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MISC 101(84) 18th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 5 JUNE 1984 at 11.45 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

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 attendances for the current week were good. 44 pits were working normally that day. In addition, 7 were producing some coal, 3 of them in near-normal amounts. A further 6 pits had some men at work. 4 men had gone into pits in Scotland that morning. Levels of coal movements remained high in spite of further ineffective efforts by Mr Scargill to enlist the support of the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR).

Talks between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and National Coal Board (NCB) were due to continue that week. The opening session the previous week had made no real progress. It had broken up following a request by the NUM for time to consider their response to a request by the NCB for proposals particularly on the future of uneconomic pits. Public comment by Mr Heathfield following the discussions had been comparatively restrained, in contrast to that by Mr Scargill, who had reiterated the NUM's previous hard line on closures.

He had met the Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Chairman of the British Steel Corporation (BSC) earlier that morning to agree arrangements for the cessation of coke movements from Orgreave calculated to make it clear that cessation was due to run-down of stocks and that it represented victory for the tactics of the police and defeat for those of the pickets. Coke would continue to be produced at Orgreave at the reduced rate of 2000 tonnes per week and there were plans for the resumption of movements once stocks had built up once more to a worthwhile level.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that production of steel by the BSC was running at about 90 per cent of normal. The Chairman hoped to increase this level of production. Most of the shortfall was occurring at Scunthorpe and was due to shortage of coke.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the general position regarding movements of coal by rail continued to be encouraging. A local problem was in prospect, however, over the Fiddlers' Ferry power station on Merseyside, which

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was coming back into operation following a local dispute. Rail movements to the power station were vulnerable to action by a particularly militant group of local signalmen who had said that they would not allow coal trains to run. It was likely that any action by these men against coal trains would also have the effect of closing down the main, West Coast line.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that misleading reports had appeared in the press following a speech which he had made at the weekend to the Conference of Conservative Trade Unionists, referring to the provision in the Trade Union Bill to make immunity for a strike dependent on the holding of a proper secret ballot. At a press conference subsequently he had said that he was considering whether the Bill should be amended so that there would in addition be a requirement for a majority vote in favour of strike action. As at present drafted, the Bill required only that a ballot should be held: this left open the possibility that a strike might be called and enjoy immunity even though the majority had voted against it in a ballot. He would prepare a paper setting out the issues for collective discussion.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that the Derbyshire NUM had voluntarily given undertakings to the High Court on the previous day that members who crossed picket lines would not be deprived of union membership or benefit until a full hearing had taken place, probably towards the end of the month, of an action brought by three Derbyshire miners against the union.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that a disagreement had emerged between management and shop stewards at Ravenscraig. Management argued that current levels of coal deliveries were not sufficient to give reasonable guarantees for the safe operation of the two blast furnaces which were working. Shop stewards at the plant disagreed and were declining to press the NUM to agree to higher levels of coal deliveries. It was possible that there might be a need to revert to arrangements for supplying the plant by road.

In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. It had not been publicly clear after the latest talks between the NCB and NUM that the onus for producing further, constructive proposals rested with the Union. The Union Side had sought publicly to present

the handling of the talks by the Management Side as implying a rift between the Government, the Chairman of the NCB and senior NCB staff on the issues in the dispute. There was little hope that the talks could produce a settlement acceptable to both sides. If the talks were to break down at the next meeting, it should be made clear that the cause was the refusal of the NUM to adopt a realistic approach to the issue of closure of uneconomic pits, and not intransigence on the part of the NCB.

- b. The main burden in the handling of the dispute continued to fall on the police. It could be argued that this burden would be eased if management in the industries affected by unlawful picketing had recourse to the civil law. On the other hand, it was not certain that recourse to the civil law would in practice have this effect. An unsuccessful court action could be a serious setback to efforts to withstand the strike. If court orders following successful civil action were not complied with, enforcement could be difficult in itself and might actually increase the problems of the police in maintaining public order. The view of Chief Police Officers, who had been consulted, was that civil action in the courts was not in present circumstances likely to make the task of policing the dispute any easier.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it appeared likely that the talks between the NUM and NCB would break down that week because of the intransigence of the NUM over the closure of uneconomic pits. It would be important that responsibility for the breakdown should clearly lie with the NUM and that the NCB should be able to demonstrate their own good faith. The Secretary of State for Transport should discuss with the Secretary of State for Energy how best to handle the problem which had arisen over supplies of coal by rail to Fiddlers' Ferry power station. The Secretary of State for Scotland should examine and report on whether transfers of electricity from Scotland to England and Wales through the interconnector were being maximised. More generally, there was no reason at present for a change in the Government's approach to the dispute. On the civil law, the Group took the view that the balance of advantage was still against action in the courts by management in the industries concerned, but if circumstances changed significantly they should

reconsider this and related issues in the light of the report which had been prepared by the Attorney General on tactical options in the dispute, including the relevance of the civil and criminal law. The Group agreed that recent events required earlier collective decisions on the form of the provisions in the Trade Union Bill on strike ballots and trade union immunity to be reconsidered by the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Economic Affairs. Ministers should, so far as possible, keep public discussion of the point in a low key in the meantime.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Transport to discuss with the Secretary of State for Energy the approach to be adopted to supplies of coal by rail to Fiddlers' Ferry power station.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Scotland to examine and report on whether transfers of electricity from Scotland to England and Wales were being maximised.
4. Invited the Secretary of State for Employment to bring forward to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Economic Affairs further proposals on provisions in the Trade Union Bill on strike ballots and trade union immunity.

Cabinet Office

6 June 1984