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MISC 101(84) 14th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 8 MAY 1984 at 11.45 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
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 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

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

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin
Minister of State, Scottish Office

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 received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that the same number of pits (121) was on strike as the previous week. The workforce at one colliery in Lancashire, comprising three pits, had suspended work following heavy picketing the previous week and would consider resuming normal working following the meeting of the National Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) on 10 May. 43 pits were working normally: attendance was above average for the first day after a Bank Holiday.

Figures for production the previous week had been good (610,000 tonnes) and good figures were expected that week also. Good levels of coal movements had also been achieved: 75 trains had run the previous Friday, and 2 coal trains had run to Ravenscraig the previous Sunday. In all, 360,000 tonnes had been moved to the power stations during the previous week.

Current production and delivery levels, if maintained, would provide for endurance well into 1985. Mr Scargill had claimed that stocks remaining were sufficient only for 8 weeks. The lack of any basis for this claim was illustrated by the fact that Mr Scargill had made a precisely similar pronouncement on 7 February. It was important to establish the true position on endurance clearly in the minds of strikers and the public. Research carried out in depth by the National Coal Board (NCB) into the views of miners, however, had suggested that there was a surprising degree of ignorance about the redundancy terms which were on offer and about which pits were likely to be unaffected by closures. The NCB were planning a major campaign that week to put across more clearly to their employees the facts about redundancy terms and closures. It was their hope by doing so to bring out the extent to which claims being made by Mr Scargill were misleading and to build on indications which were beginning to become apparent that some falling off was taking place in support for his leadership.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that, in spite of heightened aggression in recent days on the part of pickets towards the police, those who wished to go into their places of work had continued to be able to do so. This was true of the 3 pits in Lancashire where normal work had been suspended.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that there were no major problems with supplies of industrial coal except at Ravenscraig. There, despite the difficulties, planned production was being broadly maintained. The latest threat was to the plant's supplies of ore from Hunterston. At present, stocks at the plant were sufficient for 6 weeks. There were reports, however, that 2 coal ships currently off Hunterston might be prevented by dockers from being unloaded. There was some prospect that, at a meeting of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) that Thursday, the steel men and miners might reach an agreement on coal supplies to the plant which would not be acceptable to the management of the British Steel Corporation (BSC). He would be seeing the Chairman that afternoon. Closure of Ravenscraig at this juncture for any reason would cause grave damage to the BSC.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that no acute problems were reported in Scotland except at Ravenscraig. Cessation of coal supplies to the plant could lead quickly to closure and the position remained finely balanced. The strike continued to command strong support in Scotland, partly because of the militant tradition of Scottish miners and partly because of the strong personal influence of Mr McGahey.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that, as had been reported to the Group, coal movements continued at a high level. Industrial action was planned by the rail unions in pursuit of their pay claim, but this was not due to start until June, when initially it would be limited in extent. Negotiating procedures were not yet exhausted: the pace of negotiations was probably linked to the commitment of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) to refuse any link between pay and productivity questions. This commitment could not constitutionally be altered before the union's conference in July.

In discussion, the following were the main points made -

- a. It was not clear whether the Scottish Chief Constables were prepared to go as far as their English counterparts to prevent pickets from going to the scene of a possible disturbance. It was possible also that Scottish Chief Constables might feel an undue reluctance to call for the help of forces South of the border through mutual aid arrangements.
- b. It was necessary to make a further announcement soon on arrangements for meeting the costs of policing the dispute. Proposals would be circulated that day with a view to a possible announcement by the Home Secretary on

It might also be necessary soon to examine the possibility of recovering the costs to the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) of oilburn through increased prices to consumers.

No reliable information was available about the course that events were likely to take at the National Executive of the NUM on 10 May. It seemed clear, however, that support for the strike would be reaffirmed in some way or other: it was known that some moderate members of the Executive would not be attending the 10 May meeting.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was encouraging that the production and distribution of coal had been maintained at so high a level. On the other hand, there was no sign yet of a serious weakening of the strike. In the circumstances, although the NCB's further campaign that week to bring home to miners the redundancy terms on offer and the future which existed for most pits would require careful handling, it seemed the best tactic available to the Board. The Group should continue to watch developments closely, including any evidence of a falling off in support for Mr Scargill and the strike leadership and any developments in pay negotiations which made industrial action on the railways more likely. It was particularly vital from the point of view of endurance to avoid a combined coal and rail strike. Cabinet would return on the morning of 10 May to the question of the costs of policing the dispute: the Home Secretary should seek in the meantime to agree the basis of a further announcement with the Chief Secretary, Treasury and the Secretary of State for the Environment. The timing and handling of any further announcement would need further consideration in the light of events at the meeting of the National Executive of the NUM on 10 May. The Secretary of State for Scotland should explore and report on the questions raised in the discussion about the policing of the dispute in Scotland. He should establish in particular whether the Scottish Chief Constables were willing as a matter of policy to take action similar to that taken in England to prevent pickets from going to the scene of possible disturbances.

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The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Home Secretary to consult the Chief Secretary, Treasury and Secretary of State for the Environment on the basis for a further announcement on meeting the costs of policing the dispute; and to report to Cabinet on 10 May.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Scotland to explore and report on the policing of the dispute in Scotland as indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

Cabinet Office

8 May 1984

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