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MISC 101(84) 29th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 23 JULY 1984 at 4.00 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

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 Douglas Hurd MP
Minister of State, Home Office

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

ALSO PRESENT

Mr John Gummer MP
Minister of State
Department of Employment

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL AND DOCKS INDUSTRIES

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INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL AND DOCKS INDUSTRIES

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that pits fully working that day numbered 26 with a further 20 on holiday; those producing some coal numbered 6 with 2 on holiday; and those with some men in numbered 2 with a further 2 on holiday. Allowing for the effects of holidays, which began that week in Nottinghamshire, these figures were the same as for the previous week. Coal deliveries the previous week had been the best for any week since the beginning of April.

Attendances that morning both at Warsop and in Lancashire were good, but there had been violence at Bilston Glen, where 15 men had gone in and coal had been produced. Twelve men who had returned to work before the holidays but had worked on maintenance at the pit during the annual closure were now on holiday themselves: hence the apparent reduction in numbers of men working at Bilston Glen compared with 3 weeks previously. The judgement of the Chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB) was that attendances at the pit would grow.

Heavy picketing had been reported that morning at Shirebrook. He understood, however, that both the South Wales and Yorkshire areas of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were now running short of funds to finance mass picketing.

The Nottinghamshire Area Council of the NUM was due to meet that day for the first time since it had come under the majority control of non-strikers. It would consider resolutions on a number of matters: he would report the outcome to the Group.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, HOME OFFICE, said that, in addition to heavy picketing at Shirebrook and other pits where men had gone back to work, violence and intimidation continued. At Shirebrook on the previous evening, 40 men had stoned the house of one working miner. It was not yet clear whether members of the working miner's family had been in the house at the time. He would

obtain further details and report to the Group. Three arrests had been made after police reinforcements had been called to the incident. In a second incident nearby, an attempt had been made to set fire to a hut with a police officer and a watchman inside.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that he and the Home Secretary continued to examine ways of avoiding delay over the prosecution of offences arising from the dispute. He was satisfied, however, that using voluntary bills of indictment to circumvent delays in committal proceedings would be unusual and could not be justified. He had considered further whether it would be appropriate for him to take action in the Courts to seek penalties against the national officers of the NUM in respect of breaches of earlier decisions by the Court forbidding discussion or voting on the rule change proposed at the recent Special Delegate Conference of the NUM. He had concluded that action by him would be inappropriate particularly since the Nottinghamshire miners who had brought the High Court action had said explicitly that they did not wish to see penalties imposed. It was clear, however, that the Nottinghamshire miners would take further action in the High Court at once if the strike leadership tried to make use of the purported new disciplinary procedures. There was thus no action to be taken by the Government for the time being under the civil law.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that a case which had been brought by a haulier in South Wales against the South Wales area of the NUM was due to be heard that Thursday, 26 July.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY reported that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) continued to maintain production at a commendably high level. Production was now falling below the level of recent weeks because of the holiday season, but in its last week of full working the Corporation had achieved production levels higher than those immediately before the strike.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. The issues, personalities and other circumstances of the dock strike had differed from those of the miners' strike in ways which made it difficult to draw lessons for one dispute from the conduct of the other.

The docks dispute had, however, shown that it was possible for the management and others involved to influence strikers by forcefully and repeatedly presenting a limited number of key points which were crucial to the motivation of those on strike.

b. If the strike continued, it might be desirable shortly for the NCB to proceed with the closure of uneconomic pits. This would bring home to the strikers the futility of further sacrifices in the dispute and avoid the danger that the NCB might appear vindictive when it came to implement planned closures, possibly on an accelerated timescale, following the conclusion of the strike. On the other hand, this course would require the NCB to set aside procedures which it had agreed with the unions for discussing proposed closures. Although it could be argued that this would be justified in the circumstances, it was necessary, before proceeding, to consider carefully the likely effects on both striking and non-striking miners of implementing closures now. The management of the NCB were aware of the possibility, and the initiative for pursuing it lay with them. The timing of any such move would need careful consideration, particularly bearing in mind the incidence of holidays in various coalfields.

c. The Government should consider now whether it would be desirable to take measures for the long-term calculated to decrease still further the dependence of the economy, and particularly of the Central Electricity Generating Board, (CEGB) on coal. It could be argued that announcing such measures while the strike continued might influence strikers towards returning to work. It could, however, also be argued that such announcements would be likely to have a counterproductive effect on opinion among both striking and working miners, particularly if the prospects for the future of the coal industry appeared to be adversely affected.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Group hoped that the NCB would review its current publicity in the light of the presentational success achieved by the docks employers and others in the docks dispute. For the present, there was no sign of an early end to the mining dispute. It would be necessary shortly to consider the implications if the strike were still

on during the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress, which was due to take place in September. The Government's immediate priority remained to increase endurance to an absolute maximum by seeking to increase the production and delivery of coal. The Secretary of State for Energy should complete as soon as possible the measures recently identified to accelerate the rate of deliveries to power stations. He should investigate, and report to the Group on, reports that the completion of the interconnection currently under construction with France had been delayed. He should also consider, in consultation with the Secretaries of State for Employment and Transport, whether it might be feasible in current circumstances to increase levels of deliveries from open cast production above those envisaged in existing plans. He should keep the Group informed of developments concerning tactical options, the initiative for which lay with the management of the NCB. The Secretary of State for Transport should report to the Group on efforts by the Board of British Rail to secure a return to normal deliveries of coal by rail. Ministers should continue as in recent weeks to help in promoting the truthful and accurate presentation of the issues in the dispute.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion; and invited the Ministers concerned to be guided accordingly.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Energy, taking into account the points made by the Prime Minister in her summing up, to consider and report on whether endurance was being maximised by all practical means currently available.

Cabinet Office

24 July 1984