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MISC 101(85) 2nd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 14 JANUARY 1985 at 10.30 am

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 Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Lord Young of Graffham
Minister without Portfolio

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

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

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

Mr Allan Stewart MP
Parliamentary Under-
Secretary of State
Scottish Office

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that the National Coal Board (NCB) reported 935 new faces at pits by 10.00 am that morning, compared with 820 at the same time a week earlier; the total included 34 new faces in South Wales, the best for any day in the strike. Following pay negotiations between the NCB and the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) on 11 January, there was now some reason to hope that the Board's pay offer would be accepted. In the meantime, it was reported that NACODS members were crossing picket lines in increased numbers, in Yorkshire as well as elsewhere. These developments offered the prospect that more pits would resume production shortly.

Despite the difficult weather, 920,000 tonnes of coal had been moved in the previous week and 189 coal trains ran, the highest weekly number since October. The NCB were trying to solve limited difficulties which had arisen over shortages of special fuel for some boilers.

Following the meeting of the National Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) on 10 January, the Nottinghamshire Area was likely to separate from the national union. If it did, it was possible that Leicestershire, the West Midlands and Lancashire might follow. The broadening of the NUM negotiating team to include the whole National Executive, which had been proposed by Mr Scargill in order to pre-empt pressure expected from within the Executive, might be helpful to prospects for an eventual settlement. The continuing lack of a basis for an early resumption of negotiations was helping to maintain the return to work. At Ashington, a pit in the North East Area strikers had voted to return to work unless negotiations had been re-opened by 21 January. There seemed also to be some chance of moves to call off the strike in the Western Area.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that picketing that morning was comparatively light and some working miners had gone into pits unescorted by police. There had been a reduction in the pressure on police resources.

In the Crown Courts, one man had been sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment and another to 3 years' youth custody for an attack on a police dog handler near Colchester. Further serious cases were due to be dealt with in the Crown Courts shortly. For the future, he was considering whether changes to the law of picketing might be based on existing provisions in Section 7 of the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the industrial action called by the rail unions for 17 January was likely to disrupt coal movements in the East Midlands and traffic on the East Coast Main Line. The extent of the effect on services from Kings Cross would depend on meetings to be held by the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF). Limited disruption for one day appeared now to be the most that the railway unions could achieve in support of the strike.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that there had been a number of developments in the High Court on 11 January. The action which had led to the appointment of a receiver in place of the trustees of the NUM had been adjourned pending the forthcoming elections to the National Executive. Further consideration of progress with sequestration had been adjourned pending the outcome of a hearing in the High Court in Dublin early that week. A date for a substantive hearing on a challenge by working miners to the legality of mass picketing organised by the South Wales Area of the NUM had been fixed for 21 January.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the best course continued to be to maintain and reinforce the factors encouraging the return to work. The prospect of a split in the NUM was entirely a matter for the members of the union and did not call for comment from the Government.

The Group -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

15 January 1985