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MISC 101(84) 19th Meeting

COPY NO

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
TUESDAY 12 JUNE 1984 at 5.15 pm

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 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

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

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

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson  
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 41 pits were working normally that day. 2 pits which had previously worked normally were on holiday. A further 7 pits were turning some coal, 3 at levels near normal. The number of men going into work was larger that day than on the previous day. At one Scottish pit where 4 men had returned to work on 5 June, 27 had gone in that morning.

740,000 tonnes of coal had been moved the previous week, including 450,000 tonnes to power stations. Only 300,000 tonnes had been drawn down from power station stocks. In spite of difficulties the previous day at the British Rail (BR) depot at Shirebrook, more coal had been moved than on the previous Monday.

A meeting had taken place as expected on 8 June between representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and National Coal Board (NCB). Mr MacGregor had attended. Both he and Mr Cowan had been surprised at the extent to which the NUM side, including Mr Scargill, had appeared worried and under pressure. After Mr Scargill had shown signs of willingness to discuss a definition of exhaustion which might extend in practice to the uneconomic pits which the NCB wished to close, Mr MacGregor had thought it right to offer the NUM a further meeting at which they could put forward their proposals for such a definition. This further meeting was to take place the following day. The view of the NCB negotiators was that it was likely that the talks would break down at that meeting. Reports in the media which gave the impression that the initiative for producing new proposals lay with the NCB, rather than the NUM, were misleading, as were suggestions arising from an interview with Mr MacGregor in "The Times" that day that the Board was preparing to put to the NUM "a new plan for coal". Both in discussions with the NUM and in his interview with "The Times", Mr MacGregor had maintained the line which the Board had been pressing throughout the dispute both on closures and on the reduction of surplus capacity.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that 48 railmen had been sent home the previous day from BR's Shirebrook depot after refusing to handle coal trains. Following an interruption of traffic during the day, coal trains had begun to run from the depot once more in the evening and a good proportion of normal daily deliveries had finally been made. The position at the depot that day was close to normal.

Coal traffic to Llanwern had been interrupted that day after 4 coal trains had run to the plant in the early morning. Large-scale deliveries had recommenced by the late afternoon, however.

THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY reported that there had been no significant changes in supplies to steel works. Heavy picketing was reported that day, however, at Flixborough and the other Trent ports through which the British Steel Corporation's (BSC's) plant at Scunthorpe was being supplied.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that coal movements by rail to the BSC plant at Ravenscraig were continuing. Deliveries were still below the level thought by management to be necessary to maintain both the blast furnaces which were in operation at the plant, but local officials of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, after some initial reluctance to join in pressing the rail unions for higher supplies to be allowed into the plant, had now agreed to do so.

Heavy picketing had been reported that day both at Perth Harbour and at one coal depot in Scotland, with some arrests at each.

The Secretary of State for Scotland had been invited at MISC 101(84) 18th Meeting on 5 June to examine and report on whether transfers of electricity from Scotland to England and Wales were being maximised. The interconnector was operating at or even slightly above its rated maximum during weekdays. The amounts of electricity being transferred at night and at weekends were the maximum that the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) could take.

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In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. Following the meeting on 8 June, the impression had been given in the media that the obligation for producing new proposals in the talks between the NUM and NCB lay with the Board rather than the union. This impression was both wrong and unfortunate. It was apparently due largely to misleading reporting by the media. The talks due to take place between the NCB and NUM on the following day would need even more careful public presentation by the Board than earlier rounds, particularly if, as seemed likely, the outcome was a breakdown owing to a failure on the part of the NUM to bring forward constructive proposals.
- b. The possibility could nevertheless not be ruled out that the NUM might offer a definition of exhaustion which would in practice allow the NCB to fulfil its existing plans for reductions of excess capacity and closure of uneconomic pits. Mr Scargill would no doubt seek to present even this outcome as a victory for the strike. It would be most important that the hollowness of such a claim should be apparent both to public opinion and in particular to the miners. This ought not to be difficult to achieve, particularly if, as was to be hoped, any end to the strike on this basis was preceded by a return to work by increasing numbers of strikers.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Group awaited the outcome of the further talks due to take place on the following day between the NUM and the NCB. It was most important both that the NCB should continue to stand firm on the essentials of their case and that the Board's handling of the talks should not allow the NUM the opportunity to misrepresent the outcome to the presentational disadvantage of the Board. The Group had noted the report by the Attorney General on 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 (MISC 101(84) 2). Whether it would be appropriate to discuss the report in detail at the Group's next meeting or subsequently would depend on the events of the next few days. For the present, the Group had noted it as a full and helpful review of the issues which the Attorney General had been asked to examine.

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The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

13 June 1984

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