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MISC 101(84) 2nd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held in Conference
Room A, Cabinet Office, Whitehall on
MONDAY 19 MARCH 1984 at 11.15 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council
(In the Chair)

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 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

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin
Minister of State, Scottish Office

SECRETARIAT

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 reported that 44 pits were working that morning, compared with 11 the previous Friday. In particular, all pits in Nottinghamshire would be working by later that day. In the circumstances, the Chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB) saw tactical advantage in reducing tension and intended to seek an adjournment that afternoon on the NCB's application to the High Court following the breach of its injunction against the Yorkshire National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) obtained the previous week. He understood that the NUM had not intended to be represented at the hearing: they had said publicly that they would continue to picket and that any fine imposed would not be paid. The NCB had not been able to assemble the evidence necessary to take similar action in the Courts against the Kent and South Wales NUM. There was now pressure within the NUM for a meeting of the National Executive within the next few days to consider calling a national ballot. It seemed possible that there could be a small majority on the Executive in favour of a ballot, which, however, was unlikely to take place any earlier than Thursday of the following week. It was hard to predict the result. There had been some swing of opinion among NUM members towards a strike since ballots had been held in 1982. Voting for and against a strike might well be evenly balanced. It was accordingly essential to continue to handle the dispute carefully: for that reason he considered at present that increasing oilburn, which would be highly visible and might be seen as provocative, should not be put in hand before a ballot. Meanwhile, the NCB was marshalling evidence to put before miners in any pre-ballot campaign.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that police operations had been intensified considerably over the weekend. This action had been presented effectively by the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers, who was in charge, as a police action rather than a Government initiative. That morning the police had been very successful in preventing unlawful pickets from assembling in intimidatory numbers and in ensuring that unlawful picketing did not prevent those who wished to work from doing so in areas which had voted against a strike. The police were to be congratulated on this. 7,245 officers were involved in Nottinghamshire, where operations could be maintained at that

level during the remainder of the week before the question of replacements arose. The costs of the police operations raised difficult questions requiring urgent attention. There were isolated indications of picketing at power stations. Hot-line arrangements were being set up between the Central Electricity Generating Board, the police and the Department of Energy.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that no pits were working that morning in Scotland. Pickets were reported to have been present in comparative small number at 3 power stations and at a paper mill in Fife.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that a meeting about pay was due to be held later that day between the rail unions and the British Rail Board. He had spoken the previous Friday to the Chairman of the Board. He had been sympathetic to the need to avoid action which could have unhelpful consequences for the miners' dispute, but wished to maintain discipline on the railways by continuing to send home drivers who refused to cross picket lines. Some picketing of railway deliveries had been reported at 2 power stations in South Wales that morning, but, on the whole, the situation on the railways was quiet.

In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. It seemed that the result of a ballot, were one to take place, could be tipped either way if a comparatively small number of miners changed their minds. The dispute would therefore continue to require very careful handling on the part both of the NCB and the Government in order to avoid incidents which might influence miners' opinion in favour of a strike. In particular, there must be a danger that continued action in the Courts might rally to the strike some miners who remained so far uncommitted. This likelihood would not be lost on the union leaders, who might seek to maintain unlawful picketing in the run-up to a ballot in the hope of provoking further Court action by the NCB. The Government should rely on the judgement of the Chairman of the NCB to handle the situation in this and other respects in the way most conducive to a decision against a strike.

- b. The substantial costs of police action were a serious problem. As with other police costs, 50 per cent was met by Exchequer grant, but the rest fell to the police authority in the area concerned. In the case of Nottinghamshire, the effect of the additional costs, in conjunction with the holdback regime, might be severe. Arrangements to meet the full cost of the police action from the Exchequer would prejudice the Government's stance, which was not to become involved in the dispute, and would set an undesirable wider precedent. An alternative might be to leave the police authority's ratepayers to meet 50 per cent of the expenditure in the normal way, but to prevent the effect from being compounded by the holdback regime.
- c. There had been preliminary indications that the police might wish at some stage to use military helicopters to airlift personnel. This and other exceptional measures should be reported to the Group before any action was taken.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, summing up the discussion, said that the Government's objectives were that those who had voted against strike action should not be prevented by picketing from going to work; and to achieve a favourable outcome from a national ballot should one take place. On the latter point, the Group had noted the decision of the Chairman of the NCB to seek an adjournment of that afternoon's hearing in the High Court. The Chairman could be relied on to handle the Court proceedings in a way which avoided both unnecessary provocation and any appearance of irresolution; and to act in the most effective possible way to persuade mineworkers of the unwisdom of continuing with strike action. The Group were agreed that the arrangements for meeting the costs of police action gave cause for concern. Home Office and Treasury officials should be instructed to consult officials in the Department of the Environment urgently in the course of the day on ways in which the additional expenditure incurred on policing the dispute might be excluded from the effects of the holdback regime. The Secretary of State for the Environment would be invited to attend a further meeting of the Group on the following day to advise on this question. The Group had noted that there might at some point be a proposal for military helicopters to be used to move police personnel. Before this or any other exceptional measure was taken which might carry a danger of raising the temperature of

the dispute, the Group should be given an opportunity to consider it. In the meantime, the Government's interests would continue to be best served by its policy of non-involvement in the dispute, leaving industrial relations aspects to the NCB and the public order aspects to be dealt with as a police matter. The Home Secretary, the police, the Secretary of State for Energy and the Chairman of the NCB were to be congratulated on their handling of the dispute so far.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Lord President of the Council's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to instruct officials urgently to consult officials of the Department of the Environment with a view to identifying ways of accepting additional expenditure incurred on policing the dispute from the effects of the holdback regime; and took note that the Lord President of the Council would invite the Secretary of State for the Environment to attend their meeting the following day to advise on this point.

Cabinet Office

19 March 1984