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MISC 101(84) 1st Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held
at 10 Downing Street on
FRIDAY 16 MARCH 1984 at 9.15 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Norman Tebbit MP
Secretary of State for
Trade and Industry

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr Allan Stewart MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Scottish Office

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that power station endurance stood at 28 weeks. He had instructed his officials to take all steps possible to enhance endurance both immediately and for the Autumn. There were indications of opposition to the strike from a number of coal fields outside Yorkshire. Ballots would be completed by the end of that day in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Lancashire, and the results known in the course of the weekend. The spread by the National Coal Board (NCB) of information about recently improved redundancy terms had contributed considerably to reducing support for the strike. The Nottinghamshire ballot, the result of which was due on the following day, was likely to be particularly crucial to the course of the strike. Meanwhile, flying pickets had moved overnight into Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire in an attempt to close the 20-30 pits which had been working normally there on the previous day. The Chairman of the NCB had that morning applied to the High Court for a hearing on the following Monday, when he would be seeking the imposition of a fine on the Area Executive of the Yorkshire NUM or sequestration of its assets following the breach of the injunction already obtained by the Board. The Board was also seeking to gather evidence necessary to seek injunctions against other NUM areas responsible for unlawful picketing.

THE HOME SECRETARY reported that even where picketing had been heavy overnight those who wished to work had been able to do so that morning. Following the meeting, he would be visiting the Reporting Centre at Scotland Yard, where he would be receiving fuller information, including further details of the extent to which the police had been making use of powers available to them to stop vehicles carrying men to unlawful pickets.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT reported that the previous day about three-quarters of coal trains from pits to power stations had been stopped by the refusal of railmen to cross NUM picket lines. A train delivering oil had also been stopped. The British Rail Board were inclined to take a firm line and men who had refused to undertake the deliveries were not being paid.

In discussion, the following were the main points made -

- a. The Government's aims would best be served by votes against strike action in the ballots which were still to take place. The Chairman of the NCB could be relied on to handle the dispute in the manner most conducive to this result. Meanwhile, the dispute was essentially internal to the NUM, rather than between the NUM and either the Government or the NCB. It would be right for the Government to confine any public statements to questions of law and order and, if possible, to keep them in a low key.
- b. There had already been reports of some limited picketing of NCB customers. It was necessary to consider ways of ensuring as far as possible that those affected by picketing both in the public and private sectors had access to advice about their legal rights which would enable them to take action to safeguard their interests.
- c. It might be disadvantageous at present for the British Rail Board to take a strong line with railmen unwilling to cross miners' picket lines if that increased the likelihood that the rail unions might actively support a continuing miners' strike.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Government's immediate objective was a favourable outcome from the ballots which were still taking place. Thereafter, the objective should be that those who had voted against strike action should not be prevented by picketing from going to work. This would require the continuation, particularly where ballots had gone against the strike, of the efforts already being made by the Chief Constables to cope with heavy picketing; and the stepping-up of action to prevent pickets from assembling in numbers likely to intimidate those wishing to exercise their right to work. It was likely also to require further action by employers in the courts. The Attorney General would be making that day a written statement on the legal position. He should make this available together with any supplementary material he might consider appropriate following consultation with the Secretary of State for Employment, to public sector employers through sponsoring Ministers. The material should also be made available discreetly by the Secretary of State for Employment to the Confederation of British Industry and other representative bodies in a position to disseminate it to private employers. The Group had noted the position regarding power station endurance,

including plans to make full use of the Scottish interconnector and the likely need for decisions to be taken in due course on increasing oilburn if the strike continued. In the meantime, the handling of the dispute itself should be left to the Chairman of the NCB: public pronouncements by the Government should be confined to questions of law and order and should be in a low key. The present assessment was that no Minister should seek to appear over the weekend on radio or television in connection with the dispute. The following Monday morning was likely to be a crucial point in the strike. The Group should meet again then under the chairmanship of the Lord President of the Council.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Attorney General, in consultation with the Secretary of State for Employment, to arrange for information on the legal position to be made available to employers on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

16 March 1984