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RECORD OF A MEETING HELD AT CHEQUERS ON SUNDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER
AT 2000 HRS TO DISCUSS THE COAL DISPUTE

Present:-

Prime Minister
Secretary of State for Energy
Mr. MacGregor
Mr. Gregson
Mr. Butler
Mr. Turnbull

The meeting considered the issues listed in the attached agenda.

Talks with the TUC

There was a discussion of the line which Mr. MacGregor should take in his talks with the TUC on Monday. TUC officials were thought to have briefed their representatives, Willis, Basnett and Buckton to take the following line:

- (i) to listen to the NCB presentation of its case.
- (ii) to suggest that where there was a dispute about an uneconomic pit it should be referred to an arbitrator (though they would know that this would not be acceptable).
- (iii) to urge the NCB to get back to talks. They*

would warn Mr. MacGregor that there was a new unity in the trade union movement and that pressure would grow if a settlement were not achieved quickly.

It was agreed that Mr. MacGregor should set out the full facts of the NCB's offer and invite the TUC to agree that it was better than that available to virtually any other industry; and that the NUM's demand that there should be no closure of uneconomic pits was totally unreasonable. (Comparisons could be made with the realistic attitude other unions had shown over factory closures elsewhere). He should ask the TUC why they took no account of the position of those miners who had balloted in favour of staying at work; he should urge the TUC to call for a ballot, denounce violence and make its financial support conditional on adherence to its picketing guidelines.

It was agreed that the question of negotiations was the most difficult to handle. On the one hand the Board would not want to appear intransigent; on the other, entering into another round of fruitless talks could slow the return to work. Mr. MacGregor should say there could be no worthwhile negotiations while the NUM maintained its absolute position.

Involvement of ACAS

Mr. MacGregor said that ACAS would like to get involved if they could find an opening. But he had sought to discourage them from getting involved if there were no prospect of success. He had used the argument that ACAS' approach was to find a compromise acceptable to the parties but the NUM's demands were not susceptible to this approach. If conceded these demands would deny the NCB the ability to exercise its responsibilities. He did not believe

responsibilities could be divided in this way. Mr. MacGregor said Mr. Lowry was about to return from leave and he would speak to him to make the Board's position clear.

NACODS

Mr. MacGregor said the NACODS dispute had arisen from differences in treatment by different area managers. Some had been rigid in insisting that NACODS members should cross picket lines where NUM members were coming into work and that if they didn't they would not be paid. Others required only that NACODS members made a reasonable effort to get in to work but took an understanding view if this involved coming through a large and violent picket line. There were also tensions vis-a-vis BACM who, being salaried, were paid anyway. A meeting had been called by national NCB management in August to try and sort out these differences of treatment. It was thought that an agreement had been reached but the NACODS President, on returning from holiday, repudiated the proposals. He was probably motivated by a wish to get NACODS to make some response to the TUC resolution.

He could not say whether the 66% majority would be achieved nationally - there would be quite large regional differences. (The Prime Minister expressed concern that the ballot might be rigged). If the required majority were achieved, NACODS might use it simply to put pressure on NCB management to resolve their grievances. Alternatively they might call for strike action. If they did, he was hopeful that NACODS men in the hard line working areas would remain at work but the position could be difficult in border-line areas such as Derbyshire and it would be more difficult to increase the number of pits with men working. He explained that, by law, men working underground had to be supervised by people holding specific qualifications eg in operating machinery, control of gas etc. It would be difficult to

persuade BACM members with these qualifications to go underground and while there might be some NUM members who had passed their exams and who were awaiting promotion to deputy grade they could provide only limited cover.

How to bring the dispute to an end

Mr. MacGregor said that of the various possibilities, he thought that a revolt in the NUM Executive was the least likely. One of the problems was that executive members were elected for life (the Prime Minister asked whether the new legislation would have any impact on this); thus while at local level there had been a major change in the complexion of officers, ^{Notts was} represented on the Executive by Chadburn and Richardson. Although they were supposed to be mandated by their areas this was a poor substitute for having Executive members who reflected the local mood. He was hopeful that the court ca^se being heard early this week would result in a judgement requiring a national ballot.

Redundancies and Closures

Mr. MacGregor said there was no shortage of ^{app} complications. The NCB's normal procedure was to offer redundancy to men at pits being closed and then subsequently to men at other pits to make room for the younger miners from the pits which were closing. The Prime Minister suggested that preference ought to be given to miners who had led the return to work and who, after the strike, wished to leave the industry to escape hostility.

Both Mr. MacGregor and the Secretary of State for Energy thought it unwise to start closing uneconomic pits unilaterally as this would put the NCB in the position of repudiating the existing procedures. Mr. MacGregor said it was too early to take decisions on the closure of damaged pits. The most pressing case was Polkemmet but even here no

final decision was likely for three or four months. Miners at Polkemmet had voted heavily to stay at work and the Board would have an especial obligation to them to ensure that those who wanted to were redeployed.

Civil Law

The Secretary of State for Energy expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the civil law under the 1980 and 1982 Acts. He suggested the reason that affected firms had made little use of the law was that they would be vulnerable to retaliation. He thought that the Forest of Dean road hauliers were now finding life difficult as they were being denied work by Labour-controlled authorities. Mr. Macgregor said the Nottinghamshire miners would not welcome civil action against the NUM.

Working Miners

The Secretary of State for Energy and Mr. MacGregor said they had met various deputations of working ^{miners} parties but advised the Prime Minister against meeting them herself. There was as yet no clear leadership of the working miners' movement but a number of groups were jockeying for position. The Prime Minister could stir up animosity by appearing to endorse the ^mprivacy of any particular group.

Criminal Offences

Mr. MacGregor said the NCB would dismiss miners convicted of criminal offences against other miners. The Secretary of State for Energy said it would be dangerous to make this an announced policy as ~~the~~ criminal records could be found amongst working as well as striking miners. It was better for the NCB to use its discretion.

Getting the message through

The Prime Minister said she had been told that the NCB's message was not getting through to miners who were heavily dependent on the NUM for their information. She suggested greater use of free newspapers. Mr. MacGregor said miners had received letters both from national and area management though there was no such communication recently. He agreed to look into this.

Communities

It was agreed that while the NCB's announcement that it would set up an Enterprise Agency was a useful step, it had not had the impact it deserved. The Secretary of State for Energy suggested that the proposal could be given more substance by the announcement of appointments to the Board.

The Prime Minister asked whether the reclamation of derelict land offered much scope for redeployment of redundant miners? The Secretary of State for Energy and Mr. Macgregor were sceptical as the work involved was largely civil engineering which was not labour intensive.

Open Cast Mining

The Prime Minister said the NCB had historically given preference to deep-mined coal and had restricted the output to open cast coal although the latter was cheaper to produce. She asked Mr. MacGregor to see what could be done to increase open cast output by expanding production under existing contracts, by bringing sites with planning permission into operation earlier and by an active pursuit of new sites with planning permission. Mr. MacGregor said it was difficult to secure planning permission for sites. For example in Wales, the NUM exerted pressure on local authorities which frustrated the opening up of anthracite deposits. In Scotland he hoped to close Killoch and Barony

pits and open up the Douglas field by open cast methods. The Secretary of State warned that the effect on the NCB's operating results would be adverse if it were not possible to accelerate the closures of deep-mined pits. The Prime Minister said this policy was still worth pursuing as it would produce coal more economically and would add to endurance. Mr. MacGregor undertook to ^{pursue}~~consider~~ this.

Long term structure of the coal industry

The Prime Minister said that under legislation the NCB was almost the exclusive operator of coal and the licensing authority. Mr. MacGregor said the NCB should be reorganised into units based on coalfields. Over time the point of access to the fields would move. These units would be incorporated into separate companies which could eventually be sold to the private sector or operated on a joint basis. Both he and the Secretary of State for Energy, however, felt it would be unwise to broach these issues publicly while the strike was continuing. Mr. MacGregor undertook to let the Prime Minister have a paper setting out his thinking and the long-term future of the industry.

The meeting ended at 2230 hours.

HT

24 September 1984