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AND PERSONAL

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MISC 101(84) 4th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
MONDAY 26 MARCH 1984 at 9.45 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister

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 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

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 said that roughly the same number of pits - 36 - was working that morning as at the end of the previous week. Miners in Lancashire had been called out on strike from that morning by their local Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The workforce at at least two large pits, however, had made it clear that the strike was for 7 days only and was linked with a call for a national ballot. It was unlikely that the National Executive of the NUM would meet before 12 April, however. The militants in the union believed that the whole success of their campaign against closures was at stake in the current action. Even if a national ballot was called on 12 April, therefore, and even if it resulted in a vote against industrial action, it was possible that the National Executive might continue to support industrial action on a local basis. On endurance, measures had already been taken to ensure the maximum contribution to electricity supplies from nuclear power stations and the Scottish interconnector. His own view was that the time had now also come to move to maximum oilburn. He would be discussing the intentions of the Chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) when he saw him later that day. The National Coal Board (NCB) would be considering later that day whether action should be taken in the Courts to pursue the existing injunction against the Yorkshire area of the NUM and to seek a further injunction against the Kent area of the union.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that he had found police morale high on a visit he had made to Humberside the previous Friday. The position on the ground that morning was somewhat improved since the end of the previous week. Police manpower was being still more effectively used, and there was no threat to the continuation of the police operation. The police had been successful in preventing very large assemblies of pickets in Nottinghamshire, and ensuring there and elsewhere that those who wished to go to their places of work were able to do so. Pickets had, however, been reported at 18 sites other than pits, though the number of pickets involved was comparatively small and there was only one report of picket lines not being crossed. The sites affected included power stations and quays. There had also been reports



that members of the Socialist Workers Party were planning to join NUM pickets. Demonstrations both for and against the strike were expected later in the day outside a meeting of the NUM's Nottinghamshire Executive. A demonstration in favour of the strike was planned for Mansfield on 7 April. Certain precautionary action had been taken by the police before the weekend following the receipt of a threat against Mr Scargill's life.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND reported that picketing had taken place with limited success at two power stations in Scotland and at some open-cast sites.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that, following an inquiry by the regional offices of the Confederation of British Industry, there were no reports of general or immediate problems for industry. It was likely, however, that a number of foundries would run short of coal supplies that week. British Leyland's coal stocks were also low.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. Renewed action by the NCB in the Courts at present would be likely to strengthen the hand of militants in the NUM. In the light of evidence now in the possession of the Board, it would be necessary for them to couple action on the existing injunction against the Yorkshire Executive with an application for a further injunction against the Kent NUM. The Board would be likely to be drawn into following action against these areas with applications for further injunctions. Attempts at sequestration, together with a policy of non-cooperation by the NUM, would raise the temperature of the dispute, posing problems of enforcement and possibly of public order. Restraint exercised now by the NCB would not restrict their scope for Court action later. The point might soon come at which it would be desirable for further action to be taken in the Courts.

b. Nottinghamshire County Council had expressed dissatisfaction with arrangements proposed by the Secretary of State for the Environment to exempt additional costs incurred on the policing of



of the strike from grant holdback, subject to a threshold. The Council would be seeing the Home Secretary later that week to press for extra grant to meet the full cost of policing the dispute.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion said that although the present level of working in the industry was stable, it was not satisfactory for purposes of endurance. It was desirable that the CEGB should decide to move to maximum oilburn in order to conserve its stocks of coal. In the first instance, it would be for the CEGB to bear the costs of any such increase within its existing resources, though it might be necessary to reconsider the financial arrangements if the industrial action were prolonged. The Group had noted that the consequence of such an increase in oilburn was likely to be an increase of approximately 15 per cent in the tariff to bulk consumers of electricity. As for the handling of the dispute itself, the Government's objective should continue to be the maintenance of conditions favourable to influence of moderate opinion within the union. In order to avoid any unnecessary raising of the temperature in the dispute, Ministers should refrain from seeking to reply to attacks on the Government's alleged role by members of the Opposition in speeches over the weekend. On the basis of information available that morning, the Group took the view that renewed NCB action in the Courts was unlikely to be helpful at present. The Board would no doubt have similar considerations in mind when they discussed possible further Court action later that day. Increases in oilburn should be implemented unobtrusively and should be presented so far as possible as prudent action by the management of the CEGB to safeguard supplies for the long-term by husbanding their stocks of coal. The Group had noted the arrangements by means of which the Secretary of State for the Environment proposed to exempt additional expenditure on policing the dispute from grant holdback, subject to a threshold, and noted that he would announce his proposals publicly by means of an early Written Answer. Following the meeting due to take place on Thursday of that week between the Home Secretary and Nottinghamshire County Council, he would wish to have further discussions with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Treasury, Ministers and any other Ministers primarily concerned and the Group might wish to return to the matter.



The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion, and invited the Secretary of State for Energy to be guided accordingly.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for the Environment to announce by means of an early Written Answer the arrangements he proposed to exempt additional expenditure on policing the dispute from the effects of grant holdback, subject to a threshold.
3. Invited the Home Secretary, following his meeting with the Nottinghamshire County Council, to discuss further the treatment of the costs of policing the dispute with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Treasury Ministers and any other Ministers primarily concerned; and to report the outcome to the Group.

Cabinet Office

26 March 1984

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