

Transcript

General Election 2015 - 79Rewind Winter of Discontent

Dr Richard Heffernan:

The event that's known as the Winter of Discontent in January and part of February 1979 have gone down in political folklore. It was an occasion in which a great number of private and public sector disputes, all raised over the question of pay increases, brought the labor government of Jim Callahan almost to its knees.

The government had proposed a 5% limit on the amount of money that people could be given in terms of a pay increase. This was opposed by a number of unions who worked in the private sector, most notably the unions that organised people who worked in the Ford Motor Car factory. The other unions, those involved in road haulage, tanker drivers who would distribute oil and petrol around the country, went on strike, and eventually public sector workers went on strike, too, in the National Health Service and in local government.

The streets weren't cleaned. Rubbish wasn't collected. Schools were closed. Hospitals were picketed. Operations were canceled. And infamously, in Liverpool, grave diggers went on strike, and the dead remained unburied. The strikes were largely a response to workers having felt that they were bearing the brunt of austerity measures and that their pay had been controlled and limited for far too long.

And this coincided in January 1979 with a pretty dismal winter. There was snow. There was frost. There was ice. The country ground almost to a halt, hence the phrase the Winter of Discontent. The government was weakened by this. It was damaged, and what happened as a result was that the government lost credibility, lost authority. Its poll ratings tanked. And the conservative opposition led by Margaret Thatcher grew in strength as it challenged the question of union power.

It argued that the unions had too much authority and not enough responsibility, leading to the erosion of the government's position. And combined with the fact that it didn't have a parliamentary majority, set in train the events that led to the vote of no confidence that through Jim Callahan's government out of office and at the general election that the Thatcher Conservative Party won.

So the Winter of our Discontent was in part perhaps made glorious summer, if not by a son of York, than by a daughter of Grantham that saw the election of Mrs. Thatcher as a very different prime minister to the one she replaced, Jim Callahan.