

Mr Prior defends his 'middle way'

By Fred Emery
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In passionate defence of his "middle way" reforms of trade union law, Mr James Prior, Secretary of State for Employment, last night said it was a "tragedy for our country" that politicians were so divided between those who wanted fierce action and those who wanted nothing done.

Appearing at what turned out to be a dramatic session of the Commons Select Committee on Employment, Mr Prior faced his toughest challenge from right-wing Conservatives.

Mr John Gorst, MP for Barnet Hendon North, and champion of the Grunwick company's defiance of picketing, provoked Mr Prior to impassioned declarations of the need to do what was right.

Asking whether Mr Prior was

afraid to go farther than his Employment Bill proposals because it might cause a general strike, Mr Gorst suggested that if this was so the man on the Clapham omnibus might view it as "cowardice" or "giving in to threats of blackmail" or "abdication".

Mr Prior started quietly in repudiation. But his voice rose rapidly and his colour deepened as he retorted that the man on the omnibus expected those who led it to help unite the country not to divide it further. It would do the country no good, he said, if he led them into possible civil disobedience and further strikes.

It might be easier and require less effort to be tougher than he had been in his proposals. But, he declared: "Sometimes it requires courage to stand against the stream. I believe I

am standing against the stream". Many wanted to go farther, but Mr Prior argued that would have been wrong, it would not work and not be in the interests of the country. The man on the omnibus would be the first to complain if they got it wrong.

Mr Prior came to the committee appealing for an "all party approach" to the law, but while Labour MPs were gentler with him, it was they who wanted no interference with present law, and so caused his dismay. He warned MPs that many people abroad were looking to see whether Britain was prepared to take the necessary steps to get its industrial relations right.

If as a result they were seen not to work then industrial democracy, indeed democracy itself, could be put at risk.