exhausting and nothing annoys me more than thinking something has been accomplished only for institutional inertia to kick in. When Labour came to power in 1997 we finally won compensation, for those miners who had had their health ruined by working conditions underground.

The problem was, that the process was taking forever and the men were becoming weaker. By 2002 the number of medical assessments were dropping off and the DTI was falling behind target. By now though I had a strong ally.

As Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party I had weekly meetings with Tony Blair and I would take the opportunity to put my concerns to him.

I would go in with the latest numbers, updating him on the shortfall and demanding action. I was pushing at an open door because he was also MP for a mining constituency and I think he quite liked me nagging him, as an excuse to move things along. We both shared a fear that miners would die before they received what was owed to them and he wrote to the DTI stressing the need to speed up the process and prioritise the oldest claimants and those that were most disabled.

This week in the House of Commons, those of us from mining communities, believe the Home Secretary – Amber Rudd – is wrong, to reject the appeal for an independent inquiry into the events at Orgreave in June 1984.

She told MPs, that there were no deaths and no miscarriage of justice, but there is plenty of evidence that the police on the picket lines, to put it kindly, “misaid the rule book” in their attempt to break the miners’ strike. The opinion among my MP friends is that she has failed, to put right a wrong, shared by former mining communities across the UK.

Some at Orgreave were certainly injured in the brutal suppression of the picket at that coking plant. There were 95 men who for a year or more, feared trial on riot charges that could have led to life sentences.

In the Cynon Valley, 8 men were sacked for spitting at the one miner who tried to go to work at the Phurnacite plant and crossed the picket lines. He was singled out as a “scab”. None of the Phurnacite workers’ who were sacked at the time got their old jobs back. The Coal Board refused to take them back.

As *The Guardian* said, in an editorial this week, “the tactics and conduct of the South Yorkshire Police have now been shatteringly exposed by the inquiry into the Hillsborough Tragedy, which unfolded 5 years later.”

In effect, the Home Secretary said there is little new to glean about the conduct of the policing operation, nor more lessons to be learned. The-then acting Chief Constable of South Yorkshire himself accepted last May that an inquiry was needed.

While the two events are of course not comparable, with the deaths of 96 Liverpool fans at Hillsborough, some of the Orgreave pickets who were injured, were later compensated out of court, but the police have not been held to account for their actions. At Orgreave, nearly a hundred men were left without jobs and faced serious charges of riot until their trial collapsed after the police evidence was found to be unreliable.

For the local community there remain feelings of continuing grievance after 30 years. *The Guardian* editorial on 31<sup>st</sup> October argues that grievances dismissed for so long should be finally heard and there is a wider and even more important purpose into such an inquiry – the recognition that the police must be publically accountable.

This is also about trust, the trust of the ordinary citizen that the duty of the police to act lawfully is upheld from the very top. Then there is the important issue of alleged political interference by the-then UK Government in operational policing. That question still needs to be answered.

The AM for Pontypridd, Mick Antoniw was a member of the legal team that represented the Orgreave miners, has long campaigned for an inquiry into the violent clash between thousands of miners and police at the Yorkshire colliery site in 1984, said this week “It is an outrageous denial of justice”. I will continue to give those involved with the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign my full support.