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MISC 101(84) 15th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 14 MAY 1984 at 4.30 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

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

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

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

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

Mr Norman Lamont MP
Minister of State, Department of
Trade and Industry

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
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 on the previous Friday 49,000 miners had gone to work, the best attendance since the beginning of the strike. Productivity for the previous week had been high for a week of four days. The call made on stocks had been modest: less than 1 million tonnes had been drawn from stock in the past three weeks. There had been no sign of any positive response from Poland to the request by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for coal imports to the United Kingdom to be stopped. Attendance in Nottinghamshire that morning was higher than normal since the beginning of the strike.

A local NUM meeting requisitioned on 11 May at Manton colliery in South Yorkshire to call for a return to work had broken up without a vote after Mr Taylor, the leader of those supporting a resumption of work, had been shouted down. Full accounts had not yet been received of the large rally in the support of the strike that day at Mansfield. First reports, however, were that Mr Scargill had said that he was prepared for the strike to continue to November or December if necessary. This contrasted with his recent claim that stocks of coal were sufficient only for eight weeks.

Rail deliveries continued apparently unaffected by the meeting Mr Scargill had had with the transport unions seeking increased support for the strike. It was most important that industrial action, on the railways, which was now threatened in a limited form, should not result in the loss of coal deliveries, which would be an obvious and vulnerable target if the rail dispute were to be stepped up.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been no significant change in the position as it affected those miners wishing to work. In response to reports of intimidation, which had so far been hard to substantiate and prosecute because of the difficulties of obtaining evidence and the pressures on those affected, the police were attempting to maintain an effective presence, not solely at the collieries, but also in neighbouring villages.

He was arranging for information on arrests and charges to be gathered on a more regular and systematic basis. Since the beginning of the dispute, there had been 1975 arrests. The great majority of those arrested had been miners; some unemployed men and students had also been arrested, but their numbers were insignificant except in the case of students from Essex University. Most, but not all, of those arrested had been charged. Charges ranged from obstruction to serious criminal offences including theft, assault and possession of offensive weapons. The few cases which had been reported in which miners had been remanded in custody had related to breaches of existing bail conditions and those concerned had since been released. Some cases, mainly involving guilty pleas, had been heard, but the great majority of cases arising from the dispute remained outstanding. Though it was not uncommon for magistrates, who were free to follow their independent judgement in the matter, to adjourn cases arising from alleged offences committed during industrial disputes, there were no grounds for fearing that serious offences were remaining unprosecuted or that any general or indefinite delay in proceeding with outstanding cases would be countenanced by magistrates.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that, despite an isolated incident in which four signal boxes in Nottinghamshire were vandalised, one of them being set alight, British Rail (BR) continued to run sufficient trains to move all the coal produced. The rail unions had met Mr Scargill and were under pressure to provide more active support for the miners' strike. In his judgement, provision of this support was the true motive of the union leadership in calling for limited industrial action, ostensibly over pay, from 30 May although negotiating procedures had not yet been fully exhausted. He supported the Chairman of BR, Mr Reid, in his intention to give wide publicity to the management's offer of a number of dates to continue with negotiations. It remained to be seen how the union members would respond to the call for industrial action. Serious damage could be caused by comparatively few railways if action were eventually taken against coal supplies. The management were understandably determined, however, not to give way in the negotiations on productivity items which were outstanding from the previous year. He took the view that, rather than compromise in this respect, it would be preferable for Mr Reid to increase the existing pay offer from 4.3 per cent to the ceiling already agreed of 4.6 per cent, and possibly a little further, if it was clear that to do so would clinch a settlement.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the steel works at Scunthorpe and Llanwern were maintaining production in spite of some shortages of special coals. Deliveries by rail had resumed at Ravenscraig. It had been reported that at Hunterston a coal ship had succeeded in docking without the assistance of tugmen. There was no general problem for industries other than steel, though, as previously reported, some suppliers to the National Coal Board (NCB) were suffering badly from the loss of their normal business.

In discussion, there was agreement that the determination of BR to stand firm on productivity matters was understandable. The time might come, however, when some flexibility on the part of the management in respect of those requirements might be preferable to the risk of effectively co-ordinated industrial action by both miners and railwaymen.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was most important to avoid combined industrial action in the rail and coal industries, both because of the need to maintain as far as possible the isolation of the miners from the effective support of the rest of the union movement and because of the potential effects on deliveries of coal. This was not an immediate threat, however, and the response of the BR workforce to the union's call for limited industrial action from 30 May remained to be seen. The Secretary of State for Transport, bearing in mind the points made in the discussion, should continue to keep closely in touch with developments. Meanwhile, there were no signs of a break in the coal strike itself. If this continued to be the case for a further 2-3 weeks, it would be appropriate for the Government to review carefully all the tactical options for dealing with the dispute. This review should include any means of increasing the effectiveness of the enforcement of the criminal law to counter violence and intimidation; and the possible role of the civil law in restricting the effectiveness of the strike. The Attorney General, consulting the Home Secretary, and involving the Secretaries of State for Energy, Scotland and Employment as necessary, should consider and report to the Group on these matters.

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The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Attorney General, in consultation with the Home Secretary and the Secretaries of State for Energy, Scotland and Employment, to consider and report on the matters indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up of the discussion.

Cabinet Office

15 May 1984

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