

PRIME MINISTER

PA (Coal file)

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I faced an extremely hostile Lobby at 11 a.m. posing the following questions:

1. Public relations disaster - Tory M.P. worried about Government being brought down again by NUM.
2. Why wait for Monday? Why not before executive on Thursday?
3. Any chance of bringing forward tri-partite in view of Wales, Scotland and Kent strikes?
4. Why has this crept up on Government?
5. Is the Government refusing deliberately to dance to NUM tune?
6. Why did NCB allow estimates of closures to get out of hand? Why did it play it this way?
7. Will statement cover financial easement? Anything new?
8. Will Prime Minister attend tri-partite?
9. Is David Howell to see Gormley?
10. Is Prime Minister in touch with Ministers, Gormley, Ezra?

I took the following line.

My understanding was that this was the earliest a meeting could be called given that a large number of parties had to be brought together - NCB, NUM, NACODS, BACM, Ministers for Energy, Employment, Treasury and sometimes in Tri-partite meetings Scotland, Wales.

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This simply did not wash.

I said that they must, of course, ask the NUM whether they were dissatisfied with this timing; my impression was that some may not be. [D/Energy told me this morning some moderates happy with Monday].

I found it interesting, however, that the Lobby attacked the Government when a union had called what they described as a crucial executive before knowing that facts of any closure programme. Those facts would not be fully set out before tomorrow at the earliest.

I thought the Lobby were rather dancing to the NUM's tune.

So far as I knew, there was no intention to bring forward the meeting from Monday in view of the Wales strike action and threats of it in Scotland and Kent from Monday.

The situation had not crept up on Government and I found it ludicrous to suggest it had. My first chief reporter always told me to read my own paper and only those who had not read their own paper could be unaware of the February 10 meeting and its purpose - or indeed of the estimates of the closure programme which had been current in the press.

I repeatedly said that management of the coal industry was the responsibility of the NCB and the Lobby must realise that under this Government management really did rest there. I was not prepared to comment on whether we felt the NCB was handling the issue badly or well.

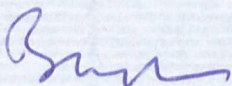
I said I doubted whether the statement would cover any financial matters. The position was that I did not know what the NCB was proposing or what the financial implications of its proposals would be. But I assumed that if there were financial implications they would then have to be discussed with the Government.

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There was no intention of the Prime Minister attending the tri-partite discussion and I knew of no plans for her to see Gormley or Ezra. Nor did I know of any plans for Mr. Howell to see Gormley.

I confirmed that the Prime Minister is keeping in touch with Ministers and in response to a direct question said she would see Mr. Howell before the statement this afternoon.

In between all this I sought to get over the Government's £800 million commitment to investment in coal's future; and the facts about imports and balancing exports (which was taken by one journalist to assume there was no room for manoeuvre there).



B. INGHAM

17 February, 1981