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MISC 101(84) 10th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
FRIDAY 13 APRIL 1984 at 9.30 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

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 Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

The Rt Hon Douglas Hurd MP
Minister of State, Home Office

Lord Trefgarne
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence

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

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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 work was proceeding in the same number of pits as on the previous day but heavy picketing had so far prevented full production starting at 2 of the pits which had been operating normally. There had been a further increase in the total number of miners reporting for work. Some 500,000 tons of coal were expected to have been moved from working pits before the end of the week, by rail and road. The atmosphere both inside and outside the Headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) at the previous day's meeting of the National Executive Committee (NEC) had been very unpleasant; a number of moderate members of the NEC, together with some press representatives, had been assaulted; 55 pickets had been arrested and 21 policemen injured. It was thought that many in the crowd outside NUM HQ were not miners but no positive proof had, as yet, emerged as a result of arrests. It had been reported that, despite the call for a national ballot being ruled out of order by the President of the NUM under Rule 43 (on the grounds that a national strike call had to be made before the question of a ballot could be discussed), 13 moderates had been able to indicate their support for a ballot and that the moderates would be seeking advice on the legality of the President's ruling.

It was probable that pressure by militants on moderate members of the NEC would continue up to and during the Special National Delegate Conference called for 19 April; mass picketing was likely to continue at selected collieries, for selected shifts. He understood the Chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB), who was due to hold a press conference later that morning, intended to keep the temperature of the dispute low, whilst encouraging those who wanted to work to return to their pits. An additional incentive for miners to report for work on 16 April would be the prospect of 5 days Easter holiday pay being made available to those who worked during the first four days of that week.

The constitutional position regarding the announced intention of asking the Special National Delegate Conference to change the NUM rules so that only a simple (rather than 55 per cent) majority would in future be needed for a national strike to be called, was unclear. A similar resolution was rejected at the 1982 Annual Conference of the NUM and it was understood that the NUM rules did not permit the matter to be considered again for two years; an attempt to reconsider the subject at the 1983 Annual Conference had been ruled out or order. The moderates would probably be seeking legal advice on that matter also.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT, said that on the previous day British Rail (BR) ran 45 out of 46 planned coal trains and they planned to run 46 that day; under normal circumstances 313 coal trains would be scheduled on a Thursday and Friday. The previous day 3 guards and 1 signaller had been sent home for refusing to handle coal trains. BR intended from now on to run only those coal trains they expected to get through.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, HOME OFFICE, said that some 1500 police had been deployed the previous day in the vicinity of the NUM HQ in Sheffield. The assaults on some moderate members of the NEC, had occurred after most of the pickets had dispersed. The police would be better prepared against such tactics in the future. Elsewhere the only mass picket of the day had been at a colliery in the Lancashire coalfield. It would be important for Chief Constables to have the earliest possible warning about pits where miners seeking to return to work might report for duty, so that appropriate policing arrangements could be made.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY, said that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) expected to be able to supply the United Kingdom market until the end of May, if necessary at the expense of exports, despite a cutback of 10 per cent in production - mainly at their Scunthorpe works. BSC management were becoming concerned at the way arrangements made between their own unions and the NUM and the railway unions, to ensure continuing supplies of coal and coke, included conditions which management would find unacceptable and which might be a cause of future difficulty in the steel industry.

THE PRIME MINISTER summing up a short discussion said that the Government should continue for the time being to keep a low profile and avoid any statement or action that would possibly be used by Mr Scargill or other NUM militants to further their cause. Every effort must continue to maintain law and order throughout the coalfields in the face of increasing provocation from pickets and some leaders of the NUM. The Group would meet again on Monday 16 April.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office
13 April 1984