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MISC 101(84) 34th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
TUESDAY 28 AUGUST 1984 at 6.00 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 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

Mr Barney Hayhoe MP  
Minister of State, Treasury

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

Mr Giles Shaw MP  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary  
of State, Department of Energy

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

SECRETARIAT

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

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1. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY said that pits working normally numbered 24, with a further 21 on holiday; those turning some coal numbered 6, with 2 on holiday; those with some men present numbered 10, with 2 on holiday; and those on strike or picketed out numbered 73, with 36 on holiday. The most significant recent change in these figures was due to the return of 6 men to Bold pit in Lancashire. During August, 10 pits had ceased to be strikebound. Since the beginning of July, 1126 National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) members had returned to work, though comparatively few of these were in strikebound areas. The small numbers returning in such areas continued to grow, however: in Scotland, for instance, 181 men were now working, 129 of them at Bilston Glen.

630,000 tonnes of coal had been moved during the previous week, 446,000 of them to the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB). Draw-down of power station stocks had been running at 40,000 tonnes per week or less for a number of weeks.

In Scotland, there was serious flooding at Polkemmet, a pit near Bathgate employing 1300 men and producing low-sulphur coal used exclusively by the British Steel Corporation (BSC) at Ravenscraig. Safety cover had been withdrawn when 2 men returned to work during the previous week and restored too late to prevent serious damage. If a return to normal working at the pit was practicable, it would take 15 months. It was possible that the pit would close, leaving Ravenscraig wholly dependent on imported coal and losing further jobs in an area affected by the recent decision to close the British Leyland plant at Bathgate. 15 coal faces had now been lost during the dispute, only 4 of them at pits thought unlikely to be capable of beneficial development.

Mr Scargill and supporters of the strike had recently given renewed prominence to purported compromise proposals put to the NCB by Mr Stan Orme MP. These supposed "compromises" had in fact been restatements of the line previously taken by the NUM in negotiations and, if adopted, would have removed the NCB's entitlement to reach a final decision on closure proposals on appeal

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from local consultative machinery. The NCB had sought, with some success, to make it clear that there was no substance in Mr Orme's proposals. The Chairman intended to write shortly to Mr Orme to put the record straight and seeking his agreement to publication of the correspondence.

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THE HOME SECRETARY said that the beginnings of the return to work in areas previously strikebound had some welcome and some unwelcome implications for the police. On the one hand, fewer striking activists were available to travel from previously strikebound areas to picket in Nottinghamshire and other working areas. On the other, this made it harder for the police to control conditions outside working pits by intercepting flying pickets as they travelled; and the more diffuse pattern of picketing made effective liaison between the National Coal Board (NCB) and the police even more important than before. The resources of the police were under strain, but could cope.

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Attacks which had taken place on property were horrific, but hard to prevent. Those responsible had the advantage of surprise and could pick targets with no prior police presence. The police regarded the attacks as spasmodic, and as more likely to be the acts of an extremist minority than evidence of a central change of tactics.

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Arrests in the course of the dispute now numbered 5897. Convictions numbered 1039: the most severe sentence so far was 9 months' imprisonment. Stipendiary magistrates would sit for the first time on 3 September at Rotherham and Doncaster. At Mansfield, Ramsgate and Nottingham, stipendiaries were ready to sit if defendants insisted on the older, more time-consuming form of committal proceedings.

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THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that there had been some improvement the previous week in the movement of coal by rail. Some coal trains had run from the Westhouses depot, but men there had decided, albeit by a small majority, to continue to ban coal traffic.

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The British Rail (BR) Board, following discussions with the unions, hoped that the unlimited work to rule threatened from 10 September would be avoided. It was probable, however, that the one day strike planned for 12 September would take place. It was almost certain that there would be industrial

action on London underground trains and buses on that day.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that, with the cargo of the Ostia unloaded, stocks at the steel works at Ravenscraig were sufficient for 4-5 weeks. Stocks at Teesside should last 6-7 weeks; at Immingham and Scunthorpe, 3-4 weeks (taking account of supplies through small, local quays); at Port Talbot, 9-10 weeks; and at Llanwern, 3-4 weeks.

Although it was expected that NCB would continue to be able to supply coal to coal-burning industry, there might be problems, if the strike continued past the end of the Summer, over supplies for space heating in industrial premises.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that it was not yet clear what the formal arrangements would be for the debate at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Annual Conference on the motion and amendments tabled by the NUM and sympathetic unions respectively. Both the National Executive of the NUM and the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the TUC were to meet separately in Brighton on 30 August. The Finance and General Purposes Committee had invited the NUM to a meeting on 31 August, apparently in the hope of reaching some agreement before the Conference on the handling of the debate. It was thought that the TUC were seriously concerned about the possibility of disorder at the Conference. The aim of the NUM would be to carry their motion calling for unconditional support by means of an appeal to delegates' emotions. Speaking against the motion would call both for moral and, probably, physical, courage. It must be likely that the motion would be carried. In any event, it seemed inevitable both that events at the Conference would harm the standing of the TUC and that it would have an unhelpful influence on the course of the dispute, at least in the short term.

In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. It was not clear whether the drift back to work on the present scale in itself offered the prospect of an eventual end to the strike. If the present rate of return was maintained and increased, it was possible that a critical point might be reached beyond which the present trickle might become a flood. On the other hand, the numbers returning were still very small compared with the numbers on strike.

Some further, positive action by the NCB might be necessary to stimulate matters in the hope of developments which could decisively affect the course of the strike.

- b. The violence and attacks on property which had taken place over recent weeks had been fully reported on television and very widely deplored. It was most important that it should be clear in the public mind that the admirable restraint which had been shown by the police faced with such events was in no way symptomatic of a lack of will to deal resolutely with them; and that no-one would be immune from prosecution where there was evidence of criminal conduct.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that evidence of a continuing drift back to work, and of the beginning of its spread to previously strikebound areas, was welcome. The aim of the police should continue to be to allow access to the pits for men wishing to return. Efforts to improve still further local liaison between the NCB and the police should be kept up. What the influence of the TUC Conference on the dispute would be, and how long that influence might last, remained to be seen. The general effect seemed likely to be unhelpful, however. In the period before the Conference, it was clearly in the interests of the NCB to ensure that the media and others clearly understood that the proposals put forward earlier in August by Mr Orme were a restatement of the position of the NUM which did not provide any basis for useful negotiations; and that the proposals made by Mr MacGregor in earlier discussions with the NUM currently offered the only genuine and reasonable basis for progress towards a settlement. For the period following the TUC Conference, the NCB would no doubt be considering the options for more active measures which might stimulate an acceleration of the return to work or make a settlement more likely. Such measures might include implementing closures or redundancies or withdrawing safety cover where violence or attacks on property took place. There would be an obvious danger, of which the NCB were no doubt aware, in placing too much reliance on the example of men whose motivation or character might be regarded as disreputable by the majority of strikers; and in taking any action which might prejudice the support of working miners in Nottinghamshire and elsewhere. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy should report on the options open to the NCB and on the tactics they proposed to

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adopt for the coming weeks. He should also investigate reports that some men on strike were continuing to receive concessionary coal. The slow rate at which offences committed during the dispute were being prosecuted continued to be widely seen as unsatisfactory. She would discuss this question separately with the Ministers chiefly concerned. The Group should meet again on 30 August: in the meantime, the daily reports prepared during August by the Department of Energy should continue to be circulated.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy to investigate and report on
  - a. the tactical options open to the NCB and how they intended to proceed in coming weeks; and
  - b. allegations that some strikers continued to receive concessionary coal.

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2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE DOCKS

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the position in the docks was not yet clear. Scheme ports on strike were Aberdeen, Dundee, Hull, Southampton, Newport, Cardiff, Swansea, Garston, Liverpool, Fleetwood, Ayr, Troon, Clyde and Forth. Scheme ports still working were Blyth, Tyne, Sunderland, Goole, Boston, Wisbech, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Poole, Plymouth, Workington and Ipswich. There was confusion at several other scheme ports: at Bristol, for example, a mass meeting had broken up with violence and uproar. It was almost certain that non-scheme ports would continue to work. Major damage to imports or exports seemed unlikely while Dover and Felixstowe remained open.

Dockers in many places were resentful at what they saw as an entirely political strike call. There was some hope that the strike would not be solid. The main danger, however, lay in the fact that, because of physical factors and traditional trade union loyalties, picketing could be expected to be effective in the docks. Effective police protection for those wishing to cross picket lines to work would be needed.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that the picture was one of disarray and bitterness. He was not entirely discouraged: there was evidence that the strike call had been a misjudgement on the part of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), whose first aim, in order to save face, would be to sustain the dispute until the



Trades Union Congress (TUC) Conference the following week was over. Opposition to the strike at Tilbury, a port on which the TGWU could normally rely to respond solidly to any call for industrial action, was particularly heartening: the container terminal there was continuing to work that afternoon.

THE MINISTER FOR THE ARMED FORCES said that the strike had implications for the United Kingdom contribution to two major NATO reinforcement and training exercises due to begin shortly and involving the movement to the Continent of 40,000 men and 9,000 vehicles. Exercise BOLD GANNET would involve movements from 4 September through a number of ports, some of which were currently working and some on strike. Exercise LIONHEART would involve movements through a larger number of ports from 15 to 16 September. He hoped that it would be possible to proceed with the exercises. There must be a possibility, however, that to do so would involve military vehicles and men in going through picket lines.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. It was important that Ministers' public statements should be in a low key and carefully calculated. The aim should be to increase the chances of a return to work, avoiding a starkly political presentation which might swing the support of the TUC Conference or wavering dockers behind the strike. The appearance of overconfidence should be avoided. The most appropriate and effective line, where comment was required, would be to point out the lack of any cause for the strike and to present the strike call as an appeal to dockers to sacrifice their wages and jobs to support the miners.

b. Legal action might be taken quickly, particularly by smaller firms, in the event that unlawful picketing in the docks affected their businesses. Larger firms were more likely to wait until the course which the strike was likely to take had become more clearly established.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it would be necessary to follow the events in the strike from day to day. The Group would discuss it further at their meeting on 30 August. The Government's public stance required careful handling: in the run-up to the TUC Conference, it should be in a low key and follow the line identified in discussion. The Secretary of State for Employment should co-ordinate a line for the use of members of the Government, consulting the Secretaries of State for Transport and Trade and Industry and taking account of the contents of the broadsheet distributed by TGWU dockers at Tilbury who opposed the strike. The amendment of the contingency plan for military assistance in the event of a dock strike should be accelerated. It was important that the United Kingdom's obligations to NATO exercises should be fulfilled. The exercises should be announced well in advance to avoid giving credence to accusations that the Government were calling in troops to break the strike. The Secretary of State for Defence and the Minister for the Armed Forces should ensure, consulting the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Transport, that advantage was taken of any flexibility in the embarkation plans to avoid controversy or confrontation.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Employment, consulting the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and Transport, to co-ordinate a public line for use by members of the Government on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Defence and the Minister for the Armed Forces, consulting the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Transport, to proceed with arrangements for exercises LIONHEART and BOLD GANNET on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

Cabinet Office

29 August 1984