

Curb on unions issue hangs in balance

13.2.1980

By Fred Emery
Political Editor

The announcement of the Government's keenly awaited proposals for curbing trade union immunities in secondary industrial action has been postponed for a second time because of ministerial inability to agree.

The issue will not now be decided at a critical meeting of ministers today, but will go before the full Cabinet tomorrow, where the outcome is still authoritatively seen as hanging in the balance, between the hard-liners and the moderates.

Even when the Cabinet has reached a final decision, more time would be needed to complete a draft of the Green Paper, and to give a first sight of that to the Commons standing committee, which is considering the employment Bill.

That information emerged last night on the eve of today's critical Cabinet committee meeting, which, with the Prime Minister in the chair, will consider the latest draft proposals by Mr James Prior, Secretary of State for Employment.

Mr Prior, last week, failed to secure his colleagues' agreement for his cautious approach and was asked to return with the full range of possible policy options for limiting union immunities, including extremes.

Last night Mr Prior was said to be hopeful of persuading the majority of his colleagues that it would be self-defeating to push the trade union leadership into confrontation over the issue. But clearly he has not yet won the day; witness the intense round of private meetings he held yesterday with ministerial colleagues in an attempt to win them over. Last night the speculative cabinet division still appeared a touch and go matter for Mr Prior.

The issue is one of degree. Present trade union immunities from civil suits for damages from employers will certainly be limited by the Government's proposals. But Mr Prior is resisting those of his colleagues who want to go as far as is

possible, exploiting the heated opportunity of public displeasure with strikers.

Yesterday Mrs Thatcher was depicted as being among those wanting to go to the limits of the possible.

At question time, asked whether the incident concerning a British Steel Corporation nurse who felt obliged to resign after pressure to contribute to a union strike fund did not make it difficult to proceed with moderate union reforms, the Prime Minister agreed. She said forcefully that it demonstrated the need to strengthen the law and for the Government "to get ahead with its trade union reforms".

There is no doubt at all among senior ministers that Mrs Thatcher is leading the cause against Mr Prior, demanding that he stiffen his proposals far more than he wanted to. But last night it was reckoned that there were about five Cabinet ministers still undecided who could tilt the present approximate 8-8 balance.

The following Cabinet members are reckoned to be supporting Mr Prior: Lord Hailsham of St Marylebone, Lord Carrington, Sir Ian Gilmour, Mr Francis Pym, Mr Peter Walker, Mr Nicholas Edwards, Mr George Younger. Against his proposals are believed to be Mrs Thatcher, Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC, Sir Keith Joseph, Mr John Biffen, Mr David Howell, Mr Humphrey Atkins, Mr Patrick Jenkin and Mr Angus Maude.

Tentatively described as undecided, but tilting Mr Prior's way, were Mr Mark Carlisle and Mr Norman St John-Stevas. Leaning away from Mr Prior were Mr Michael Heseltine and Mr William Whitelaw. That would result in a tie, leaving Mr John Nott, who is believed to be propounding a novel middle way, and so might have a casting vote.

All such reckoning is of course highly speculative but it shows how far this government has split on a crucial issue of policy.