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MISC 101(84) 47th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
TUESDAY 13 NOVEMBER 1984 at 11.15 am

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 Peter Walker MP  
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin  
Minister of State, Scottish Office

The Rt Hon Tom King MP  
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP  
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Lord Young of Graffham  
Minister without Portfolio

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP  
Attorney General

Mr Norman Lamont MP  
Minister of State  
Department of Trade and Industry

Mr David Mitchell MP  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of  
State, Department of Transport

SECRETARIAT

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

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

## 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 numbered 45, those turning some coal numbered 12, and those with some men present numbered 48. The number turning some coal had increased by 2 compared with the previous week. Numbers of pits on strike or picketed out were now 69, compared with 119 at the beginning of the Summer Recess.

Numbers of strikers returning to work had increased markedly. Following eight months in which 6,000 had returned, around 5,000 had now returned over 9 days. 1,986 had returned the previous day. 707 had reported for the first shift that morning. He expected this figure to increase to 800-900 by the end of the day. In Scotland, where numbers of working miners had increased by 60 per cent in the space of two days, he hoped that 2 further pits would shortly restart production. In addition, Manton colliery was expected to resume production that day or the following day, and a further Yorkshire pit was expected to restart in the course of the week.

Movements of coal in the previous week had reached a record 954,000 tonnes. Coal stocks at the power stations had again increased following an increase of 120,000 tonnes during the preceding week. He expected a further increase during the current week. Availability of coal, rather than the ability of British Rail to provide trains, was now the limiting factor on movements by rail in the South Midlands.

Striking miners, when they returned, would become eligible after four weeks for back payments in respect of holiday and certain other entitlements. To receive these payments before Christmas, it was necessary for them to return by 19 November. The National Coal Board (NCB), however, were anxious to maintain incentives to return for those who had not done so by 19 November. The possibility of advance payments to strikers returning after 19 November was not ruled out. Moreover, the NCB intended to provide new incentives for returning strikers (and further rewards for miners who had continued to work)

by implementing their 1983 pay offer. This would give strikers returning to work the prospect of a lump sum for back pay from November 1983 to March 1984. The NCB were planning further letters to strikers, backed with paid advertising, to bring home to strikers what was on offer.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the growth of the return to work, with strikers returning in varying numbers to many previously strikebound pits, had led to a change in the strikers' recent tactic of two large-scale mass pickets each morning. The new pattern, in which signs of co-ordination could be seen, involved serious acts of violence to persons and property. It was hard for the police to counter these tactics in advance, both because of their wide geographical spread and because much of the trouble was taking place away from the pits themselves. A comparatively large number of arrests had been made, however, many of them followed by charges for serious criminal offences.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that the sequestrators appointed by the High Court had so far succeeded in seizing only a small sum from the assets of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). It seemed likely to be necessary shortly to indemnify the sequestrators as to their costs if the process was to continue.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. It was essential that the difficulties being experienced by the sequestrators in tracing NUM funds should not lead to a situation in which a judgement of the High Court for contempt was unenforceable. It would be proper for the Government to give the sequestrators an indemnity as to their costs if necessary to allow the judgement of the Court to be upheld.

b. Judgement had now been given against Mr Scargill and Mr Heathfield personally for costs arising from the action in the High Court in July by miners challenging the validity of the purported change in the rules of the NUM on disciplinary procedures. Actions were also pending against the members of the National Executive of the NUM over alleged

improper use of funds and against the trustees of the NUM for breach of trust. These developments, and particularly their possible consequences for individuals, could have important implications for the relative strength of moderate and hard-line opinion within the National Executive of the NUM. They might also have eventual implications for progress with sequestration, the next major step in which was the action in hand in the Irish High Court over money deposited by the NUM in the Irish Republic.

c. The backlog of cases arising from the strikes had been greatly reduced in the magistrates' courts, where 9 stipendaries had now been provided. It was nevertheless a matter for concern that a greater number of the more serious cases arising from the dispute had not yet been dealt with in the Crown Court.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the recent acceleration in the return to work was a most welcome victory for working miners acting in accordance with the rules of their union. Ministers should take care to treat it publicly as such: statements which appear to claim political credit for the Government were likely to be counterproductive. The Group welcomed the steps being taken by the NCB to sustain and, if possible, to increase the momentum of the return. The criminal acts with which strikers had responded were a serious development. She would arrange for Cabinet later that week to discuss further ways of reducing what still appeared to be unacceptable delays in trying the most serious criminal cases arising from the strike. As to the civil law, the Group agreed that the sequestrators should be indemnified by the Government as to their costs if that was necessary in order to allow the judgement of the High Court to be enforced.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Took note that the Prime Minister would arrange for Cabinet on 15 November to discuss further ways of accelerating the trial of serious criminal cases arising from the dispute.

3. Invited the Attorney General, consulting the Chief Secretary, Treasury as necessary, to arrange for the sequestrators pursuing the assets of the National Union of Mineworkers to be indemnified as to their costs if that was necessary to allow the judgement of the High Court to be enforced.

Cabinet Office

13 November 1984