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MISC 101(84) 7th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
WEDNESDAY 4 APRIL 1984 at 4.00 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher  
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 George Younger MP  
Secretary of State for Scotland

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 John Stanley MP  
Minister of State for the Armed Forces  
Ministry of Defence

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

SECRETARIAT

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

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 the drift back to work was continuing. More miners were working that day than had been the previous day and, notwithstanding the recent instruction from the Nottinghamshire Area Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) that their members should not cross picket lines and their recommendation that their members should set up their own picket lines, all but one pit in the Nottinghamshire coalfield had worked normally during that morning. As a result of approaches by both management and union representatives to the 3 winders who had not reported for work at that pit in the morning all pits were working normally during the afternoon shift. It was thought likely that the Nottinghamshire NUM Delegate Council Meeting on 5 April would reject both their Executive's recommendation to set up picket lines and instruction not to cross them; and that the forthcoming ballot of 18,000 members of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shot firers (NACODS) (spread throughout all coalfields) would reject strike action. If the Nottinghamshire Delegate Council voted as anticipated it seemed likely that railwaymen at the main depots serving the area would be prepared to move coal from pits that were working.

There was continuing disagreement between the NUM and Steelworkers at Ravenscraig over who should decide the level of coal and coke deliveries required by the steelworks. There had been indications that members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) would be prepared to move coke and coal supplies from Port Talbot to the Llanwern steelworks as long as they came from existing stocks and were not new imports. The Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) would be arranging for the delivery of further supplies of coal to power stations with substantial stocks to be delayed, if delivery was likely to prejudice the readiness of members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) to move existing stocks within power stations. Some 110,000 tons of coal had been moved on 3 April but the movement of coal, especially by rail, might be slowed still further if the NUR persisted with their tactic of selecting signalmen who were prepared to obey union instructions, to man those signal boxes best positioned to prevent the movement of coal trains.



It was thought likely that moderate members of the NUM National Executive Committee (NEC) would come under increasing pressure from militants as the meeting scheduled for 12 April drew near. As he had reported previously 14 members of the NEC were mandated to vote for a national ballot, but even so it was by no means certain that the NEC would decide to hold one. The National Coal Board (NCB) were arranging for 'Coal News', containing details of investment plans, the current pay offer and generous redundancy terms, to be delivered to all miners within the next 24 hours and to follow this up with a substantial publicity campaign designed to keep miners attention on the main issues during the run up to the NEC meeting and any subsequent ballot. It was thought likely that considerable numbers of both militant and moderate miners would be present outside the NUM headquarters in Sheffield on 12 April and violence would occur.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that fairly heavy picketing had been resumed at some collieries. There had also been some 600 pickets at the docks at Port Talbot that morning and large numbers of pickets had been outside some power stations, for example 300 at Blyth. Nevertheless police action continued to ensure that all those wishing to enter their place of work had been able to do so. The police were confident that they would be able to maintain a clear passage for road-borne coal deliveries to any power stations requiring them.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that a number of smaller ferrous metal foundries were running very short of both coal and coke and would have to stop working if fresh supplies could not be obtained. The situation in the British Steel Corporation (BSC) major works varied; Port Talbot could continue production for a further 7 weeks and some supplies of coke were getting through; production would need to stop at Llanwern by the end of April, Scunthorpe by 21 April, Ravenscraig by 13 April and Teeside by the end of the current week unless further supplies of coke and coal could be delivered.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT, said that normally 330 coal trains were planned to run each day. On the previous day of 130 trains called only 65 ran and only 50 were expected to run on that day. About 25 per cent of 'merry-go-round' trains had run in the past 24 hours. Most of the shortfall resulted from action by British Rail (BR) staff, the remainder as a result of NUM picketing. Most East Coast ports were closed



to coal traffic but no major problems over coal movement by road had been reported during the past 24 hours, except in Wales. There had been some instances of vandalism and/or sabotage of railway signalling equipment in the vicinity of coal fields which had been reported to the police.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that it remained important that the Government continued to maintain a low profile at least until the NUM NEC had decided whether or not to organise a national ballot. Even though the increasing level of attendance at working pits was encouraging as were the predicted likely outcomes of the forthcoming meeting of the Nottinghamshire Delegate Council and the NACOD ballot it was by no means certain that the NEC at its meeting on 12 April would decide to hold a national ballot and the prospect of a long strike remained. The Group welcomed the NCB's plans to keep the main issues clearly before members of the NUM in the period between now and any national ballot that might be organised. It was important that high level consultation between the BR Board and NCB should continue and any public announcement of the possible closure of small ferrous metal foundries or any other industrial plant which might give encouragement to the militants should if possible not be made before the NEC meeting on 12 April. She would take particular care to highlight the issues at the heart of the dispute - high investment, good pay offer, very generous redundancy terms and Government confidence in the future of the coal industry at every opportunity - especially during a BBC Panorama interview scheduled for 9 April. Any Ministerial statement or action that could be seized on by the militants to further their desire to politicise the issues should be avoided. The Group must be ready to reassess Government tactics on all aspects of the dispute as the situation developed.

The Group -

Took note with approval of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

5 April 1984