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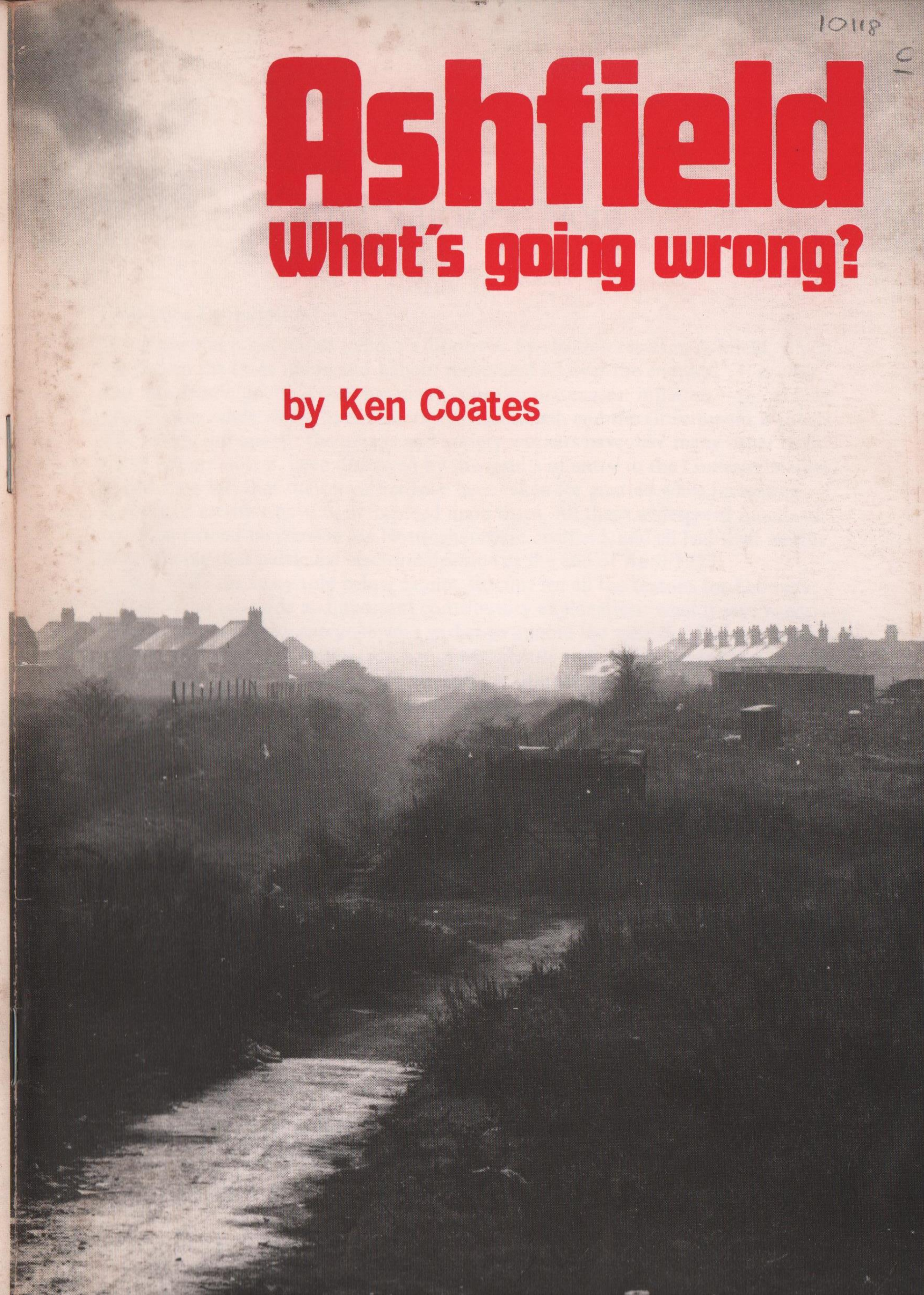
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Ashfield

What's going wrong?

by Ken Coates



Introductory Note

What Price Consultation?

This pamphlet is not about Labour's disastrous by-election result in Ashfield, which has shaken the trade union and Labour movement all over the country.¹ It is clear that this drastic political shift has many contributory causes: inflation — prices have ripped away while wages have been tightly restrained, and the Government is therefore widely unpopular; the miners and hosiery workers have, like many other traditional Labour voters, been dismayed by the results of entry to the Common Market; people have felt that their loyalties have been taken for granted while increasing burdens of sacrifice have been imposed upon them. All these widespread moods of rejection extend far outside the Nottinghamshire coalfield, and all had their weight in producing that particular electoral decision at the end of April 1977.

But while the story told below cannot account for all the reasons for Labour's defeat, it does provide an important contributory explanation: what it says needs to be duly assessed by everyone who wishes to uphold the view that Labour represents a movement, a knitting together of democratic and socialist objectives, rather than a series of purely technical administrative alternatives.

"Consultation" is a watchword much abused, and never more so than in the case here documented. People participate in trade unions in order to win some degree of control over their own working lives, and in local politics in order to wrest some area of real power over their own immediate environment. Neither task is easy, and it is frequently possible to meet frustration. It is unwise to assume that democracy is a simple process. Yet, making proper allowance for this, when the existing channels of communication become blocked, when vital decisions are prepared in conditions of clandestinity, then the very practice of democracy is placed in jeopardy. Something like this has been happening in Ashfield, and it is unlikely to be confined to that area. For this reason, the events recorded here might reasonably interest others than those directly affected.

1. The by-election result on Thursday, April 28th 1977 was:
(1974 General Election figures in brackets)

		<i>per cent</i>	<i>per cent</i>
Timothy Smith (C)	19,616 (12,452)	42.5	(22.3)
Michael Cowan (Lab)	19,352 (35,367)	42.5	(63.4)
Hampton Flint (L)	4,380 (7,959)	9.6	(14.3)
George Herrod (Nat Front)	1,734 (did not contest)	3.8	
Mrs Jill Hall (Soc Workers)	453 (did not contest)	1.0	
Swing to C was 20.9 per cent (2.6 per cent swing to Labour in 1974)			
Electorate: 76,193 (74,701)			

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1. A Secret Document

In the Autumn of 1976, I received a telephone call from a former student of mine, who informed me that he had learned of the existence of a complex plan for the phased closure of all the collieries in the Ashfield area of Nottinghamshire, together with a number of others which were scattered along the Western fringe of the County. This plan, he said, was based upon data furnished by the National Coal Board to the Structure Planning Unit of the Nottinghamshire County Council. He wished to know whether it was possible to discover if the Miners' Union had been informed of this sweeping transformation, which would one day overtake them. Apparently the plan anticipated the exhaustion of coal reserves across a wide area, resulting in a serious concentration of shut-downs bunched towards the mid-1980's. I took my caller seriously, and began to check what he had told me. As an active member of the Rushcliffe Labour Party, my nearest Labour county councillor was Councillor Vic Lloyd, who sits for the Cotgrave ward. Councillor Lloyd is also a member of the Nottinghamshire Area Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers, and, not unnaturally, he was most concerned to explore this issue, when I asked his advice and help.

It quickly became plain that some sort of detailed plan did exist, and my councillor began to ask for it. After his enquiries had failed to produce the offending document, and after a couple of months of other investigations on my own part, we both decided that the proper course of action was to open the matter out to wider discussion. Meantime, I had been nominated as a possible prospective candidate in the upcoming by-election contest for the Ashfield division. This seemed to offer a convenient platform from which to urge that this question be considered. Accordingly I wrote an open letter to members of the Ashfield Labour Party, and to branch and area officers of the NUM. This stimulated a stiff local controversy, which necessitated a series of further letters: the sequence of these is, once they are interspersed with the various rejoinders and denials which provoked them, self-explanatory.

In my first open letter on this topic, dated 10th December 1976, after explaining the brief history which is outlined above, I had written:

"Of course, the life of a colliery is not permanent. There may, for all I know, be a good case for some closures over a longer or shorter period of time. I am, however, convinced that some earlier closures in our broader area were profoundly mistaken, notably that at Clifton, where power-station coal could have been deposited in a power-station yard for a considerable while to come, if the Board had not, largely unsuccessfully, tried to push its labour force into moving to Cotgrave. In the event, the pit closed, and many miners left the industry alto-

gether. For this reason, I have been convinced ever since that the fullest consultation is necessary from the very earliest stages, if the Board is to avoid such mistakes by profiting from the experience and advice of the mineworkers. So I asked leading members of the NUM whether they had been notified of the Ashfield proposals. They had not.

"I then asked a very honourable and level-headed County Councillor who is employed in the mining industry, whether *he* had been informed. He had not. Further enquiries revealed that the document in question was "confidential", and was not even to be shown to County Councillors.

"Here is a pretty case of not very fresh fish! A public body, the NCB, accountable to us all, prepares a secret document and gives it to another public body, accountable to us all, on condition that our elected representatives are not allowed to see it. Obviously, this is not a very active policy of 'consultation'.

"Now, I am not arguing that the document in question is without merit. I am saying that it is without *legitimacy*. Supposing the Coal Board wants to persuade Sutton miners to move, say to the Vale of Belvoir. That could be sensible, but it will be subject to negotiation. People might not want to go. They might prefer to stay where they are. They have, in any case, opinions of their own. They have a union which represents them. Shouldn't their opinions be asked, through the NUM, *before* anybody files a report with the structure planners? Supposing the county could be persuaded to commit funds to developing one area, and encouraged to promote changes in another, in order to fit one prognosis, offered by the Board. Wouldn't this nullify all future consultation? Shouldn't the workpeople's chosen delegates be involved in whatever argument is necessary about these questions, *from the beginning*? Here is a question which takes us to the very heart of the problem of industrial democracy.

"Of course, there are things we can do about this. We can ask the County Council officers to divulge this plan to Councillors. We can ask the Board to divulge it to the Union. We could ask our own Councillors to issue instructions to all personnel that no plans submitted by any employer may be given any consideration at all unless they are previously initialled by the proper representative of the appropriate union or unions. Then employers will *have* to consult first, and form plans by agreement. I hope all three of these things will happen. But more: I hope we will learn from this episode.

"Sutton and Kirkby face serious changes in their industrial prospects, and these will be very painful for well-established and harmonious local communities unless they are consulted, and involved in all important planning questions, from the earliest possible moment. Our people are not pawns in a chess board, or numbers in a work-roll, but they are individual citizens, with developed loyalties and traditions, and a profound right to be able to influence the way that their social environment changes."

During the next ten days a fairly fierce discussion broke out, and this involved not only local people in the threatened areas, but councillors and officials of the planning department. Most of the rank-and-file councillors were no better informed than I was myself, and it was plain that they had not been carefully briefed on the industrial inputs to the structure plan. But the staff of the planning department were unfailingly courteous, and as helpful as they were allowed to be within the terms of their agreement with the NCB to respect the confidentiality of the information which it had furnished to them. Accordingly, by 20th December 1976, I

was able to send out a further open letter, which said, on the question at issue:

"First, I should say that my statements have encouraged a most helpful response from the County Council staffs and a number of Councillors representing the mining community. I am now in a position to state exactly what is the location of the secret document which considers future pit-closures in Sutton and elsewhere. This is listed in a publication called *Draft Report of Survey*, an excellent and comprehensive review which is available from the Nottinghamshire Structure Plan. On page 200, the document with which we are concerned is listed as a *Draft Structure Plan Topic Report on Coal Mining*, of November 1975, 'available in summary form only'. The summary is, of course, rather uninformative, since there is no point whatever in classifying the Topic Report if all its contents are to feature in an abbreviated form.

"I should now explain two further points which are important: first, no doubt arising from a misunderstanding of my previous letter, some people have mistakenly reported that I have claimed to have seen the offending document. In fact I have not even asked to see it, because I am complaining about the fact that it is kept secret, in principle, and not about the fact that I personally am not allowed to have it. I do not wish to ask anyone to make a special exemption in my case, which would only have the effect of binding me to that very secrecy which I do not believe to be justified in this affair. My source is an honest one, but I will read this document when it is released to the mining community, and not before. I should also add that every member of the County Council Staff to whom I have spoken has behaved blamelessly and entirely properly, and these good people are not in any way responsible for the 'leak'.

"Secondly, I do not know in what form the NCB filed the evidence from which the secret Topic Report was compiled, and I am told that some Board Spokesmen have denied that they have given any 'document' to the County Council. That may be literally true: they may have given oral evidence to the planners, or they may have printed it in cuneiform script on a clay tablet, or they may have met in an Edwinstowe cellar and tapped it out in morse code on the pipes. I rather doubt some of these explanations, since the information in question seems to be bulky, carefully considered, and technically highly competent.

"Now let us come to the central issues. The published Structure Plan speaks of the loss of 13,500 jobs in mining in two decades. The formula of a 'double decade' can be very misleading. Why not say 'in twenty years' time'? I think the answer can only be that this would not be true. From now to 1986 is one decade. From then to 1996 is another. Let's guess that this massive closure programme could start in 1984 and finish in 1988. That would complete it within 'two decades'. It would also complete it within twelve years, which might seem to make it more urgent for us to think about it.

"If the Board is going to sink not one, but four or three pits in the Vale of Belvoir, from where will come the miners to staff them? If they come from Ashfield, will they be asked to commute, in order not to offend the Duke of Rutland by their presence during the hunt? If that happened, how long would the journey take? Or will they be invited to move? If so, will they be able to take gran and grandad, or will Teversall or Stanton Hill become old people's ghettos? Will there be jobs for miners' wives in the Vale? Will the new houses be built as part of a self-contained mining settlement, or will they be scattered round existing rural villages and townships? I do not know the answers to these questions, but I expect the Board's planners must be worrying about them, even now. If this is so, why not

ask miners, and their wives, and their aged relatives, and, yes, their children, what *they* think? The social consequences of such a migration would be enormous, and they are certainly not confined to problems of jobs and rehousing. We live in a *community*, where old people help younger ones, where each depends on the other. Most of the time we don't even notice it, it is so familiar. But it will hurt very much on the day it isn't there.

"That is why we must insist on our right to know, and to talk things over *before* decisions are made.

"New laws have come into force, or partly into force, since 1974. These include the Industry Act and the Employment Protection Act, both of which guarantee trade unionists 'the right to know'. Employers are bound to reveal information for collective bargaining purposes, and the Government recognises, in principle, the right of workers to bargain about investment decisions, questions affecting closures and a variety of other major economic matters. It could be argued that employers who compel an elected authority to conceal such information even from elected representatives are acting against the declared will of Parliament, and if they were pressed they would find this very difficult to justify.

"The leader of the County Council has put it to me that certain kinds of confidences *should* be observed, and I do agree. I don't think that personal case files, or similar documents, should be published to anyone except the persons concerned, although these people are often, in fact, the last to gain access to them. But shouldn't the County Council adopt a policy insisting that employers try to present *joint* submissions on all relevant matters, and that they must at least inform their trade unions of all those issues about which they are entitled to know under the law of the land, before risking the involvement of a public authority, against its will, in industrial relations conflicts?"

After these broadsides, the issue quickly found its way into the local newspapers. The first of these to explore the ground was the *Mansfield Chronicle Advertiser*, popularly known in the area it serves as the CHAD.

"An allegation that the National Coal Board has prepared a detailed plan outlining various time scales and options for the closure of all the pits in the Sutton area . . . claims that the plan suggests they might finish in the period ten years from now, and alleges secrecy on the part of the Board over the issue. Following this Nottinghamshire miners' leaders have instructed the Nottingham Area NUM Executive Committee to seek talks with both the North and South Nottinghamshire areas of the National Coal Board to discuss job security in the Notts. coal-field.

"Both Mr Len Clarke, Nottingham area president, and its general secretary, Mr Len Martin, are anxious for clarification over future Board plans, especially in view of the coal bonanza that might accrue from the Vale of Belvoir.

"A spokesman for the Board strongly refuted the existence of any detailed plan for such closures, and denied that secrecy was involved in what he states is a purely tentative assessment supplied in confidence to Nottinghamshire County Council's planning department.

"It is subject to change in the light of continuing exploration and newer technology, he stressed, adding that the Board is continually faced with the need to look at the exhaustion of coal reserves, and that regular discussions with all the interested parties keep everyone informed of the prospects.

"Mr Clarke told CHAD that, although he did not know of the alleged plan to close all the Sutton pits, his area had always been satisfied that its consultations with the Board on these matters was all it should be."

But according to the *Chronicle Advertiser*, the coal board spokesman was emphatic that

"although the assessment submitted to the county planners was confidential, full discussions on a regular basis take place at pit consultative meetings, colliery and area review meetings at which union representatives are kept fully in the picture.

"He stressed that any review can change drastically over a period of time.

"It is a fact that we consult with the county planning authority on a confidential basis about the exhaustion of seams, but any assessments made are only on a purely tentative basis. They are a continuing process, and I can assure all concerned that no firm decisions have been made for any pit closures in the Sutton area or anywhere else," he said.

"If we decide a pit must be closed, we give ample notice to the unions, in fact they know before the county planners or anyone. Coal reserves are put into various classifications and those which at one stage are not classified as being workable can well become classified as workable in the light of later exploration and advances in technology. New Hucknall Colliery is an example of this, a pit at which the reserves were thought to be near exhaustion and which is still in production.

"We make these assessments in order to assist the county planners, but they are continually subject to revision."

"Mr Clarke, for the NUM, told CHAD that he had not been informed of the alleged pit closures.

"We are kept fully informed by the Board, and get all the information on these matters." — (*Mansfield Chronicle Advertiser*, page 1, 30 December 1976)

A less objective story was filed a week later in the rival journal, *Notts Free Press* which cited Mr Len Martin, the area secretary of the NUM, as dismissing the whole story, saying that it was an "election gimmick".

I replied to this statement in another open letter: the *Free Press*

"dismisses the facts I have helped to bring into the daylight about the NCB's secret plans for the closure of an important section of the coalfield in the middle-term, headlining these revelations as an 'election gimmick'. The truth is, as I informed the *Free Press* reporter when he interviewed me, that I had raised this question with my friends on the County Council many weeks before the present by-election was even hinted at . . . Councillor Vic Lloyd and I have been worrying about how to ventilate this problem for a considerable time, and that all Councillor Lloyd's best efforts to secure a copy of the scheduled topic report have been unsuccessful. I know he will be my unimpeachable witness on this matter.

"I did tell the *Free Press* newsman that the first and most crucial complaint I had raised was a constitutional one: that a key planning document was being withheld from our elected representatives, and that this must in any circumstances be unjustifiable. The reporter said he agreed with me that this was an unanswerable charge: but he did not even mention this central complaint in his story as it finally appeared.

"Since then I have had the opportunity to discuss this matter with the Chairman of the County Council's Planning Committee, Frank Higgins. He unreservedly confirmed that the councillors have not been given sight of this document, and he strongly agreed that they must be entitled to see it. I believe he has informed the *Free Press* that this is his considered view. We shall all wait with keen interest to see how fairly they report his statement."

In fact Councillor Higgins did issue a series of statements, on 14th January, 20th January and 3rd February. In the first of these, the councillor forthrightly called for release of the topic report.

"Pressure on the National Coal Board and Notts. County Council planners to release a 'secret' document on the future of mining in the county mounted this week when Notts. Environment Committee chairman Coun. Frank Higgins revealed that he may go to the Department of Energy for support . . .

"While not sharing Mr Coates' fears that the document contains information which miners and their union are not aware of, Coun. Higgins is annoyed and puzzled that councillors have not been allowed to see it, even in confidence.

"He explained that the information required had been passed on by the Board on the understanding that it was purely on an officer to officer basis. An attempt to persuade them to alter their minds had since failed, and if another appeal met with the same fate, he may ask the Department of Energy to support his request.

"Anyone who knows anything about the industry knows perfectly well that when you run out of coal, that's the end of the job. But I think it would be in everyone's interest, particularly in the light of discussions on the Vale of Belvoir, if the facts were known," he said.

Coun. Malcolm Lee, of Huthwaite, would also like to see the document, if only to help him in his fight to attract more industry to Ashfield.

"If there is a document which sets out policies for pit closures, it should be given to members to help us with the structure plan. But I have no proof such a thing exists." — (*Notts Free Press*, 14th January 1977)

The second report, in the *Chronicle Advertiser* the following week, was more specific about how publication was to be tackled:

"The National Coal Board is to be approached again next Thursday by at least one county councillor in an effort to gain publication of a detailed Board estimate of pit closures in Nottinghamshire within the next 20 years.

"Coun. Frank Higgins, chairman of the county Environment Committee told CHAD that he will bring the issue up at a major seminar arranged with Board officials. He does not see why the best interests of the community should not be served by abandoning the cloak of secrecy.

"Since the existence of the estimates were first publicised in CHAD on 30th December several bodies have shown concern. These include Nottingham area NUM whose National Executive Committee is seeking talks with the Board on future job security and Mansfield District Council.

"Following pressure from Mansfield councillors at last week's council meeting a letter has been sent to Nottinghamshire County Council demanding that the information given to county planners be given also to Mansfield District Council.

"The NCB has admitted that the report was given to top officers of the county

council as confidential, but has claimed that it does not contain detailed plans for pit closures. Its spokesman denied secrecy and stressed that it was a purely tentative assessment subject to change in the light of continuing exploration and newer technology.

"The estimate is contained, CHAD understands, in the Structure Plan Topic Report on Coalmining for November 1975. It was supplied to officers of the County Council who were preparing the Draft Structure Plan for the county.

"One informant has suggested that its contents include estimates that half the pits in the county will close within the 20 year period.

"Coun. Higgins added that he could understand the Board's problem in wishing to keep the document confidential.

"The seminar next Thursday will include discussion on the coal reserves discovered in the Vale of Belvoir, which recent investigations have shown could be in the region of 1,200 million tons." (CHAD, 20th January 1977)

However, after the meeting in question, although the embargo was not lifted, Councillor Higgins seemed to have changed his view about matters. Now, he told the *Chronicle Advertiser*,

"The information detailing estimates of pit closures in the county over the next 20 years, given under a pledge of strict confidence by the National Coal Board to Nottinghamshire County Council officers only, would prove to be of no importance if published, is the view of Coun. F. Higgins, chairman of the county Environment Committee.

"The estimates were given to assist in the preparation of the Draft Structure Plan for the county, but the information is now completely out of date, is Coun. Higgins' view.

"He admits that he has not read the report which was prepared by County Council officers upon facts supplied by the Coal Board.

"On a different tack, an officer in the County Council's Planning and Transportation Department told CHAD that there is a confidential report which the NCB would only give on the basis that it was to be divulged to certain officers.

"We are bound by our obligations. The facts were given only to officers and the councillors do not know what it contains. The published summary of this report would not provide a great deal of information," he said.

"Many people are now asking: Why is the secrecy necessary? Why — if, as Coun. Higgins maintains, it is out of date and most of the information in it is known at local or pit level anyway — are councillors, to say nothing of the general public, denied access to it?

"This is intensified by feeling in some sources that the lack of this information has to some degree negated the recent public meetings held in various centres throughout the county to explain the implications of the structure plan simply because what could be significant evidence was not available.

"Coun. Higgins told CHAD that he believes that if it were published — 'It would be the biggest flop of all.'

"He told CHAD that he did not think the NCB attitude in maintaining secrecy over the facts was a sensible one, although he pointed out that in any assessment made of the life of a pit, later discoveries of new reserves and the future availability of new technology can change them drastically.

"I feel that the NCB should replace it with new and up-to-date information," he said, adding that the County Council has taken steps to establish industrial

estates in the Sutton area because it is known that the pits there are among the oldest in the county and are, therefore, likely to be the ones to be closed down first." (3rd February, 1977)

As far as the newspaper-reader of Ashfield would have known up to this time, then, this was the state of affairs: allegations that a secret county council planning report existed, and that it forecast widespread pit closures in West Nottinghamshire, had first been denied, and then confirmed, by a variety of public officials. Having confirmed them, the chairman of the appropriate council committee had first called for their publication, and threatened to invoke the assistance of the Secretary of State for Energy, and then later offered the view that the Report in question was unimportant, outdated, and inaccurate, even though, at the time in question, he admitted he had still not seen it. Rightly or wrongly, important union spokesmen had been quoted as dismissing the whole notion that there might possibly be something to worry about in the scheduled Report. The coal board had denied giving the County Council any information which was not already openly available to the miners, and had not answered the question "why, then, enjoin the planners to respect as confidential something which is already widely known?" It was in this rather cloudy context that the leader of the County Council said to me "why, you've stirred up a hornet's nest, to be sure!"

2. What the Structure Plan Said

County planning authorities are obliged, under section 6 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act, to prepare a detailed survey of the "matters which may be expected to affect the development of its area, or the planning of its development". The planning authorities are enjoined to prepare a Structure Plan, which "must be justified by the results of the survey, which will accompany the submission of the Structure Plan to the Secretary of State.

In England and Wales the planners work over a 20-year period: in Scotland, under parallel legislation, the forward plans are prepared to cover a period of eight years. When the Nottinghamshire area found itself brought into the reorganised system of local government, there had been no statutory report on the region it covered for well over two decades. The structure plan team which is responsible for the Nottinghamshire plan is part of the County Council's department of Planning and Transportation. It is a highly qualified and efficient group, and it set about its work with considerable élan and some rigour. In 1976 the various final drafts of the Plan were published. Before this, a whole series of Topic Reports had been issued, covering a range of specific issues, such as housing, employment, leisure and recreation, population, public utilities and so on. In all, twelve such reports were prepared. Eleven were published, and made available to the public. The remaining one, completed in November 1975, was the Topic Report on Coal-mining, "available in summary form only".

This summary is not long, and it would not honour the pledges of confidentiality given to the NCB, which provided most of the information upon which it is based, if it did not reduce most of this data to the vaguest abstractions. However, since it is still all that is publicly known about the scheduled report, it is worth reproducing it:

"Coal Mining in Nottinghamshire — A Summary

- "1. The coal industry has declined substantially nationally since the war, both in employment, from 780,000 in 1951 to 315,000 in 1973, and in output from 209m tons p.a. to 118m tons p.a. over the same period. Nottinghamshire has one of the most productive coalfields in the country, and while it has also declined in employment and output mainly in the west of the County it has been substantially insulated from the national decline largely as the result of the low price of its pithead coal, and particularly during the 1960s due to the construction of a number of coal-fired power stations in the Trent Valley. Coal mining is still Nottinghamshire's major single employer, with 45,000 employees in 1973.

- "2. The future prospects for employment in the coal industry are for greater stability, and are better now than at any time since the 1967 Fuel Policy White Paper (Cmnd. 3438). Based upon the 'Coal Industry Examination', a tri-partite report produced by the National Coal Board, the Mining Unions and the Government, the present output of the coal industry is planned to remain at its present level until 1985 with declines through pit exhaustion being matched by increases from existing and new collieries. The main constraints to achieving this target are stated as the availability of finance, and the problem of labour mobility likely to arise through the depletion of useful economic reserves at some mines, while others are expanded.
- "3. Projections of future mining employment in Nottinghamshire have been made, based upon expected colliery life and the need to meet national output targets. It is anticipated that employment will continue falling from its 1974 level of 40,500 to 32,400 in 1986 and 25,700 in 1996. The likely diminution in employment would mean that for every 100 miners in 1974, only 63 would be required in 1996. However, this anticipated fall in employment is misleading in relation to the real labour needs of the mining industry. The age structure of the mining workforce, is such that 63% of those presently employed are over 40 years of age, so only 37% would be available for work in 1996. Therefore even though total employment is likely to fall, recruitment into the industry needs to continue.
- "4. The practical planning problems revolve around the need to cater for the inevitable exhaustion of reserves at some collieries, coupled to the need to make good the potential labour deficits at those mines with substantial reserves.
- (i) the greatest problem is the inability to state with any degree of certainty the likely date of exhaustion;
 - (ii) the problems associated with mine exhaustion are concerned with the need to provide alternative job opportunities for those who neither wish to transfer to other collieries, nor are eligible for the Redundant Mineworkers Payment Scheme; many of these older miners will register as unemployed with little hope of re-employment, even given the availability of retraining opportunities;
 - (iii) the magnitude of the labour deficit at continuing mines will be reduced by the transfer of miners from collieries where reserves are likely to become exhausted, but it is still likely to be about 7,800 over the 1974-86 period, and 10,100 between 1974 and 1996. It must be stressed that these are minimum figures, taking account only of natural wastage due to retirement; any wastage from within the workforce, for instance due to movement into other industries, will increase the likely deficit. Thus the main need for recruitment will come in the period up to 1986, and will be experienced most in those areas distant from the present concentrations of labour, and at those pits with an above average age of workforce.
- "5. The major policy implications of these issues relate to changes in the travel-to-work patterns of miners, and the provision of housing. The present travel-to-work pattern is characterised by the majority of miners travelling a very short distance and a small minority travelling a considerable distance; these latter have either transferred from collieries now shut, or are skilled men involved in increasing production at mines with substantial reserves. There

is also a general west to east movement of miners reflecting the historical development of the coalfield. Future travel-to-work patterns will be closely related to housing policies, but two features are likely: firstly, a marked decline in commuting from Derbyshire, as the centre of mining shifts eastwards; secondly, an increase in the average length of journey-to-work as more miners transfer to work at collieries which are further from main towns.

"6. The National Coal Board is a large property owner, mainly through the Coal Industry Housing Association, owning 5% of the total County housing stock (up to 80% in some communities). The main problems associated with this housing are:

- (i) a large proportion of houses are occupied by retired or disabled miners and widows, termed 'benevolent provision';
- (ii) the problem under (i) occurs at a time and in areas where housing is required to attract skilled miners to the County;
- (iii) the 'tied' nature of NCB housing leads to dissatisfaction either when the miner wishes to leave the industry or when the house is sold to the Local Authority in the efficient management of their District's total housing stock.

The two issues of immediate concern are, firstly, the need for additional housing (by Local Authorities) for incoming miners, bearing in mind that a better use could be made of the housing stock through the provision of dwellings for the retired. Secondly, is the issue of the feasibility and appropriateness of extending the municipal control of housing in the 'tied' sector.

"7. The three areas which appear to be most suited to the location of new housing for miners are, to the east of Mansfield, at East Retford, and at Ollerton/Boughton.

"8. The National Coal Board are studying the feasibility of new mining operations in parts of the east and south of the County, but have made no firm decisions as yet. If any such operations are authorised during the plan period, the position of coal mining in Nottinghamshire will need to be reviewed."

Somewhat more information can be dug out of the overall documentation of the Structure Plan, and I did this in an open letter which I circulated on 27 January 1977:

"I have at last had time to track down the various statements on the future of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, which appear in the published County Council Structure Plan documents. Two of these major reports are filed in most local branch libraries. They are:

1. The Consultative Draft Written Statement
2. The Draft Report of Survey

"The first of these documents is a mimeographed booklet, something over an inch thick, bound with a plastic clip. The second is an elegantly produced printed book of large format, bound in green. You can ask the librarian to find these reports for you, and there should be no difficulty in consulting them.

"Each document is divided into chapters, and the paragraphs are all numbered. The practice is to begin the number with the chapter reference and follow it by the paragraph number within the chapter in question. I am therefore citing the

numbers which you will need to refer to, if you are to follow this argument in the original documents. I wish to make six points arising out of the material which has already been published. The documents to which I am referring already make it perfectly clear, beyond any reasonable doubt whatever, that the main statements I have made about the future of the coalfield are true, and that the situation is extremely serious.

"1. 'a decline in mining employment over the County as a whole of approximately 6,300 between 1976 and 1986 and of approximately 7,200 between 1986 and 1996 is expected.' (4.9 Consultative Draft Written Statement of the Nottinghamshire Structure Plan, 1976)

This is the basis for my statement that 13,500 jobs will disappear. Subsequently, I have learned that the Planners have revised this estimated decline for the second decade to 6,400.

"2. 'The decline in employment in the mining industry is expected to continue, especially in the west of the Mining system *in the early part of the plan period* (my emphasis) as a result of the exhaustion of coal reserves, with the result that there is likely to be a loss of approximately 5,500 jobs between 1976 and 1986, and approximately 7,000 between 1986 and 1996.' (Ibid, 4.21)

"3. These estimated losses have subsequently been corrected to read 6,300 and 6,400 respectively.

"4. The Structure Plan divides the "Mining System" into several zones. In the Erewash Zone, we read:

'A decline in mining employment is expected in this Zone from approximately 3,400 in 1976 to 1,150 in 1996.' (4.28)

"5. In the Mansfield-Ashfield Zone, we are told:

'Employment in the coal industry is likely to decline from approximately 9,100 jobs in 1976 to 2,300 in 1996 due to the exhaustion of coal reserves. *Any significant decline is not expected until after 1980 and probably not until the mid 1980's* (my emphasis) beginning in the West of Zone but extending eastwards over the Plan period". (4.29)

"This confirms my suspicion that the closures are likely to bunch near the middle of the time-span, rather than disperse towards its end. 'Exhaustion of reserves' is liable to occur with relative simultaneity in the Westernmost part of the area, unless something happens to revalue the Board's estimates of which resources are viable. There is a fair amount of Derbyshire coal still ungot, as a result of Lord Robens' closure programme earlier. But, as a boy I worked in the threequarter seam in Silverhill, and I would be the last man to wish those conditions on anyone else: given a choice between thin seams on the Notts-Derbyshire Border, and thick ones at Belvoir, one would be bound, in the abstract, to prefer the new coalfield. The fact remains that we are not talking about these decisions in the abstract, but in their given community context, and there might well be room for discussion about what constitutes 'exhaustion of reserves'.

"We all know that forecasts are uncertain and sometimes even misleading. Nonetheless, the inaccuracies within them can often cancel each other out. One thing is perfectly clear: if they are useful to the structure planners they would be useful to the County Councillors who are not allowed to see them.

"6. To return to the published data, we must consider the age-structure of

the existing labour force. *The Draft Report of the Survey*, still published by the structure plan, gives aggregate figures as follows: over 40 years of age in 1974 were 64% of miners in West Bassetlaw, 63% in Central Notts., 67% in Mansfield-Ashfield, and 69% in Erewash. (DR of S 6.60). This means that the Board will need a massive and effective recruiting campaign, coupled (unless this were preternaturally effective) with a policy of concentration of the able-bodied labour force into the most viable units of production. This, rather than depletion of resources, could well become the over-riding drive towards closures in the older areas. If this reasoning is accepted, it will be plain that the process would be accelerated by early retirement, and accelerated yet again if it were anticipated that any significant amount of labour for Belvoir might come from the old Notts. coalfield.

"The secret document about which I have been complaining is the *Topic Report on Coalmining* of November 1975, one of twelve such reports prepared in the course of the work on the structure plan. This document is lodged with the Department of the Environment, the NCB, and the structure planners themselves. Various requests from County Councillors to see it have been denied, on the grounds that the information it contains was furnished in confidence. The other eleven topic reports are all available to the general public, as well as councillors. The Leicestershire County Council, whose chairman is the Duke of Rutland, has not prepared a confidential topic report on coal-mining, and all of its mining data (sadly out of date, Leicester's planners inform me) is freely available in the published topic Report on Employment.

"I think we can now forecast with some accuracy the contents of the secret report. It will contain pit-by-pit estimates of reserves, with possibly upper and lower expectations. It will contain pit-by-pit, or perhaps area-by-area, age-profiles of the labour force. It will locate the time-scales with greater precision than the statement of the estimated decade of possible closure. If it is to be at all useful to planners, it will have to narrow this focus to enable phased responses in the fields not only of employment, but also of relevant welfare provision. I therefore anticipated shrewd guesses about the actual years of forthcoming closures, or at least about the time-scales within which closure becomes imminent likely.

"As for the Vale of Belvoir, about which the coal-field is alive with rumour and speculation, this development naturally arouses a great deal of concern. The County Council reports make only the most guarded and general refernces to this problem, which they all insist remains open for detailed treatment in the future. I have never sought to imply that the scheduled report discusses this matter. But the issue remains very much alive, since the convulsions of the coal-field will be exacerbated to the extent that any call is made upon Nottinghamshire manpower to meet that exciting challenge. My remarks about Belvoir are concerned to highlight the obvious truth that this decision is coming to a head, and that it must be considered not simply as a manpower, but also as a community problem. The same considerations apply to the development of new mining housing further North. Boughton for instance, is scheduled in the published summary of the classified topic reports as an "area most suited to the location of new housing for miners". This area is one of the most serious problem districts pinpointed in the County Deprivation Study.

"I have little doubt that the break up of community life which has been imposed by industrial migration has made a serious contribution to the difficulties

experienced by families living in the Boughton district.

"Various trade union leaders have made public announcements implying either that they are already well informed about these matters or possibly that there is no need for them to be informed. Of course, I do not know what the NCB has told NUM officials. If the NUM knows everything already, however, there can be no imaginable valid reason for denying Councillors access to data prepared by their own employees."

No-one who was in a position to know the contents of the offending Topic Report has ever denied my contentions about its scope and composition, so it seems very likely that this letter scored a bull's eye. However, there remained another important source of official information, derived from the Topic Report, to which I gained access after 27 January. This is the Employment Topic Report, which the County Planning Officer kindly sent me after I had mailed them my own letter on the question.

Not for the first time, this document raises some interesting questions of consistency. We have already been informed, in the published short version of the Coal Mining Topic Report, that "It is anticipated that employment will continue falling from its 1974 level of 40,500 to 32,400 in 1986 and 25,700 in 1996". (paragraph 3, see above p.11. Now we learn that "it will continue to fall . . . from its 1971 level of 32,000 to perhaps 25,600 in 1986 and 18,400 in 1996". (Employment Report, 5.8) Obviously such discrepancies as this imply that we are not considering the same populations, and that the Topic Reports for Derbyshire or other neighbouring areas must be considered alongside those we are currently investigating.

The Employment Report divides up the coalfield into four subsidiary zones. These are: Zone 1, Worksop and District; Zone 3, West of Newark, including Gedling and Edwinstowe; Zone 5, Mansfield-Ashfield; and Zone 7, Erewash. The Report continues:

"The age structure of the mining workforce is such that 65% of those presently employed are over 40 years of age so that only 35%, or 11,200, will be available for work in 1996. Therefore, even though total employment in the industry is likely to fall, recruitment will need to continue and will have to attract a substantial proportion of the growth in male working population, especially in Zones 1 and 3 (40).

"The employment problems within the Mining System revolve around the need to cater for the inevitable exhaustion of reserves at some collieries, principally in the west of the System, whilst at the same time to make good the potential labour deficits at those mines with substantial reserves which tend to be in the east of the System. It should be noted that whilst the greatest reduction in the number of mining jobs is expected to be in Zone 5, the reduction in Zone 7, as a percentage of the total workforce, presents far more serious problems. The main problems are as follows:

- a. the greatest is the inability to state with any degree of certainty the date at which reserves at any particular colliery are likely to be exhausted. The implications of new reserves possibly being exploited from Zones 1 and 3 should also also be borne in mind;
- b. with colliery exhaustion there is a need to provide alternative job opportunities for those who neither wish to transfer to other collieries nor are eligible for

the Redundant Mineworkers Payments Scheme; many of these older miners will register as unemployed with little hope of re-employment even given the availability of retraining facilities;

- c. the magnitude of the labour deficit will be reduced by the transfer of miners from collieries whose reserves are likely to become exhausted over the Plan period to existing or new workings where labour is required.

"It has been estimated that at least 27,000 new jobs will be required in the System over the Plan period, an increase of a quarter over existing employment, of which a large proportion will be required by 1986. This estimate is based on the projected fall in mining employment and an assumed growth in the working population equivalent to natural change."

"(40) Although precise figures may be misleading, the proportion of the population achieving working age (assuming no net migration) who would have to be recruited to mining, based upon the projected deficit 1974-1996 would be 31% in Zone 1, 58% in Zone 3, 8% in Zone 5 and 12% in Zone 7. This assumes no attraction of labour from elsewhere."

The Employment Report also lets some other interesting cats poke at least their whiskers out of the bag. In Zone 7, we are told "By 1996 employment in the industry will probably be limited to administrative personnel." (p.56) Why this Zone will need administrators once the mines have gone is not explained, but no doubt it has something to do with the great demand which may be perceived for admirals in a rapidly-shrinking Navy.

When we examine what is reported on the Ashfield Zone, we find confirmation that mining employment is expected to decline by 9,000 (5.95); we also find more elaborate information about the age of the mining labour force: "41% are currently over 50 and will retire before 1986, while a further 26% will retire between 1986 and 1996. This is only loss by natural wastage. It is likely to be a minimum figure inasmuch as wastage . . . can be considerable." This reinforces the likelihood that the structure planners have, in the scheduled topic report, a detailed grid giving age structures colliery by colliery. It also reinforces the supposition that estimates about the life of available reserves will have much smaller weight than those of the residual working life of an ageing work-force: the first kind of estimates may be variable and contingent, while the second constitute extremely inflexible hard facts, which rigorously imply that pit-closures will become necessary in order to re-deploy a shrinking manpower, unless remarkable success were to be achieved in colliery recruitment. We shall return to this matter.

3. How the County Council "Consulted"

Before a planning authority can finalize its structure plans, it is obliged by law to undertake a thorough programme of public consultation, in which the general public, other local authorities which may be affected, and special interest groups may discuss the implications of the proposals which are made, and offer suggestions about suitable modifications of them. The structure planners will then consider these proposals, and any objections which may be raised, before finalizing their draft and submitting it for approval by the Department of the Environment.

In the abstract, the Nottinghamshire authority took this duty very seriously. Some £60,000 were allocated to finance a whole programme of meetings and lectures, copies of most of the key documents (although not, of course, of the Secret Topic Report) were made available in all branch libraries, and a most effective visual aid kit was prepared in order to highlight some of the main issues in a very imaginative way. There is a good deal of evidence that the responsible officers of the structure plan staff regarded this part of the process of planning as an important one. Certainly they worked at it, and worked hard.

Yet mining remains the basic industry for a crucial part of the area, and the existence of a scheduled statement dealing with it, which had been withheld from councillors, was inevitably bound to impede this process. This was still further affected by the fact that many councillors were to say the least of it, inadequately briefed even on the contents of the published documents, and most councillors were apparently unaware of the very existence of the classified topic report. Although this document was listed in a published bibliography attached to the Draft Report of Survey, it is clear that its significance had not been explained to the majority of councillors before the time when the public discussion of the matter broke out.

Soon after the news became generally known, the Labour Group of members on the County Council met, and, according to the information which I received, resolved to approach the National Coal Board in order to request their permission to release the Topic Report to Council members. But permission was obviously not forthcoming, and once this became understood, leading members of the Labour Group changed their public position on the question. However, some rank-and-file councillors continued to insist that the Report should be released.

Meantime, the Mansfield District Council officially resolved to ask for access to the Report, and the Ashfield Constituency Labour Party unanimously agreed to approach the Secretary of State for Energy, Tony Benn, to secure its release to councillors. In spite of this, it soon began to look as if the leaders of the Labour

Group were anxious not to press too hard in order to allow their council members permission to unlock the filing cabinets of their planning department. Four councillors had been given the duty of approaching the NCB in order to secure the raising of the embargo on the circulation of the Topic Report. On 24 January 1977, the following memorandum was sent by Councillor Cattermole, the secretary of the Labour Group of County Council members, to the Group Leader, Councillor Wilson, and to Councillors Higgins and Cowan:

"At the last Group Meeting it was agreed that Councillors Wilson, Simms, Higgins and myself should see the Coal Board with regard to the so-called 'Secret Document' which was in the hands of the Environment Committee in conjunction with the compilation of the County Council Structure Plan. I obtained convenient dates from the Councillors concerned and approached the Coal Board with a view to arranging a meeting.

"The County is covered by two area boards and it was proposed that a joint meeting should be arranged. After a number of telephone calls it has not been possible to arrange a meeting and it will certainly not be possible to arrange one before the next Group Meeting as the Coal Board are reluctant to agree to such a meeting.

"The events which have led to the press publicity on the 'Secret Document' are as follows:

"In mid 1975 the Coal Board were approached by the County Council for information that would enable the County Council to prepare its Structure Plan. Certain information was given to Council Officials of a confidential basis to enable this Plan to be prepared. No document was, however, prepared by the National Coal Board itself and I have the assurance of the National Coal Board that no information that was given to the Council has not been given to the National Union of Mineworkers Nottinghamshire area. Indeed I have been assured that the Union are in possession of much more information than has been given to the Nottingham County Council. In conversation with National Coal Board Officials, they have said that the information given to the Council was given before they had completed their trial borings in the Vale of Belvoir, which will have a great impact on the Coal Boards future developments.

"The matter became the matter of public speculation when a vacancy became known for a Member of Parliament for the Ashfield constituency, when Ken Coates addressed a series of three letters to parties in the constituency. Copies of two of these letters are attached to this document.

"Copies of these documents were sent by Ken Coates to the Right Hon. Tony Wedgwood Benn, MP, Minister of Fuel and Power, and to the Director of Transportation of the County Council. Upon receipt of these letters, Wedgwood Benn immediately contacted Sir Derek Ezra and sent him copies of the letters. As a result of this the Coal Board are having to review the whole procedure of releasing information to County Councils up and down the country. Until such time as this procedure has been finalised with the National Coal Board the Area Boards are unable to agree on a meeting."

A few comments upon this revealing text are called for. First, the slight complexity involved in arranging a meeting between two area Boards and the four councillors was not a necessary precondition for solving the problem. Many of the threatened collieries were in the South Nottinghamshire Area of the NCB, and it

would have been a quite sufficient beginning to fix a meeting with the Area Director of South Nottinghamshire alone. Further, it was subsequently made clear, at a meeting between both North and South Nottinghamshire Area Directors and the Nottinghamshire NUM Executive, that the Topic Report did indeed contain information which had not previously been given to the union, even though the reliability of this information was put into serious doubt. Whilst this fact would probably give comfort to the NCB's staff, it was not convenient to the County Council, since, if its plans were to be based upon seriously unreliable evidence they were scarcely worthy of official ratification by the Department of the Environment. The subtle switch in the policy of the County Council leadership is detectable in Mr Cattermole's final paragraph, which, far from criticising the Board for being unduly close, implies a criticism of the Secretary for Energy and the present author, for causing the Board "to review the whole procedure of releasing information to County Councils up and down the country".

What Mr Cattermole refrained from explaining was far more important. Who was it that authorised the collection of information from a prominent industrial interest under conditions of secrecy which prevented even elected councillors from access to it? Was this remarkable authorization obtained solely from the senior employed officials? If so, how could it bind councillors, and what was to prevent them simply issuing an instruction that the Topic Report on Coalmining be circulated? If not, which councillors authorized so dubious a procedure, and why did they not consult their colleagues about it? Where was the decision to permit such an intrigue minuted? If it was not minuted, what was its validity? On all such urgent constitutional matters, Mr Cattermole's memorandum preserves an eloquent silence. Also not discussed in the memorandum is the obvious question, why did not Mr Cattermole's committee of four address themselves directly to Mr Benn, in order to seek his help in resolving the difficulty? They did not, and in fact it was not until late April that members of another Council, in West Yorkshire, appealed to the Secretary of State to intervene in order to secure proper consultation between the planning authority and the Board. Had Nottinghamshire reacted promptly, it might be thought, valuable time could have been saved, and improvements in these obviously inadequate mechanisms could have been initiated from the beginning of the year.

Informed local observers did not miss the point of this argument. Writing in the *Mansfield Chronicle Advertiser*, Harry Whitehouse insisted:

"It is all too easy to seek hidden motives for the release of the information that the National Coal Board has supplied confidential to Nottinghamshire County Council planners which casts doubt on the future viability of many North Nottinghamshire pits . . .

"At the moment the confidentiality of the report is being maintained against allcomers, and therefore it is impossible to judge just what are the precise effects of its information.

"However, the limited information it has been possible to obtain would seem to indicate that it sees some 13 pits and 13,500 jobs having been lost to the industry in this area by the end of the 1980s. While the pits are not named, the inference is that they are easily identifiable.

"The industrial implications are obvious, the local government ones perhaps less so.

"First and foremost is the rather disturbing situation that, as far as County Hall is concerned, the contents of the communication from the NCB, and indeed the existence of the communication itself, were known only to certain senior members of the planning staff, not to any councillors.

"Moreover, according to my information, not only were these elected members kept in the dark, they were by-passed. Several copies of the NCB report have gone to Government departments as part of the procedure for keeping them informed of planning developments.

"Coun. Frank Higgins, Chairman of the Environment Committee, has now said he intends to find out what the NCB has told the planners. His committee is the one which decides the overall economic planning policy for the county — it is hard to see how it can do this job if essential information is not readily available to it.

"And Mansfield District Council also finds itself in the same position of planning for the development of its area, only to find out that some of the important facts are being withheld from it. It, too, is now demanding that it be put fully in the picture.

"To be fair to the officers, the report was necessary for them to compile the draft structure plan for the county which is now undergoing public discussion. They received it under the pledge of confidentiality, the NCB apparently being under the fear that publicity might cause unnecessary alarm, and feel themselves still bound by that pledge. The impression I have gained is that they now wish they could be relieved of it.

"One other aspect is also causing some concern, and the £60,000 public participation exercise now being carried out by the County Council on the draft structure plan is seen in some quarters as a farce.

"The public, local authorities and other organizations and bodies are being asked to make their comments on the proposals in the plan.

"What, it is being asked, is the use of bothering to make these comments if they will be ignored because those who have made the proposals have not revealed the true reason for making them? Anything which is said, possibly after a great deal of research and trouble, would be a waste of time because the planners have unrevealed information to use against them." (27th January, 1977)

(Mr Whitehouse was not aware of the revision of the structure plan which reduced the estimated job-shrinkage to 12,700, and he speaks of "North Nottinghamshire" meaning a geographical expression, and *not* "The North Nottinghamshire Area of the NCB". Such ambiguities are necessary in any journalistic coverage, since journalists are trying to simplify their reports to achieve wide understanding. The same geographical term was used in a widely quoted report in the *Guardian*, and resulted in a schoolmasterly correction from the NCB. Many of the threatened pits are, of course, in the South Notts. Area, as has already been pointed out in this paper.)

Of course, the legal position of a council employee who withholds information from an elected councillor could be difficult. Awareness of a complex history of cases on this matter obviously put Nottinghamshire's planning staffs on their toes. On February 1st 1977, Mr Howard Jackson acting for the Director of Planning and Transportation sent me a short letter insisting that the officials of the planning department had received no requests from councillors to see a copy of the scheduled report. The pre-occupation of the planners with legal technicalities revealed

itself in the last clause of this latter, which concluded: "So actual denial of access to the report has not occurred."

When I received this note, I wrote to Councillor Michael Cowan, who had recently been adopted as Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for the Ashfield constituency. As a key committee chairman on the County Council, Mr Cowan was in a remarkably strong position to resolve this issue.

"This is the first opportunity I have had to congratulate you on your victory at the Ashfield selection conference. I should like you to know that I would be entirely willing to speak on your behalf if you wished me so to do.

"As you know, I have been campaigning for the publication of the scheduled Topic Report on Coalmining (November 1975), which was prepared by the Structure Planning team of the County Council in the course of their labours. I enclose a copy of a letter which summarises my reasons for believing that the Topic Report contains material of great concern to your constituents. I am absolutely confident that you will agree with me that this Report should be made available at least to County Councillors. My own feeling is that it is probably necessary to make it available to the general public, since all the other eleven Topic Reports are freely available for public inspection.

"Rather to my surprise, yesterday I received a letter from Mr Howard Jackson of the Structure Planning Unit, in which he said, 'I should like to make it absolutely clear that to date I have not received from any County Councillor a request to see a copy of the Topic Report on Coalmining (November 1975), so actual denial of access to the Report has not occurred'.

"I enclose a copy of this letter. As you will know, there is a strong legal presumption that County Councillors have the right to access to such material: no doubt this is why the Director of Planning and Transportation shows some sensitivity on this question. My own opinion is that it is extremely important that this Topic Report should become available *before* the by-election proper begins. I think that bold intervention of the Labour Party in the discussion of the implications of this Report will, in fact, increase Labour support in the communities of Ashfield.

"I very much hope that you will be able to see your way to requesting access to the Report, with a view to stimulating precisely this discussion."

Mr Cowan did not acknowledge receipt of this latter. I subsequently wrote twice again, enclosing copies of the earlier correspondence, and seeking a reply. On the 22 February, and again on the 9 March, I repeated my request. None of these letters produced any acknowledgement. During the by-election campaign which followed, Mr Cowan's agent telephoned me, to ask me to arrange for a party of workers to go over to Ashfield from my own area, Rushcliffe. I explained that, while I would of course pass on his request to my constituency, I myself would await a reply to my letters before coming. I added that I was eager to come, but that I could see no reason why I had not received any answer. The agent was most surprised: "It's very strange," he said. "Michael is usually so punctilious about dealing with his mail."

It is now May, we have had an adverse election result, and I have still not had my answer.

I think I agree, it is very strange.

4. What they told the Union

As has already been explained, early in 1977 the NUM Area Council requested an early meeting with the two Area NCB directors in order to discuss "future employment prospects". On the 15 March, the NCB issued a press release on this meeting. Two days later this was circulated to the Labour Group by Mr Cattermole.

"The Executive Committee of the Nottinghamshire Area of the NUM and the Directors and supporting staff of the two Nottinghamshire Areas of the NCB met recently to discuss anxieties about future employment prospects in the mining industry.

"The Chairman, NUM President Mr Len Clarke, explained that the meeting had been called as a result of questions about security of employment arising from comment on the Nottinghamshire Draft Structure Plan and references to a report allegedly forecasting a large reduction in local mining jobs.

"Mr Ian Dowson, South Notts. Deputy Director explained that the report referred to – a 'Topic Report' on the mining industry – was prepared by County Council officers as one element of the build up to the Draft Structure Plan. He said the mining manpower estimates provided by the Board reflected the situation as it then appeared two years earlier. Similar estimates provided for an earlier planning study had proved to be about 50 per cent wrong as a result of changed circumstances, such as oil price increases and improved mining methods.

"On this occasion projections up to 20 years into the future had been requested but the published Draft Plan had, in fairness, noted that the figures were only projections and were subject to continuous review.

"In fact, they were now already out of date.

"Mr Merrik Spanton, North Notts. Area Director, pointed out that developments resulting from Government approval of 'Plan for Coal' were only just being formulated when the figures were being prepared.

"Executive member Mr Vic Lloyd said the County Council had to try to anticipate replacement job requirements so it was important that their information was regularly brought up to date.

"This was agreed and the meeting also felt it might be beneficial for Union and Board representatives to jointly meet County Council members prior to the Council meeting to approve the Structure Plan.

"Mr George Cheshire said it was important to allay fears, particularly in the Sutton-in-Ashfield area, that there were going to be wholesale pit closures.

"Dr Alan Griffin, North Notts. Industrial Relations Officer, said the request for 20 year forecasts had meant that the Board had had 'to peer right into the future, outside their own normal planning timescale, and in these circumstances accuracy was impossible'.

"He was supported by Mr Joe Whelan, the Union's Financial Secretary, who asked who would have forecast the large increases in oil prices and who could forecast relative prices in the future? Mr Whelan said he was satisfied that local NCB management were not keeping secrets from the Union and saw no point in getting alarmed about long term predictions which were bound to be unreliable.

"The Union Vice President, Mr Neville Hawkins, agreed, pointing out that fears of the closure of Harworth Colliery a few years ago had proved groundless.

"Mr John Longdon, Senior Mining Engineer, reviewed the Board's current view of the prospects for North Nottinghamshire, saying that apart from the exhaustion of Teversal Colliery – and it was recognised that this was not necessarily accepted by the Union – no closures were expected before 1986. In the following ten years another colliery was likely to exhaust its reserves but there would be larger numbers of men needed elsewhere, for example at Silverhill, Bevercotes and Harworth.

"We do not envisage any significant reduction in the total number of jobs in the North Nottinghamshire coalfield for as far ahead as we can reasonably foresee, Mr Spanton said.

"Mr Dowson said no South Notts. Area mines were expected to close before 1986 but in the following ten years some pit closures were likely due to exhaustion.

"South Notts. Area Director Mr Donald Davies, stressed that no pit in the county would be closed to develop mining in the Vale of Belvoir. No decision had been taken about mining there but if any projects did receive approval it would doubtless be the Board's objective to keep pits nearing exhaustion open as long as possible to maintain coal supplies and to be able to offer alternative jobs when they eventually had to close.

"Mr J. DeLacy, an Executive member, said the two NCB Area reviews showed that the 1986 predictions in the mining Topic Report were already wrong and anything beyond that date was 'guesswork'.

"Summing up, Mr Clarke said the meeting had confirmed that there was unlikely to be any serious contraction in the period up to 1986 but it was accepted that the following decade could see some exhaustion of reserves although this was likely to be offset by expansion at existing long-life collieries and the possible development of new ones.

"The meeting agreed to the issue of this joint press release summarising the discussion."

Various things are missing from this report. First, although the Topic Report was handed to the NUM chairman, it was not circulated to members of the Executive. In May 1977, some of these members have still not seen the full report. What the Board spokesmen did at the meeting was to project various slides onto a screen, illustrating some matters which had been covered in the Report and some which had not. When Jack Grainger tried to raise the vexed question of the social consequences of closures, he was ruled out of order by the union chairman, on the grounds that the meeting was called to consider employment prospects, not social consequences. Other members of the NUM team found apparent errors in the arithmetic of the evidence which was furnished to them. Vic Lloyd pointed out that if the figures were "out of date" this would invalidate parts of the structure plan. One member asked that the final decision be not minuted as unanimous. The joint press release, therefore, is not quite as informative as it might have been, and it does some of the members of the union side less credit than they deserve.

The fact remains that the document is painfully obscure at precisely the points where it needs to explain. Which figures, we must ask, are "out of date"? It has always been understood that figures about reserves are subject to serious fluctuation. But are the figures about the age-structure of the work-force also so subject? Of course not. For the existing labour-force, these figures are entirely accurate. Estimates of recruitment can be wrong, but they are distinctly unlikely to err on the bright side. The NCB's *Report and Accounts* for 1975/76 give the following picture of national recruitment:

"The number of men at collieries fell by 5,100 during 1975/76 to 243,656 at the end of the year. Both wastage and recruitment were lower than in 1974/75, with juvenile recruitment virtually stable and a substantial reduction in voluntary wastage.

	1975/76	1974/75
Recruitment Newly employed		
Under 18s	5,268	5,948
Others	3,842	8,442
Re-entrants	7,874	16,413
<i>Total Recruitment</i>	16,984	30,803
Involuntary wastage		
Death and retirement	4,199	4,435
Medical reasons	2,031	2,596
Dismissals and redundancies	8,589	7,024
Voluntary wastage	7,297	10,495
<i>Total wastage</i>	22,116	24,550
Net change in manpower	-5,132	+6,253

"The low voluntary wastage and the substantial recruitment of ex-mine-workers in the last two years mean that this source of already trained manpower is now much smaller and recruitment in future will increasingly require to be from men and boys new to the industry. It is to be expected that recruitment will become more difficult as the economy recovers from the recession of 1975. Virtually all the men made redundant were over 60, and benefitted from the provisions of the Redundant Mineworkers Payments Scheme. The number redundant as a result of colliery closures was less than in 1974/75: the increase in other redundancies, which were carried out with the agreement of the men concerned, allowed an improvement in the age balance of the mining labour force, which had worsened considerably in the 1960s. The average age of mineworkers fell for the second year in succession, from 43.6 at the end of December 1974 to 43.2 at the end of December 1975, the lowest since 1964."

The failure to keep up with "natural wastage" is more likely to accelerate than decline, with the gradual introduction of early retirement. Writing on this matter in the *Sunday Times*, Roger Eglin pointed out at the time of the miners' ballot on this question that "Implementing the initial stage of the miners' bid to reduce retirement to 55 by 1980 would mean 80,000, a third of the labour force, retiring in the next

three and a half years. With the older men going, wastage would obviously fall but would still be there to some extent. NCB officials pale at the Herculean prospect of recruiting some 40,000 to 50,000 men a year to maintain the labour force. Some regions would be hit harder than others. While only 35% or so of the labour force in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, North Derbyshire and South Midlands would retire between now and 1980 under the NUM's proposals, South Wales — hence the fears about its ability to keep working — would lose 40.4% of its men.

Such regional figures disguise even greater local variations. Three of the above regions have pits where more than half the men would go by the end of the decade."

When Mr Dowson told the NUM Executive that "similar estimates" to the "manpower estimates provided by the Board" "had proved to be about 50% wrong", what exactly was he saying? The structure plan is a direct consequence of local government reorganization, which is a recent event. Nottinghamshire has sought no "similar estimates" in a very long time.

"The report of Survey is the first statutory report on the geographic county for almost 30 years" claims the *Summary of Draft Report of Survey* (para 1.2). A very dissimilar enquiry was undertaken in the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire sub-regional study, at a time when an insane shrinkage of mining capacity was taking place. Is it this enquiry to which Mr Dowson is referring? If so, why did he not say as much? Surely such an admission would have put his audience on their guard?

Whenever the Board makes press statements on these matters, they invariably highlight the problem of geological reserves. But *has* the County Report got the *manpower* potential wildly wrong? This is gravely to be doubted, as anyone who consults the published Employment Topic Report, cited above in Chapter two, will readily see. No plan is mistake-proof. But if the Board now has different figures from those published in the County's Reports, is it not crucially urgent to publish them, and soon? Should not the NUM demand a careful breakdown of all recruitment figures, revealing annually what proportion of the "31% in zone 1, 58% in zone 3, 8% in zone 5 and 12% in zone 7" cited above (page 16) have in fact been attracted to mining upon reaching working age, and what proportion of outside recruitment has taken place?

Mr Dowson would have been far more persuasive if he had given these figures instead of vaguely querying the validity of those already furnished by his own colleagues to the structure planners. Even then, the \$64,000 question would remain: what guarantees are to be given to this intake of new, predominantly young, workers, that they have any real or acceptable security in an industry which can apparently plan major upheavals in its structure without prior consultation with its employees?

Reading between the lines of the NCB's statements, some members of the NUM Executive told me that they thought we had gained a qualified victory, in that first, the Topic Report was no longer flatly denied; second, the Board seemed to have modified its time-scales for certain closures, giving a limited stay of execution for some pits; and third, it would be more difficult to hatch plots like this one again.

I would like to think this true, but I have an important reservation about it. If the Board is varying its timescales, this proves they were nothing to do with geological reserves, which would be invariable if that argument were valid: and every-

thing to do with manpower, as I have suspected all along. The simplest explanation of the "reprieve", then, is that the older collieries were to have been used as "refrigerators" in which to store labour for a development of the Eastern area of the old Notts. coalfield. Now they will refrigerate a little longer, to store labour for Belvoir, the development of which will take longer, since work cannot begin until extensive enquiries and other formalities are complete.

It seems entirely clear that this is a national problem. As Michael Walsh pointed out in *Tribune*:

"Pit manpower will be cut by up to one-third over the next decade if productivity targets mapped out by the National Coal Board are met. As many as 80,000 mineworkers' jobs will go, perhaps even more.

"This prospect — so far kept under wraps by the NCB for obvious reasons — emerges from the latest progress report on the long-term *Plan for Coal* agreed by the board, the unions and the Government. Though not necessarily meaning redundancies, it is certain to worry the mineworkers just as the board is stepping up its calls for increased productivity.

"The progress report, released last week, avoids setting down future manpower targets. But other figures make the picture clear: if the board is right about how much coal it will be getting from new and existing pits by the end of the century, and if its productivity predictions prove even partially correct, then we will need fewer than 200,000 miners by the year 2000.

"At present, the pit workforce stands at around 247,000. If the NCB targets are met the number looks like having to be slashed to between 165,000 and 195,000.

"The key projections are on productivity in the new generation of ultra-modern pits planned or likely, for example Selby, and in those existing pits that will still be operating in 20 years' time. The plan's figures suggest that:

In the new generation of pits, fewer than 80,000 miners will be required.

In those still not worked out by the end of the century a maximum of 109,000 miners will be required, even if there is no productivity improvement whatsoever between now and then — an unlikely event.

"The target originally laid down three years ago, and re-affirmed last week in the latest report, is 150 million tons of deep mined coal annually by the end of the century. Two thirds of it is to be from new mines like Selby, the rest from existing long-life pits. At present, annual production — excluding open cast coal — is running at about 112 million tons. The hope is 120 million tons by 1985, rising by another 30 million tons annually over the next 15 years.

"According to the report, productivity in the new pits will be at least three times as high per man as it is now. On that basis, output per man shift, will be more than seven tons, or between 1,200 and 1,300 tons a year. With that kind of output, the new generation of pits will need between 75,000 and 80,000 workers. And some of the new generation will have even higher productivity. In Selby the prediction is that it will need only 4,000 men to mine 10 million tons of coal a year.

"As for the existing pits, if there were no increase in productivity whatsoever, the total manpower requirement at the end of the century to produce 50 million tons of coal would be just under 110,000.

"In fact, it will be regarded as a disaster if productivity in existing pits does

not rise dramatically, which of course would mean that manpower requirements in 20 years' time would be that much lower. The NCB aim is a 4 per cent increase in productivity a year, and the board has been pouring so much new investment into existing coalfields that some improvement must be expected.

"As a result, the manpower requirements of the existing long-life pits could well turn out to be nearer 90,000 giving a total in Britain's pits of some 170,000 miners within a couple of decades.

"Should the productivity projections come true, redundancies could presumably be avoided by 'natural wastage' and early retirement. Indeed the figures put the fears expressed about the manpower consequences of early retirement into something of a new light.

"But, redundancies or not, the mineworkers aren't likely to be complacent over the implications of another sweeping reduction in their numbers. The suspicion that 'productivity' arrangements lead to premature pit closures is deep in the mind of most pitworkers who recall all too bitterly the closures of the sixties . . ."

The need for a new style of open consultation remains, and remains a burning one. This could not have been more clearly spelt out than it was when Tony Benn spoke to the Nottingham Area NUM during its Annual Two-day Conference in Sutton-in-Ashfield during February 1977. The *Chronicle Advertiser* reported:

"A call to the National Union of Mineworkers to press for an end to secrecy over official proposals that affect the future of the industry and the lives of the mining families, who depend upon it was made by Mr Tony Benn . . .

"He called it bringing to an end the 'obsessive secrecy' of some official bodies and local authorities . . .

"Attentively heard by the 280 delegates present, Mr Benn criticised local authorities, central government and other organizations for what he alleged was the inclination to keep important information from the public it vitally concerned.

"Knowledge is power. If they know something you don't know they have the advantage, but if you know what they know they realise you can argue with them. I see my task as that of a partner with those who make the wealth and those who control it, and I want to see an end to this obsessive secrecy which has kept the people often in ignorance of the changes that were coming to them,' he said. 'The union must be closely involved at local level with any plans for the industry's future.'

"He told his audience of branch committees representing all pits throughout the Notts. coalfield, of the success story of coal over the past three years, and gave several points of action which he felt would bring the miners to a fuller participation in the industry's future.

"He wanted as a priority a strong and united NUM, referring to the union's visionary role, and the warnings it gave in 1968 during a spate of pit closures when it stressed that oil would not always remain cheap, and that the day would come when the oil sheiks would demand a higher price for their products.

"He also urged the union to develop a growing role within the National Coal Board, calling for a greater involvement in management of the industry.

"There is a great deal of scope for extending the influence of the mineworkers in the management of the industry and its decisions,' he said . . ."

5. To Sum Up

In this story, the industrial relations problems of consultation have necessarily been highlighted, and the procedures of the National Coal Board are bound to be faulted.

Faulty, too, have been the consultative procedures of the County Council, because, in spite of a real attempt to discuss general planning questions, councillors themselves have been denied access to a key source of information.

Some leading trade unionists have now given the impression that they are satisfied with this state of affairs. Some councillors, too, seem to agree that it is all quite tolerable. Why, then, should the rest of us complain? The truth is, in a nutshell, that about one-third of the miners of the large condemned area are young enough to be compelled, within a relatively short time, either to uproot themselves, or to commute for considerable distances, in order to be able to carry on in their chosen jobs. Firstly, they have a right to know what to expect. Secondly, they need to know in time to be able to put up any alternative proposals which seem sensible to them. Thirdly, and crucially important, they have a right to insist that any new mining developments will avoid the dreadful and callous mistakes of the Robens era, and that redevelopment will be planned for and with *communities*, rather than concerning itself simply with the adjustment of a pay-roll.

This means that we need to develop democratic pressures to ensure that miners, and miners' wives, and all the senior and junior members of their families, all have a real say in what is to happen, how investments are made, and to what use the industry's resources are put.

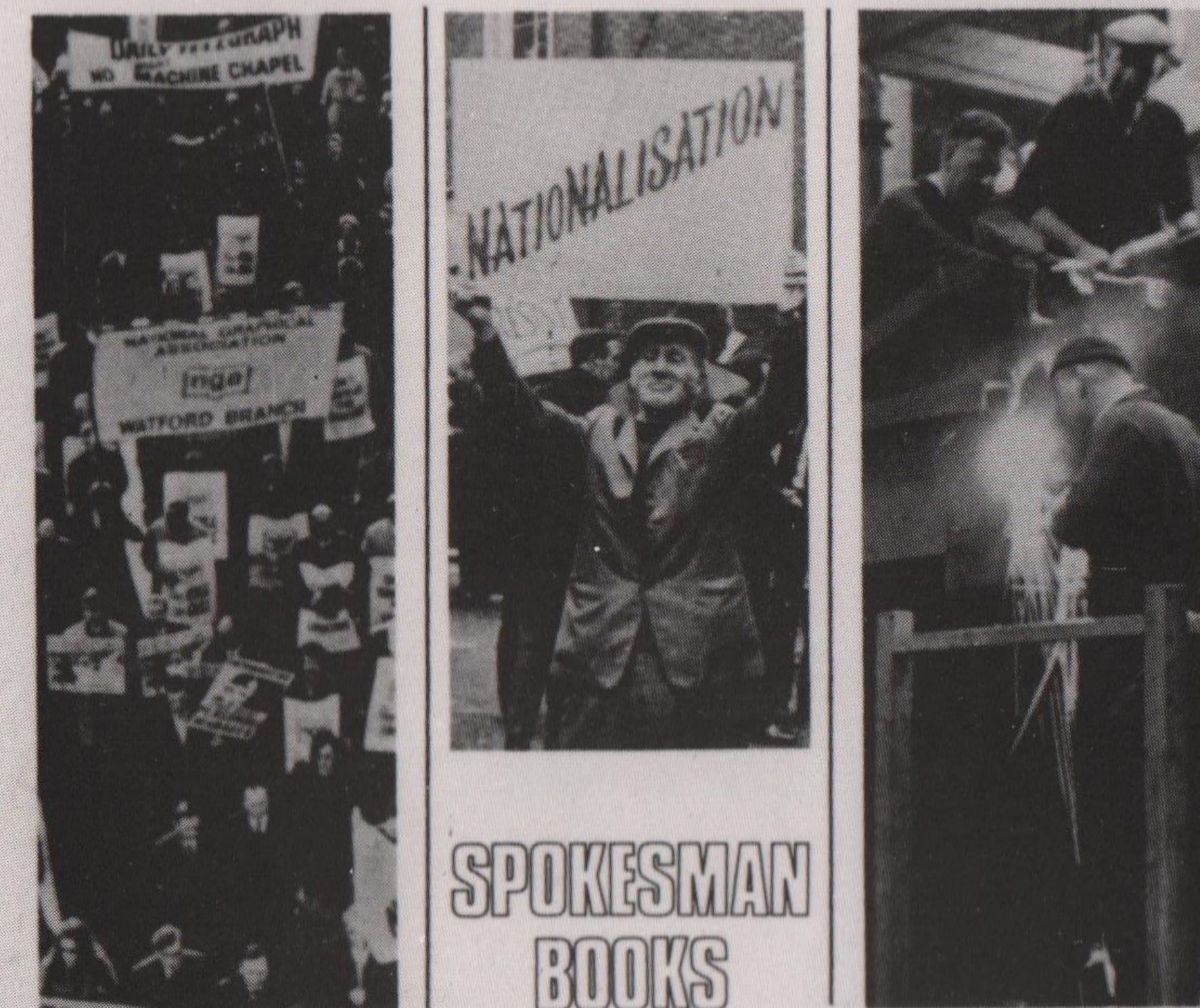
Such pressures will exert themselves through the NUM, through the deputies' and managers' union (NACODS and BACM), and through local government and local political parties. But "such pressures" are not disembodied processes, boiling up willy-nilly whatever we do or don't do. We shall get the consideration we fight for, and not a ha'p'orth more. Enough has been written in this short pamphlet to show that there is a case for concern, and that something should be done. Will it get done?

Yes, if we insist on it. First, we must insist on the full facts, including, at this late stage, the full publication of the secret Topic Report and any revisions which may be proposed to it. Second, we must discuss how to respond, in our union branches and neighbourhood organizations. Then, when the response is agreed, we must organize in order to implement it.

If all these things happen, then the result could be a triumph for democracy, rather than a dismal setback. Democracy, it becomes increasingly clear, is not simply a pile of committees and a set of procedures, although inevitably it is partly these things. It is, however, much more, what ordinary people *do*, when they have decided they want something.

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