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MISC 101(84) 3rd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held in
Conference Room A, Cabinet Office
on TUESDAY 20 MARCH 1984 at 12.00 NOON

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 Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

The Rt Hon Patrick Jenkin MP
Secretary of State for the
Environment

The Rt Hon John Biffen MP
Lord Privy Seal

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr David Mitchell MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Department of Transport

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

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SECRET AND PERSONAL

1. POLICING: FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The Group considered possible ways in which additional expenditure incurred by police authorities in connection with industrial action in the coal industry might be excluded from the effect of the Rate Support Grant holdback régime.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT said that he had examined the alternatives of making a specific grant to reimburse Nottinghamshire and other County Councils concerned for grant penalties incurred in respect of expenditure on policing the dispute; and a disregard for holdback purposes of expenditure incurred by police authorities in excess of certain levels. On balance, he had concluded that a disregard would be the right course. It would however be necessary for it to be drafted carefully in general terms applying to all qualifying authorities for a whole year. It might best be related to expenditure under Section 14 of the Police Act 1964 during the financial year 1983/84. The disregard would not result in additional expenditure, though the total amount of holdback would be reduced. There was a precedent from 1981/82, where certain costs incurred in policing civil disturbances had been disregarded for purposes of targets and holdback. The details would require further consideration: in the meantime, he was being pressed by Nottinghamshire County Council for an early meeting to discuss the financial implications of the dispute.

In discussion, the following were the main points made -

- a. There was no intention that the Home Secretary should make directions under Section 14 of the Police Act 1964 in the circumstances of the current dispute. The disregard should therefore be couched only in terms of additional costs incurred on assistance requested by Chief Officers of Police under the Act.
- b. For the longer term it might be desirable in due course to explore ways of encouraging police authorities to provide mutual aid on a "good neighbour" basis without reimbursement. On the other hand, this might lead to an undesirable reduction in the willingness of Chief Officers of Police to respond voluntarily to calls for aid from other areas.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, summing up the discussion, said that the Group was agreed that the right course was to provide that additional expenditure arising from the policing of the dispute should be disregarded for purposes of the holdback regime, as proposed by the Secretary of State for the Environment. The detailed arrangements, including the amount of expenditure above which the disregard should operate and the way in which this should be defined, should be agreed by the Secretary of State for the Environment with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary. Meanwhile, there would be advantage in announcing as soon as possible that the Government was prepared in principle to make arrangements to mitigate the problem that had arisen. If questioned in the House that afternoon, the Lord Privy Seal should say that the problem was currently under urgent consideration. The Secretary of State for the Environment, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary should seek to agree urgently on the terms of a further statement of principle which the Secretary of State should make later that day in response to representations from Nottinghamshire County Council. In respect of the additional costs incurred on policing the dispute in Scotland, the Secretary of State for Scotland, in consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, should make arrangements as similar as possible under Scottish conditions to the disregard for purposes of holdback proposed for England and Wales.

The Group -

1. Invited the Secretary of State for the Environment to agree with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary -
 - a. detailed arrangements for a disregard, for purposes of holdback, of additional expenditure incurred on policing the miners' dispute, based on the terms of Section 14 of the Police Act 1964 in the manner proposed by the Secretary of State for the Environment and taking account of points made in discussion;
 - b. the terms of a statement of principle to be made later that day by the Secretary of State for the Environment in response to representations from Nottinghamshire County Council in respect of additional costs of policing the dispute.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Scotland, in consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to take action in Scotland corresponding as closely as possible to the disregard for purposes of holdback proposed in England and Wales.

SECRET AND PERSONAL

2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that the number and location of pits working was roughly the same as on the previous day. There were reports that Kent miners were contemplating picketing of major industrial sites in their area, including Bowaters. There were also some reports of coal shortages on the part of some major industrial consumers. A full market report on production and deliveries of coal during the week would be available on the following day. As reported the previous day, the CEGB were in touch with his Department and others concerned against the possibility of picketing of power stations becoming widespread. There were signs that the Yorkshire NUM had been surprised and disappointed by the application of the NCB the previous day for an adjournment in the High Court. Approximately 1000 pickets had gathered at the Yorkshire NUM Headquarters in the expectation that union assets would be sequestered and with the clear intention of escalating the dispute. Renewal of the NCB application in the Courts would require two clear days' notice. There was still no sign that a meeting of the National Executive of the NUM would be called; the end of the following week remained the earliest date on which it was likely to be possible for one to take place. There had been reports that Yorkshire miners were receiving strike pay of £70 per week, plus additional payments where they had taken part in pickets. These were being investigated.

THE HOME SECRETARY reported that about 950 pickets had been at pits that morning compared with some 1400 the previous day. The forces available to the police in Nottinghamshire (not all of them deployed) had been reduced from 7245 the previous day to 6877 that morning. A hearing was to take place that afternoon in the High Court on an application by the Kent NUM for an injunction against the police following the stopping of a number of pickets the previous day on the Kent county boundaries. The application appeared to be based at least in part on reports which were inaccurate as to the facts. Reports had been received that a meeting of area leaders of the NUM held in Sheffield on the previous Sunday had anticipated that the

imposition of a substantial fine on the Yorkshire NUM as a result of court action by the NCB would lead some areas which had previously opposed the strike to reconsider their position. If true, these reports confirmed the wisdom of the NCB's decision the previous day to seek an adjournment in the High Court. The police would continue with their current action to maintain law and order. It should be noted, however, that action on the current scale could not be sustained for any great length of time without substantial problems related to cost and logistics. He anticipated, however, that it would be possible to continue without undue difficulty at least to the end of the current week.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT reported that only two trains had been stopped that day by pickets, both of them in Yorkshire.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND reported that the situation there remained unchanged since the previous day, with no pits working. Exports of electricity to England and Wales were continuing via the interconnector: it might be necessary before long to consider moving to oilburn in order to safeguard coal stocks if these exports were to continue.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, summing up a brief discussion, said that it was satisfactory that the level of working achieved the previous day had been maintained and that further violence had been prevented. The Government would wish to see these achievements maintained in current circumstances pending any major change in the conduct of the dispute. There appeared to be no immediate prospect of a meeting of the National Executive of the NUM to discuss a possible national ballot. With a partial strike affecting the majority of the coalfields, and substantial continuing police activity there was a danger that some incident might occur to raise the temperature and adversely affect the climate of miners' opinion. The tactics of the NUM leadership appeared, for the time being, to be to await such developments in order to increase the chances of support for a national coal strike. There was currently no action which the Government could take to bring matters to a head in a fashion conducive to its aims. It might be necessary shortly for the Group to reconsider endurance and the possible need for oilburn. In the meantime, the Government should maintain the low key approach which it had successfully followed throughout the dispute so far, while police

action continued to prevent violence and ensure that miners in areas which had voted against the strike were able to continue to work. It seemed likely that police action would have to continue throughout the week and probably during the following week as well. He would arrange to report orally to the Prime Minister the following morning, accompanied by the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Energy and Employment and the Attorney General.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Lord President of the Council's summing up of their discussion.
2. Took note that the Lord President of the Council, together with the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Energy and Employment and the Attorney General would report orally to the Prime Minister on the following morning.

Cabinet Office

20 March 1984