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CM (72)
8th Conclusions

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CABINET

*CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at
10 Downing Street, on Friday, 18 February, 1972
at 8.15 p.m.*

Present:

The Right Hon. EDWARD HEATH, M.P., Prime Minister

The Right Hon. REGINALD MAUDLING, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department	The Right Hon. SIR ALEC DOUGLAS- HOME, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
The Right Hon. LORD HAILSHAM OF ST. MARYLEBONE, Lord Chancellor	The Right Hon. ANTHONY BARBER, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer
The Right Hon. WILLIAM WHITELAW, M.P., Lord President of the Council	The Right Hon. LORD CARRINGTON, Secretary of State for Defence
The Right Hon. SIR KEITH JOSEPH, M.P., Secretary of State for Social Services	The Right Hon. GEOFFREY RIPPON, Q.C., M.P., Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
The Right Hon. ROBERT CARR, M.P., Secretary of State for Employment	The Right Hon. MARGARET THATCHER, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Science
The Right Hon. GORDON CAMPBELL, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland	The Right Hon. THE EARL JELlicoe, Lord Privy Seal
The Right Hon. PETER WALKER, M.P., Secretary of State for the Environ- ment	The Right Hon. PETER THOMAS, Q.C., M.P., Secretary of State for Wales
The Right Hon. JAMES PRIOR, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	The Right Hon. JOHN DAVIES, M.P., Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and President of the Board of Trade

Also present:

The Right Hon. SIR PETER RAWLINSON, Q.C., M.P.,
Attorney General

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Secretariat :

SIR BURKE TREND

Mr. N. F. CAIRNCROSS

Mr. B. G. TUCKER

Subject

INDUSTRIAL AFFAIRS

Coalminers' Strike

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Industrial
AffairsCoalminers'
Strike

Previous

Reference:
CM (72) 7th
Conclusions,
Minute 7

The Cabinet considered the current industrial situation in the light of the reactions of the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers to the report, published that day, of the Court of Inquiry into the coalminers' dispute.

**The Prime Minister* said that the report of the Court of Inquiry into the miners' pay dispute under the chairmanship of Lord Wilberforce had been published that morning and copies had been circulated to members of the Cabinet. The Secretary of State for Employment had called both parties to the dispute to his Department at 10 a.m.; and they had remained there, together with Mr. Feather, the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and Mr. Campbell Adamson, the Director General of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), throughout the day.

The Secretary of State for Employment said that, after studying the report, the Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had informed him that they wished to negotiate further with the National Coal Board (NCB) on certain peripheral issues, including the age at which the adult rate should be payable and the pay increase for colliery clerks, which needed to be clarified before the Executive could consider consulting the union's membership about the report's recommendations. As a result the NCB had undertaken to consider the union's requests sympathetically. At this stage the President of the union, Mr. Gormley, had indicated that the prospects of a settlement were good and that he would recommend his Executive to call for an end to picketing that night and to consult their members by ballot about acceptance of the Court's recommendations. At the ensuing meeting of the full Executive, however, it appeared that the militant members had prevailed; and the Executive had voted by 14 to 11 to reject the Court's recommendations and to insist that their original claim should be met in full. Mr. Gormley had then let it be known that this decision might be reversed if the increases recommended by the Wilberforce report for surface workers and underground workers who were not employed at the coal face were further raised by £1 in each case. A full meeting of the National Coal Board had considered this proposal and had unanimously concluded that, although they remained willing to negotiate within the general framework of the Wilberforce recommendations, they could neither offer any improvement in the main cash increases which it envisaged nor reduce the 16 month period for which they were to apply. In the Board's view, the Wilberforce recommendations represented a fair and impartial assessment of the pay increases which were justified in the special case of the miners; and it would be indefensible to make further concessions.

Mr. Feather had advised the NUM Executive that the rest of the trade union movement would not regard their attitude as reasonable. He himself had then urged the Executive at least to agree to submit the Court's recommendations to their membership by ballot, even

* Previously circulated as a Confidential Annex.

if they felt unable to commend them. But they had refused to do so. They had, however, readily accepted his suggestion that they should discuss the issue with the Prime Minister, if he was prepared to receive them.

The Prime Minister said that he would certainly be willing to meet the Executive. But he wished first to ensure that the Cabinet were in agreement about the attitude which he should adopt. His first objective should presumably be to influence a sufficient number of the Executive so to modify their views as to make it possible to promote a ballot on the Court's findings. But the tactics of the meeting would need to take account also of the views of Mr. Feather, Mr. Adamson and the representatives of the NCB, who would accompany the NUM Executive to No. 10.

In discussion it was suggested that it would be necessary to seek to persuade the Executive that, if they maintained their intransigent attitude, they would be in imminent danger of losing both public sympathy and the support which they currently enjoyed from other trade unions. This should become apparent to them as their obduracy attracted increasingly hostile comment; and they should therefore be prevented, so far as possible, from taking a final decision until they had been subjected to the full force of public opinion. If they were allowed to disperse that night, they could not easily be reassembled at short notice and the more militant and vocal members would be at liberty to foment further resistance in the coalfields.

It might prove impracticable, however, to keep the Executive in play in this manner; and the Cabinet should accordingly consider the position which the Prime Minister should be recommended to adopt if he was unable to persuade them to modify their attitude at least to the extent of agreeing to put the recommendations of the Wilberforce report to a ballot of their members. To indicate that the Government might apply to the National Industrial Relations Court for a ballot order under the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act would be liable further to alienate the moderate members and would therefore be unwise at this stage. If the Executive remained adamant, therefore, a choice might have to be made between indicating that the Government were prepared to contemplate the negotiation of concessions going beyond the recommendations of the Wilberforce report or standing firm on those recommendations themselves. The implications of the latter course could ultimately be very severe indeed. For example, even if the full weight of public opinion were mobilised against them, the miners might remain intransigent; and, although Servicemen and volunteers could in that event be used to gain access to such stocks of coal as existed, this respite would be exhausted in a few weeks. Nor would the import of coal substantially alleviate this position. But, if work had not been resumed at the coal face within a short time, the Government might find themselves unable to sustain the life of the community unless they surrendered to the miners; and public opinion would then censure them even more severely than if they were to treat with the miners now. On the other hand, it was inconceivable that, on the very day when the Court of Inquiry had reported, the

Government should acquiesce in concessions going substantially beyond the Court's recommendations. To do so would present the militant leadership of the miners with so clear a victory that no democratically constituted Government could hope to sustain their authority for long without seeking a fresh mandate from a General Election. To fight and to lose would be bad enough; not to fight at all would be even worse. Every effort should therefore be made to anticipate so drastic a dilemma; but, if matters reached this point, the Cabinet as a whole would wish to be consulted again before any final decision had to be made.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the Cabinet agreed that he should receive both parties to the dispute that night. He would first discuss the situation with Mr. Adamson and Mr. Feather, as the representatives of the two sides of industry. Thereafter he would represent to the members of the Executive of the NUM that it was in the national interest that they should at once arrange for pickets to be withdrawn and should conduct a ballot of their members on the basis of a recommendation that the proposals made by the Wilberforce Inquiry should be accepted. It was not possible to foresee how the matter would then develop; but, in case immediate decisions were needed, Ministers should remain in readiness for a further meeting.

The Cabinet—

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office,

21 February, 1972.