

Coal file

CHANCELLOR - INTERVIEW ON COMMONS REMARK ABOUT MINERS STRIKE

Transcript from: BBC Radio 4, Today, 1 August 1984

INTERVIEWER: (Brian Redhead) ... At the end of the debate in the Commons yesterday on the Government's economic strategy the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Nigel Lawson, was spelling out the cost of the ~~the~~ miners strike. "Even in narrow financial terms", he said, "it represents a worthwhile investment for the good of the nation". Well the Opposition was outraged, and the Prime Minister herself looked none too pleased because the Chancellor's remark appeared to support Labour's charge that the Government is deliberately turning the coal dispute into a political strike. Well Mr Lawson is in our radio car now. .... , you gave the impression that the Government is happy to pay money to prolongue the strike - is that so?

CHANCELLOR: No I didn't give that impression, and of course the Government is not at all happy about the strike. I think one has to see this storm in a teacup in perspective. We had this debate about the coal strike last night in which the Prime Minister won the debate hands down, won the argument hands down and Mr Kinnock was completely routed. And this I think is the verdict of this morning's press. And in order to ~~xx~~ try and salvage something from the wreckage the Labour Party is now trying to use my remark as a diversion.

INTERVIEWER : But weren't you saying two things; one, that the strike isn't costing very much and that it is money well spent?

CHANCELLOR: The question of the cost was raised, as you will recall, by Mr Hattersely and I thought it was sensible to put the true figures into the debate and to contrast the cost, which is not inconsiderable, but the cost, with the immensely higher cost of ~~xxxxx~~ £3 million a day which is the cost of subsidies from the taxpayer to the Coal board, the cost of keeping open the uneconomic pits. Because everybody knows that that is the problem. The problem is the huge subsidies being paid to the Coal Board and the need to close economic (uneconomic) pits. And to close them, I may say, in giving the most generous redundancy terms that have ever been given. And, as you know, no miner has been made compulsorily

redundant, they are all given the the opportunity to have other jobs in the coal mines if they wish to do so. And those who take voluntary redundancy, and very, very large numbers are queuing up to take voluntary redundancy, are given exceptionally good terms.

INTERVIEWER : But you're still making it sound as if you'd prefer to pay to finance the strike than come to a negotiated settlement for fear that the negotiated settlement will simply maintain the present level of subsidies?

CHANCELLOR: No, I don't want this strike. Nobody wants this strike, certainly nobody in the Government, nobody in the Conservative Party. And I was Energy Secretary for 2 years before the election and there was never any coal strike then. No I don't want this strike but the fact is we've got a strike because Mr Scargill insisted that there should be a strike and he has refused to allow the miners a ballot. And that's the way to get the strike to an end, that's what I'd like to see, a ballot in which the miners themselves expressed their own views freely.

INTERVIEWER : But the miners are expressing their views, 120,000 of them, by not going to work. Does your attitude not reveal, as one of the Labour Members said yesterday, both a callous attitude and an inability to understand the essentials of the strike, which is that people feel that their jobs are threatened and that their community is threatened?

CHANCELLOR: I don't think that is the case. As I say, the terms on which redundancy is offered is extraordinarily generous. And you have to remember that 60,000 miners are continuing to work. Pretty well everywhere in the country where the miners were able to have a local ballot they balloted to go on working and they are working. The areas where they are not working are the areas where they have not been given a chance to express their views in a free ballot.

INTERVIEWER : You're not seriously suggesting that 120,000 miners, supported by their wives and children, are striking reluctantly - except in the sense that every strike is reluctant? Clearly they are expressing a point of view. They do not regard £17,000 as hugely generous to give up a lifetime's work?

CHANCELLOR N, they regard the money as generous and there is the most appalling intimidation going on in many many parts of the country. And a reign of terror in many of the mining areas of this country. So let's put it to the test. Let's see which of us is right. Let ~~the~~ the National Union of Mineworkers have a ~~ballot~~ ballot, as they should do, under the constitution of the union.

INTERVIEWER : But they're not going to have a ballot and if they don't have a ballot does this mean to say that you will go on paying the money to prolong the strike?

CHANCELLOR : We have a ~~duty~~ duty to, ~~and~~ and the Electricity Board has a duty, to keep the power stations going. Because, as I said in my speech, for the overwhelming majority of electricity users in this country security of supply is paramount. And the Electricity Board has a duty to its customers to keep the power stations going and that is what they're doing.

INTERVIEWER : But hasn't Her Majesty's Government a duty to reach a settlement in this dispute, to put pressures on both sides to come to the negotiating table and to see if they can't find a satisfactory agreement?

CHANCELLOR : The Government is not a party to ~~this~~ this dispute. This dispute is between the Coal Board, which is seeking to put the industry on a sound footing, and Mr Scargill. That is where the dispute is. Of course the Government backs the Coal Board in this because what the Coal Board is doing is in the national interest.

INTERVIEWER : But the Government must be a party to the dispute because it's a nationalised industry, the nation owns it and you are acting on behalf of the shareholders?

CHANCELLOR : No, the Coal Board is the management. They are charged with the job of running the industry. They have been charged with the job of turning the industry round, ending these massive subsidies at the expense of the taxpayer and the expense of the ~~rest~~ rest of industry, securing cheap coal for our future so that we can have lower priced electricity than would otherwise be the case. That is what what the Coal Board have been charged to do and they have to decide how to go about it. And they have been challenged by Mr Scargill who has his own political motives,

as everyone knows, but they've been challenged by Mr Scargill. And now very regrettably none of the Government's ~~s~~making, none of the Government's desiring, we have a strike. And now we have to hope that that strike will end on satisfactory terms as soon as possible.

INTERVIEWER : But with the Coal Board saying that it doesn't now intend to ~~negotiate~~ negotiate, that the next move must come from the national union of mineworkers, with the Prime Minister accusing Mr Scargill ~~and~~ and his supporters of being the ~~main~~ enemy within, what hope is there of a settlement?

CHANCELLOR: All strikes get settled. And <sup>in</sup> this particular one the Coal Board has gone a very long way. Mr ~~Sc~~ Scargill, so far as I'm aware, has not moved ~~an~~ *an* inch. The ball is in his ~~own~~ court.

INTERVIEWER : And you're prepared to wait until he makes the move?

CHANCELLOR: ~~xxxxxxx~~ We have got to be prepared to wait if that is what is necessary. But a long strike is not in any body's interests and I hope that it won't be very much longer.