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MISC 101(84) 36th Meeting

COPY NO 18

CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 1984 at 2.30 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 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 Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

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

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon John Wakeham MP
Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

Mr John Stradling Thomas MP
Minister of State, Welsh Office

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
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 SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that pits working normally that day numbered 42, with a further 3 on holiday; those turning some coal numbered 7, with a further 2 on holiday; those with some men in numbered 14; and those not working numbered 106, including 1 which would normally be on holiday.

There were record attendances that day in Scotland at Bilston Glen and in the Midlands at Shirebrook and Warsop. Attendances elsewhere (including Kent) were similar to, or slightly higher than, those on the previous day.

On the assumption that planned levels of coal deliveries and oilburn were maintained, power station endurance now extended well into 1985. Movements of coal during the previous week had been remarkably good, considering that 2 days had been holidays. Deliveries in August had been maintained at the same level as in July, despite the peak colliery holiday period.

Any effect on the power stations and railways of the support given to the strike by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was not yet clear. Morale among power station staff remained high, however, and the unions concerned had called a meeting later that week to agree their interpretation of the TUC statement. Deliveries of coal by rail to power stations, having declined from 190,000 tonnes at the end of July to a low point of 96,000 per week in August, had increased again to 134,000 tonnes per week.

The proposed renewed negotiations between the National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had been called off that morning in confused circumstances. The true sequence of events had been that, after the agreement of both sides in principle to renewed talks, Mr Ned Smith of the NCB had spoken to Mr Heathfield the previous day to discuss an agenda. Mr Heathfield had been doubtful whether the NUM would agree to include the question of uneconomic pits on the agenda. Mr Smith and Mr Heathfield had agreed that talks which did not address it would not be worthwhile. Mr Heathfield had agreed to discuss the question further with NUM colleagues.

before speaking again to Mr Smith. No further word had been received by the NCB before the NUM announcement at a press conference that morning that the NCB had cancelled the talks. The most likely explanation was that the NUM leadership, aware that they could not seriously discuss the question of uneconomic pits without breaking undertakings to their members, but also that talks which excluded the question would expose the unreasonableness of their position, had chosen to engineer the rupture. Mr MacGregor would be strongly advised, on his return to London that afternoon, to expose the falsity of the NUM account of events and to put them on the spot by a unilateral offer of talks at a specific time and place, resuming from the position at which negotiations had broken off in July. He himself felt strongly that this would be Mr MacGregor's best course of action.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the impact, if any, of the previous day's events at the TUC on the transport of coal remained to be seen. There was some difference of view among the management of British Rail (BR) about current prospects for maintaining the recent increase in rail deliveries. He was looking into the availability from all sources of further lorries for the transport of coal by road: many were currently in use for the sugar beet harvest, which would continue until November.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that demonstrations at the TUC in Brighton the previous day had been smaller and more peaceful than had been feared. The police had dealt with them successfully. The response to Mr Scargill's call for picketing on the previous day at all NCB premises had been poor, with even a nominal attendance lacking in some places.

Further attempts had been made by the Lord Chancellor's Department and his own to accelerate the rate at which prosecutions arising from the dispute were being dealt with. One stipendiary had sat on the previous day at Chesterfield and one at Rotherham. Both authorities would decide soon whether to ask for additional stipendiaries. The county authority for Nottinghamshire was thought certain to ask for a stipendiary if defendants insisted on old-style committal proceedings. In addition, pressure at Rotherham, Mansfield, Worksop and Retford was being eased by the transfer of cases elsewhere. The City of Nottingham was making facilities for 11 additional courts per week to take cases from Mansfield, and other courts were arranging for additional sittings, including some in the evenings.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that the bulk of court cases arising from the dispute in Scotland, where there were no committal proceedings, would be heard during the next few weeks. Additional resources were being made available where necessary to enable the courts to deal with the load.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) had maintained planned production at its steel works. They wished to begin coke movements from Orgreave again on the following day, and were in touch with the local police. Dockers at Immingham had now completed training in the use of front loaders, whose use by BSC employees to load lorries with iron ore had triggered the previous dock strike. The blacking in support of the miners' strike approved in principle the previous day at the TUC had extended to coal and substitute fuels, but not to ore: the Immingham dockers were reported to be willing, and even eager, to move ore supplies. An approach to the Corporation from the Secretary of the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) suggesting the resumption of negotiations on quotas for deliveries of raw materials to Ravenscraig had been firmly rebuffed.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that he had advised that day on the scope for lifting planning restrictions on the delivery of coal by road from open cast sites. It appeared that it would be open to the Secretary of State for the Environment to make a new ruling on such restrictions if an application were made to him, but that it would not be possible to avoid holding an Inquiry if an interested party required one.

In discussion, the following were the main points made -

- a. The statement agreed by the TUC on the previous day had included wording recognising that the practical implementation of the proposed support for the miners would require detailed discussion with the General Council and agreement with the unions directly concerned. This suggested that the effects of the statement might well be less than its

presentation had suggested. It was necessary, nevertheless, to be on the alert against the possibility that effective disruptive action might be taken, even by members of trades unions whose leaderships were not sympathetic to the strike.

b. The presence of Mr Scargill on picket lines had often coincided with violence. The unexpected peacefulness of the demonstrations at the TUC had shown clearly that, whether or not he might be responsible for instigating violence, it was within his power to prevent it when he chose.

c. The requirements of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) made it desirable, if possible, to identify ways of lifting planning restrictions on road deliveries from certain open cast sites without the risks of delay which would result from the holding of Public Inquiries.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was necessary to wait and see what results flowed from the vote by the TUC in support of the strike. It was unfortunate that the TUC had not chosen to support those miners who continued to work, having voted to do so; but rather those who, by intimidation and mob action, sought to prevent them. The ability which Mr Scargill had demonstrated to prevent violence when he chose should not be allowed to pass unnoticed. The Government should continue to press for a ballot to be held and for strikers to observe the guidelines on picketing laid down both by the TUC and the NUM. It appeared that Mr Scargill might have made a tactical error in breaking off the proposed discussions with the NCB in a way which laid his good faith and truthfulness open to serious question. Any statements by Ministers on the controversy would need careful handling to avoid giving it a political flavour which might distract attention from the real issues. Ministers should take all appropriate steps, however, to ensure that the facts were reported in the media truthfully and accurately. No doubt the Chairman of the NCB would wish to consider an early initiative on the basis of the advice which would be put to him that afternoon. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State for Energy and other Ministers concerned should

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continue to take steps to enhance endurance of the strike. The Secretary of State for Transport should continue with his examination of the availability from all sources of additional road transport for coal, and report to the Group. The Attorney General, in consultation with the Secretaries of State for the Environment and Energy, should consider further whether it might be possible to lift restrictions on road deliveries from open cast sites in a way which would avoid the risk of delay identified in discussion.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
 2. Invited the Secretary of State for Transport to examine and report on the availability from all sources of additional road transport for coal.
 3. Invited the Attorney General, consulting the Secretaries of State for the Environment and Energy further to consider ways of lifting restrictions on road deliveries of coal from open cast sites on the basis described by the Prime Minister in her summing up.
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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 majority of ports continued to work. 80 men were reported to have gone back that morning at Hull, though some subsequent reports suggested that the port had closed again later in the day. A similar number had gone in at Tilbury and a few at other ports, including one at Southampton. Men at Grimsby, Immingham, Barry and, most recently Fleetwood, had voted to go back to work.

Some peaceful picketing on a small scale was reported at Hull, Felixstowe, London and Liverpool. So far it had been organised exclusively, or nearly so, by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). Those wishing to go into work had not been physically prevented from doing so.

The amount of traffic diverted to Continental ports because of the strike was very small. In addition to three passenger liners, about five cargo vessels had been diverted so far: it remained possible that they might yet call at British ports later. The only major shift in traffic occurring because of the strike was between striking and open British ports. These effects might largely be permanent. The strike was causing particularly serious damage to Bristol and the other striking West Coast ports.

The Port of London Authority (PLA) had announced that their ports remained open and that they would continue to employ any docker who lost his membership of the TGWU for continuing to work. There was no legal or other reason preventing the Authority from giving such an undertaking. It was unfortunate that the attention of the media had been distracted from this important pledge by the ballot of dockers which the Authority was carrying out through the Electoral Reform Society, and which it had announced at the same time. The attention of management at other striking ports had been drawn to the PLA's assurances to working dockers and it was to be hoped that they would follow suit.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that NATO reinforcement and training exercises involving the movement of men and vehicles through the ports had begun successfully. While there could be no question of negotiations with pickets, the aim was to maintain the present, low profile of the exercises.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that at Aberdeen, where essential supplies for the Orkney and Shetney Islands had been handled throughout the dispute, dockers had now voted limited dispensation to allow some of the islanders' livestock to be shipped to the mainland.

In discussion, it was suggested that the small numbers of dockers from other ports picketing at Felixstowe might be set to increase sharply; and that the National Union of Seamen might be preparing to black cargoes and vessels diverted from striking to open ports. Either or both of these developments, if they occurred, might lead quickly to legal action by employers against the unions concerned.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Government and the employers were still waiting for the course of the strike to establish itself. For the present, there was little further that Ministers could usefully do or say, though it was to be hoped that the important and helpful assurances given by the PLA to dockers of continued employment in the event of loss of union membership would receive wider publicity and be echoed elsewhere.

The Group -

Took note.

3. REQUEST FOR THE RECALL OF PARLIAMENT

The Group discussed a letter dated 3 September to the Prime Minister from the Leader of the Opposition attaching a statement by the Parliamentary Committee of the Labour Party calling on her to seek the recall of Parliament.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that the Group were agreed that she should not seek the recall of Parliament. She would reply to the Leader of the Opposition that evening in terms which the Group had discussed.

The Group -

Took note.

Cabinet Office

5 September 1984