

RECORDS BROKEN FOR WHAT REWARD



THIS has been a great week for those of you who voted Conservative at the last election. Your Government, your party, has just sunk a nail so deeply into the side of Nottinghamshire that it will leave the county deeply wounded for decades.

I'm talking, of course, about pit closures. I listened carefully to all of the Government's fine words about the "rescue" package. They don't amount to a row of beans.

Of course there was a rescue. Michael Heseltine saved his job, and the "rebels" saved Government by caving in. Rebels? What a joke. I wouldn't trust that lot to make a stand on unconditional surrender. There were an awful lot of MPs who talked a good TV interview, but when the time came to vote they ran out of bottle - lost sheep trotting

meekly in behind the Tory whip.

The issue always hinged on the demand for coal. The industry needed this year's demand - 65 million tonnes - to remain constant. Mr. Heseltine barely listened. His "core contract" of 40 million next year and 30 million the year after was the death warrant for the 31 pits. Forget "mothballing" and "market testing". The mothballed pits will never reopen. The 12 pits being market tested will be closed by Christmas.

THE freedom to compete for non-existent orders is like the freedom to swim across the Trent... tied inside a bin liner. For the nuclear industry, the Government guarantees to buy every unit of electricity that it generates. So too, for gas. Only coal stands abandoned.

We're told that coal is not "price

competitive" - but we still produce it at half the cost of German coal. Miners have increased the productivity in Notts pits by 50 per cent in the last five years, and the price of coal at the pithead has not increased for six years. Miners break record after record ... and for what? We've given them little more than symbolic awards for building their own coffins faster.

The economics of an energy policy for Britain could, though, be written very differently. Mr Heseltine could simply have transferred the subsidy from nuclear to coal and what a difference it would have made; he could have announced that the Government was proposing to give coal away, pay every pensioner a £10 bonus and still declare a £200m profit in the coal industry every year. That is the scale of the nuclear subsidy.

As it is, every man, woman and child in Notts will be required to throw £225 a year into a hole in the ground. That's what it will mean in terms of lost production in the local economy.

For a short time we might each be offered a £5 refund in the form of a regional development agency, a

business park or an enterprise zone. Such funding won't last long. It will move as soon as the public loses interest and the Government lurches into another sort of crisis. But the legacy for this county will last longer than my lifetime, longer than my children's. It is a legacy which will leave whole communities bowed and broken.

PERHAPS if I explain the cynicism behind what has gone on, you will understand the extent of my anger. The Government never planned to save the pits. The announcement has been delayed for weeks while they tested public opinion. The Press were fed leaks about the number of pits to be saved, only to have the figures changed later. Eventually the Government got the feedback it was waiting for: the public was getting tired, Tory rebels were confused, the miners still divided. You were the mouse that had been trapped and toyed with, but the Tories had grown tired of the game. It was time for the kill.

Were they right? Were the anger and indignation that roared through this county and captured the hearts of the country no more than Christmas decorations? We shall see this week, as miners go on strike. We shall see who else joins in. We shall see who draws the line that says "thus far and | no further".

Mr Heseltine said he wanted to address the future, not the past. Then let him look into the eyes of children in mining communities around Nottinghamshire. He would see there the future he is offering. No other country in Europe would throw away such assets. No other country would squander such resources. Blind, arrogant and indifferent... it must be great to be a Tory.