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MISC 101(84) 27th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 16 JULY 1984 at 11.00 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 Nicholas Edwards MP
Secretary of State for Wales

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

The Rt Hon John Stanley MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces,
Ministry of Defence

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

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THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon John Wakeham MP
Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

Mr John Gummer MP
Minister of State, Department of
Employment

Mrs Peggy Fenner MP
Parliamentary Secretary,
Ministry of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Food

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd

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1. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that attendances at those pits which had that day completed their holiday period had been good, particularly in Leicestershire. Shirebrook and Warsop collieries had recorded their best attendance since the strike began. Overall 42 pits were working normally (4 others were on holiday); 5 were mining some coal (3 others on holiday); there were some miners working at one pit (3 others on holiday) and 117 pits remained strike bound. The movement of coal had improved towards the end of the previous week, during which power station stocks had declined by less than 0.25 million tonnes. The National Coal Board were to undertake a further publicity campaign on 17 July to create an atmosphere in which responsibility for any breakdown of the negotiations, due to restart on 18 July, could be firmly blamed on the unwillingness of Mr Scargill to negotiate in a constructive and reasonable manner.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that it was hoped a further improvement in coal movement from the Coalville British Rail depot would be seen during the current week, following the return from holiday of two previously co-operative signalmen. Despite the dock strike a number of small wharves, especially on the River Trent were continuing to handle coal.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) plant at Llanwern had 2 weeks supply, for a two blast furnace operation, of coal, coke and iron ore on the premises, of which 1800 tonnes of coal and 8400 tonnes of iron ore from Port Talbot and 1500 tonnes of coke from Usk wharf had been delivered during the previous weekend. Stocks at Scunthorpe, Ravenscraig and Teeside were sufficient to last until the end of August. The dock strike had prevented further unloading at Hunterston, Immingham and Teeside. Lorry convoys to move coal, coke and iron ore, already offloaded from Hunterston to Ravenscraig were expected to begin again on 17 July, following a cessation of movement during the recent Glasgow Fair. The movement of 6400 tonnes of coke from Orgreave to BSC Scunthorpe had now been completed.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been renewed violence that day by pickets at Port Talbot, 32 lorry windscreens were reported to have been smashed; arrests had been made. He had no reason to believe that any increase in the number of police patrolling mining communities to combat intimidation would be likely to be more effective; greater emphasis was being placed on freephone arrangements for reporting intimidation and following up such reports quickly.

In discussion the following points were made -

a. It would be difficult to increase pressure for a ballot of National Union of Mineworkers members in the absence of potentially effective moderate leaders on either the National Executive Committee or amongst those who would attend the Union's Delegate Conference. The patronage wielded by Mr Scargill was a powerful disincentive to those who might wish to support a more moderate line.

b. There was continuing cause for concern about the delays in bringing to trial those who had been arrested during violent incidents on picket lines and elsewhere. Although some cases had been heard in Magistrates courts and 20 persons had been fined more than £200 each, no Crown Court trials of indictable offences (eg criminal damage, riot and arson) had yet been arranged. It was relatively simple for defence lawyers to delay proceedings and it would be worth considering whether there was anything that could be done to guard against such delays being unreasonably long. In the absence of trials and convictions it appeared that Mr Scargill was succeeding in supporting his publicly stated view that he and his union were above the law so far as this dispute was concerned. This would of itself provide a deterrent to those who might wish to return to work.

THE PRIME MINISTER summing up the discussion said that it was important to maintain the campaign for encouraging and facilitating by every possible means a return to work by those wishing so to do. It would be helpful if the Attorney General, in consultation with the Lord Chancellor, were to examine ways of speeding up proceedings so as to ensure early trials particularly in the most serious cases, of those involved in connection

with violence and intimidation, and report back to the Group. It was to be hoped that the Coal Board's intended publicity efforts would be successful in placing responsibility clearly on Mr Scargill should the forthcoming talks breakdown as a result of union intransigence.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Attorney General to consider, in consultation with the Lord Chancellor, methods of speeding up trials especially those arising from serious violence and intimidation, and to report back.

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2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE DOCK INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the strike appeared to be the result of deliberate efforts by Messrs Kitson and Greendale of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) to achieve some positive success in redeeming union promises of support for the miners strike. The original plan, to start the strike a week earlier, had been thwarted by the sickness of one man. The problem at Immingham the previous week which had led to the strike had now been resolved locally by the British Steel Corporation (BSC) and TGWU, following a ruling against BSC by the National Dock Labour Board. The strike was now being sustained by fears of imminent changes to the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) being exploited by the TGWU leadership. It was significant that the TGWU had not sought assurances (which they would have received) that the Government had no plans to change the scheme as it currently stood. The union was demanding guarantees from the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) that would in practice mean that the TGWU was, in future, the sole arbiter of what constituted a breach of the NDLS; this was clearly unacceptable. It was also possible that the TGWU might resurrect its demands that the NDLS be extended to those ports not at present within the scheme. All the scheme ports and most non scheme ports were now closed to freight. The vote, on a show of hands, at Dover earlier in the morning was reported to have shown a majority for closing the port to freight, but it was not yet clear whether the Dover Harbour Board would be agreeable to maintaining passenger and holiday traffic only. (It was subsequently learned that the Board had so agreed and the port would be closed to freight from that evening.)

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) had invited both sides in the dispute to separate exploratory talks. It was thought likely that the NAPE would meet Mr Lowry during the afternoon of that day, but it was not yet known whether the TGWU would accept the invitation. (It was subsequently learned that the Union would meet ACAS during the afternoon of 17 July.)

THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE ARMED FORCES said that the existing plan for service assistance in maintaining the essentials of life during a dock strike could not be expected to replace other than a relatively small

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proportion of the flow of essential supplies. The precise capability would need to be assessed in relation to the needs existing at the time it was decided to consider activating it. The plan was constructed in such a way as to permit the maximum flexibility of deployment, up to 13 multi-skilled teams would be provided.

THE PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD said that although there might be shortages of some food items there should not be a significant food shortage and there was no justification for panic buying. It had been reported that TGWU officials were being restrictive in granting dispensations for the movement of perishable foodstuffs. The major concern would probably be animal feedstuffs; some 30,000 tons of Soya was stranded by the strike just inside Liverpool docks; the processing plant was just outside.

In discussion the following points were made -

- a. The Business Statistics Office had been asked to provide information daily to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the effects of the strike on a wide variety of industry and commerce. A daily briefing meeting, on lines similar to those held by the Secretary of State for Energy during the miners strike, would be held by the Secretary of State for Transport to which representatives of other Departments would be invited.
- b. It was thought possible that TGWU members in the scheme ports might be less inclined to return to work than those in non scheme ports and it might therefore be sensible to concentrate efforts to obtain a return to work on the latter. It had been reported that dockers at Felixstowe were fearful of violent picketing, which could affect their willingness to return to work. It would be necessary to demonstrate that the police could provide adequate protection if necessary.
- c. It would be helpful to establish the position of employers and others concerning legal redress under both existing legislation and the new Trade Unions Bill currently proceeding through the House of

Lords, and which was expected to receive the Royal Assent before the recess. It was possible that some shipowners might wish to seek redress through the Courts. Work should also be put in hand urgently to identify those firms whose workers were likely to lose their jobs as a direct result of the dock strike in order that both the Government and employers concerned could highlight this risk in their anti-strike publicity.

d. Union officials organising the dock (and miners) strikes appear to be basing their campaign amongst their own members on loyalty, fear and ignorance. The Government and employers could counter this by demonstrating that loyalty was misplaced in that members of the TGWU outside the dock industry, and other unions, risked losing their jobs as a direct result of the strike; fear could be allayed by demonstrating, for example that the NDLS was not in danger of being abolished or changed and ignorance could be combatted by a co-ordinated and sustained campaign to supply the true facts to all who were on strike as well as other union members and the public at large.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion said that the Lord President of the Council in conjunction with her Principle Press Secretary would oversee arrangements for briefing all Ministers and Government spokesmen and ensuring that "duty Ministers" were always available for television, radio and press interviews. The port employers, particularly in the non scheme ports should be urged indirectly to communicate effectively with their employees, stressing that there was no real cause for the dispute and that jobs were at risk. In this connection it would be helpful for the Confederation of British Industries and large industrial employers to make clear the damage which would be done to employment. It must be constantly emphasised that the Government had no plans to abolish or change the NDLS. It should also be repeated that the Government intended to take the steps necessary to keep Britain working. If asked Ministers should say that this did not exclude the declaration of a state of emergency if that proved necessary or, as a last resort, the use of servicemen to maintain supplies essential to the life and safety of the community.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Lord President of the Council to arrange with the Prime Minister's Principal Press Secretary for the handling of publicity and the media on the lines indicated in the summing up of the discussion.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Transport, in consultation with the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and Employment to arrange for adequate communication by port employers about the risk to jobs, on the lines indicated in the summing up of the discussion.
4. Invited the Secretary of State for Employment to report on the prospects for those seeking redress under the 1980 and 1982 Employment Legislation and whether the new legislation, when enacted, would make a significant difference.

Cabinet Office

17 July 1984