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MISC 101(85) 7th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 18 FEBRUARY 1985 at 11.00 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

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 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

Mr David Waddington QC MP
Minister of State
Home Office

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

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

SECRETARIAT

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

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 868 new faces had been reported that morning by 10.00 am. 53 new faces had been reported in South Wales, the highest number for any day during the strike. 870,000 tonnes of coal had been moved the previous week. Transport, including rail movements to key power stations, continued satisfactorily.

The National Coal Board (NCB) had continued their contacts with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) through the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The Board had announced on Friday 15 February that no basis existed for a resumption of talks after the NUM had first rejected, and then proposed unacceptable amendments to, a draft basis for a settlement. The Board had maintained their line at a further meeting with the General Secretary of the TUC on the previous day. The TUC had subsequently asked to meet the Prime Minister. That request, together with the NUM National Executive meeting due on 23 February and the Delegate Conference called for the following day, had no doubt slowed the return to work that morning.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the British Rail (BR) Board intended to reassert firmer industrial discipline by action at local level. In his view, it was likely that a return to more normal working would follow without industrial action.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that an application from the Receiver for the dismissal of the sequestrators had been refused that morning by the High Court. The outcome of the sequestrators' case in the Irish High Court over NUM funds held in Dublin, which was expected soon, might not be favourable. Although it remained unlikely that any call would be made on the indemnity which the Government had provided to the sequestrators, there could be no doubt that it had been both necessary and helpful in allowing the sequestration to proceed effectively.

In discussion, it was reported that the proposal by the NCB that existing pit review procedures should continue to operate pending detailed agreement

on new procedures was regarded as a sticking point both by the NUM and by the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfireders (NACODS). A situation in which no review procedure operated pending the outcome of such discussions would allow union negotiators to block closures indefinitely, however, and would obviously be unacceptable to the NCB. On the other hand, it was understandable that the unions should be concerned that it would be in the tactical interests of the NCB to prolong negotiations if in the meantime closures could take place under existing procedures. A compromise might perhaps be possible under which, for example, existing procedures would apply only if new arrangements were not agreed by both sides using their best endeavours within a set time (perhaps 4-6 weeks).

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that she would agree to see representatives of the TUC as requested the following morning. Her aims would be, while making it clear that negotiations were a matter for the NCB and not for her, to explain why the Government considered it important that the strike should end on the basis of clear understandings between the parties; and to encourage the Congress increasingly to bring a constructive influence to bear on the NUM and Mr Scargill.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

18 February 1985