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MISC 101(84) 30th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 25 JULY 1984 at 3.45 pm

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 Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

Mr John Moore MP
Financial Secretary, Treasury

Mr Alexander Fletcher MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Department of Trade
and Industry

ALSO PRESENT

Mr John Gummer MP
Minister of State
Department of Employment

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

AND PERSONAL

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SECRET AND PERSONAL

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that the number of pits working were the same as on the previous day. Attendances at working pits were good. At Hem Heath, which was now in full production, there were record attendances that day. More than 90 men had gone in at Shirebrook despite heavy picketing. The media that day had reported limited but welcome signs that pressure might be growing among strikers for a return to work. Movements of coal continued at a high level, given the strike: in the previous week, stocks at power stations had fallen by only 75,000 tonnes.

The loading of iron ore was due to resume at Immingham on the following day. He hoped that the importance of providing no pretext for further industrial action by dockers there had been forcefully impressed on the local management of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB).

Serious instances of intimidation of miners wishing to work continued to be reported. One man who had earlier returned to work at Bilston Glen had stayed away that day after all the windows in his house had been broken the previous night. A second man had gone into Bilston Glen that morning in spite of having to pass through a gathering of 40 men outside his house. Such incidents appeared well-planned, and seemed in some cases to be directed particularly against men whose attendance was crucial to any production of coal. He understood that the National Coal Board (NCB) would be telling the police the identity of men who might be particularly at risk.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND said that he understood that the police were stepping up their operations at Bilston Glen and other pit communities in Scotland to seek to counter incidents of intimidation of the kind reported by the Secretary of State for Energy.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that he saw no immediate prospect of a marked improvement in the movement of coal by rail. Attempts by British Rail (BR) to take a hard line with staff who refused to operate coal trains had not led to a return to normal working by the staff concerned, whose normal wages were paid by their unions if they were sent home. The BR Board were considering their options, but were inclined to believe that the rail unions might take advantage of any attempt to impose stricter industrial discipline to call a strike on the railways with the object of supporting miners. He considered that this threat must be taken seriously and that the right course was for BR to proceed cautiously for the immediate future.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. The NCB had made it clear that they would consider, in the light of the outcome of the meeting of the National Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) on the following day, whether or not the draft agreement which they had offered as a basis for a settlement should remain on the table. Withdrawal would prevent the NUM, should negotiations with them resume, from appropriating the concessions which the Board had already been prepared to make and seeking more on top. The return to work might be accelerated if the formal position of the NCB left open the possibility that the dispute might eventually be brought to an end on terms which were less, not more, favourable to the strikers than those already rejected by their leadership.
- b. The time might be drawing closer when it would be appropriate for the NCB to turn to new ways of stimulating a return to work, whether by easing access to striking pits for those wishing to work (for example, by the provision of secure transport); or by action calculated to have a more general effect on the motivation of strikers (for example, by proceeding with pit closures). Any such action would, however, need to be carefully timed and deftly handled, bearing in mind considerations such as the incidence of holidays in various coal fields, the timing of the Annual Conference of the Trades Union Congress and other industrial relations issues inside and outside the coal industry.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that, although reports of an increase in activities by miners and miners' families in support of a return to work were welcome, it was essential to maintain the police effort to counter intimidation at least at its present level of effectiveness; and, if possible, to increase it in the interests particularly of the womenfolk and children of the men affected. The Group would wish to consider in due course any developments which might occur at the meeting of the National Executive of the NUM on the following day. In the meantime, with the approach of the Parliamentary Recess, it would be necessary at Cabinet on the following day to decide on arrangements for the monitoring of the dispute by the Government during the holiday period; and for continuing the co-ordination, under the aegis of the Secretary of State for Energy, of the day to day presentation of the Government's stance on the dispute to its supporters, to miners whether working or on strike and to the public.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office
26 July 1984