

THE WORLD THIS WEEKEND INTERVIEW WITH MR JAMES PRIOR,

Radio 4, SUNDAY, 3 FEBRUARY, 1980, 1.00 PM

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Robert Williams asked Mr Prior whether he accepted the private steel producers' accusations that the Government had let them down?

A: No, in no way would I accept that. It takes a long while to prepare legislation as complicated as this and as important as this and as sensitive as this, and certainly the employers as well as the unions have been saying you must consult us before you bring it in and that's what we've been doing.

Q: You had the mandate when you came to power, that was 9 months ago, you knew then and Mrs Thatcher said then that it was absolutely essential that something was done about it.

A: Yes, it has been done. The Bill is in the passage of going through Parliament now, we're on the Committee stage. The great mistake the Government has made in the last 15 years is to legislate for one specific event rather than legislate for a whole period of time, now we cannot afford to make those mistakes again and this is why I am absolutely firm that what we're seeking to do is a long-term change in industrial relations. That is what is important.

Q: But the fact is you have been seen as a government to be overtaken by events hav'nt you?

A: No, I don't think we have been overtaken by events, the Bill is going through Parliament, and actually one of the worst

/things that could have

things that could have happened would have been for the Bill to have just passed into law before this took place, because it would have been put under immediate test. I always wanted this Bill to come in at a period of relative peace because then it could have become established in peoples' minds before it has to be used in the way that it would have to be used at the moment. If we suddenly tried to push 2 or 3 clauses of this particular Bill through Parliament now in a great rush on picketing and immunities then I think that Bill could come under immediate test, it would be tremendously highlighted in the public and union mind and I think would almost certainly fail as a result.

Q: Do you think that provisions of the Bill as they are at the moment would stop the kind of secondary picketing which started yet again this morning?

A: Yes I do. When you say that it started again this morning much of this picketing that has started again this morning will not be secondary picketing, it will be picketing by employees at their own place of work. Now that's not secondary picketing and if they picket their own place of work then that would be legal but if other people come in to picket that place of work that would not be legal.

Q: So what you're saying is even strangers to a dispute could be drawn in willy nilly even so and the unions would still have immunity under a new act.

A: Now you're getting on to a very much more complicated matter now. Now what we are seeking to say on immunity, and we shall be publishing a consultative document with our proposals in it this coming week or in the next few days at any rate - what we're saying there is

/the law

the law which gives immunity to trade unions against being taken to court for breaching contracts particularly commercial contracts is far too wide at the moment and needs narrowing. Where the individual employees decide to come out in dispute with their own employers of course it would'nt stop it but where they are drawn out for reasons which have nothing to do with that dispute at all, with an individual dispute at all, then of course we should seek to stop it. The point of difficulty is to be precise as to how you draw the legislation which brings about that narrowing. It's a very complicated piece of law. In 1969 Donovan in his great report said that it was a legal maze and that I think has proved to be the case.

Q: How difficult has Lord Denning's ruling, the one that has now been overturned, how difficult has that made the job of the Government in this kind of situation?

A: I don't think the recent Denning judgement, the one which was overturned on Friday last week has made any difference. I am not going to comment on Lord Denning's judgement. I think he is a very great man. I would'nt comment on his particular judgement; all I know is that 2 recent judgements by Lord Denning have now been overturned and by the House of Lords, and therefore the Government has to act and really what we are acting on is the earlier House of Lords judgement - the one in the case of Daily Express versus McShane which came out in the third week in December and which is the one on which we have prepared our consultative document.

Q:

Q:

In other words something is wrong at the moment and the Conservative Government is going to sort it out.

A:

It is very wrong at the moment. It has to be put right, it has to be put right with a great deal of sensitivity or else we shall end up with a situation worse than that we have now. And I cannot stress too strongly that if the Government gets its industrial relations policy wrong this time round then the outlook for our country, and I mean our country is very bleak indeed. We've now had in the past 15 years 3 different Governments defeated on this issue, we cannot afford to let that happen again.