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Coal

PRIME MINISTER

NCB CHAIRMAN

I can understand Patrick's eagerness to hang on to Ian MacGregor. I can also understand Nigel's keenness to hire him. But I do not think it would be right either to assume that both the BSC and the NCB could be run successfully by part-time Chairmen, or to expect a 71-year-old to take on that task.

And we think there is a further problem. MacGregor is known, to some extent rightly, as a man who will implement the strategic decisions of Ministers without much regard for the consequences for manpower. He is, in short, seen as a hatchet man. His appointment to the NCB would probably therefore make it much harder to achieve even a fairly conservative rate of pit closures without aggravation. And to appoint him as a "half-time hatchet man" would probably stir up the NUM in a way that few other issues could do.

So I think that both the BSC and the NCB should have full-time Chairmen; and that given that MacGregor can fill only one of those positions, he should stay at BSC. Surely it would in any case be folly to move a senior Chairman from a position in which he is generally regarded by Ministers as performing exceptionally well, to one in which we have no idea how well he would perform?

There is therefore no escaping the search for a new full-time Chairman of the NCB. Siddall and MacGregor being ruled out, we should ask Nigel to produce a short list - to which both Siddall himself and Robert Armstrong's Public Appointments Unit could be invited to contribute. If we have found one good man, I cannot believe that it is beyond our power to find another.

FERDINAND MOUNT

15 December 1982