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MISC 101(84) 8th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 9 APRIL 1984 at 4.45 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher
Prime Minister

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

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr Michael Ancram MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Scottish Office

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

SECRET AND PERSONAL

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 and was particularly noticeable in the Lancashire coalfield. The National Coal Board (NCB) reported that 46 pits had been working normally that morning and 10 more were producing some coal; 120 remained strikebound. Although picketing had generally been light, two pits in Nottinghamshire had been subject to heavy picketing in the middle of the day; 500-600 pickets had been at Cresswell Colliery and up to 3,000 at Babbington Colliery. There had been scuffles with the police, some of whom were reported to have been injured and about 60 arrests had been made. Despite the massive picket, reportedly containing a number of non-miners, 100 out of the 120 miners scheduled to work during the afternoon shift at Babbington had entered the pit and were working. The President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) could be expected to try and raise the political temperature of the strike before the National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting on 12 April, with a view to obscuring the real issues. The weekend press had given helpful coverage to the continuing police operation to uphold the rule of law and to the options open to the President and militant members of the NUM NEC to avoid holding a national ballot. If no ballot was called it might be expected that striking miners in areas where NEC members had been instructed to seek a ballot would reconsider their willingness to continue striking.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the police operation continued successfully. The sudden appearance of massed pickets at Cresswell and Babbington Collieries had created temporary difficulties but additional police had quickly been deployed and the situation contained. The emergency debate in the House on the following day, granted at the request of an Opposition back bench member, would give him the opportunity to highlight the basis of the police operation in support of the rule of law and put in proper perspective those who were intent on denying, and those whose duty it was to uphold, the rights of miners who wanted to work to enter their workplace for that purpose.

SECRET

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT, said that during the weekend national officials of both railway unions had been exerting considerable pressure on members, particularly guards and signalmen, in the Midlands, to obey union instructions and refrain from handling coal traffic. On the previous Saturday 36 coal trains would normally have run; in the event 10 were called and only 3 ran. That day 200 would normally run but British Rail expected to run only 25-30. The British Rail Board would continue to adopt a low key approach to disciplinary action against staff refusing to handle coal traffic. East coast ports remained effectively closed to coal traffic but a Greek-owned coal ship was due to berth at Port Talbot that evening. No industrial ^{relations} ~~reactions~~ problems had been reported in connection with movement of coal by road; some coking coal had been delivered to the British Steel Corporation foundry at Scunthorpe; details of the overall tonnages moved by road were not yet available.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE, said that there was little change to report. The exact terms of the agreement reported to have been reached by officials of the triple alliance unions over coal deliveries to Ravenscraig remained unclear. If two trains were to run daily it should prove possible to maintain about 85 per cent of normal steel production from the end of April. The Scottish NUM President, Mr McGahey, had however been reported as saying that only sufficient coal would be delivered to prevent the closing down of the ^{furnaces} ~~furnaces~~.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a short discussion, said that it remained important for the Government to maintain the current policy of non-involvement in the dispute, except in support of the police operation to maintain law and order and permit miners who wished to do so to attend their place of work, and to highlight the reasonable pay offer, the generous terms for early retirement and the very high level of investment planned to support a viable and prosperous future for the coal industry. She intended to concentrate on these points during her Panorama interview that evening. The Group would meet again on Wednesday 11 April when there would be an opportunity to assess the outcome of the emergency debate in the House on 10 April.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

10 April 1984