

Sharp exchanges in Commons over ballot on miners' dispute

By Philip Webster, Political Reporter

Political differences over the miners' dispute sharpened yesterday when Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, said that it was a great pity that no national ballot had been allowed.

There was confusion in the Commons after the speaker, Mr Bernard Weatherill, halted Mr Walker midway through his reply to a private notice question tabled by Mr Tony Benn. Mr Weatherill said that the minister was going beyond the terms covered by the question.

Earlier Mr Benn had been involved in a heated altercation during a live interview on Independent Television News. The speaker's action in interrupting Mr Walker, which upset Conservative MPs, came as he answered a question from Mr Benn about the effect on energy supplies of the decision by the transport unions to back the miners.

Mr Walker had said that he hoped the unions would take into account that 14 of the 24 members of the National Union of Mineworkers' executive were mandated to support a national ballot and that 56 pits were now at work compared with 46 last week. Mr Weatherill said that Mr Walker was going beyond the question of action by the transport unions.

Labour MPs then protested that Mr Walker was deliberately widening the issue, and it was several minutes before order was restored. Mr Walker then told the House that there were six months' stocks of coal at the power stations.

The confrontation on ITN's *News at One* programme between Mr Benn and Mr Leonard Parkin, the interviewer, came after ITN had shown two pithead reports followed by another item in which Mr Neil Kinnock declined to say whether or not he supported a ballot.

Mr Benn, asked whether he backed a ballot, said ITN was trying to create trouble in the Labour Party and was losing public credibility because it was

not covering what was really happening.

As Mr Parkin attempted to intervene, Mr Benn said: "You listen to me for a moment... because I think you have brought me here under false pretences."

ITN coverage had been a disgrace, he said. People were defending their jobs, trying desperately to save their communities. "Why don't you cover the crisis in the mining industry upon which you and I will depend for energy when the oil runs out?"

As Mr Parkin persisted Mr Benn said that the national executive of Labour had backed the miners, and he added: "And what you are doing, and this is how ITN makes a living and his knighthood, you're trying to make trouble in the Labour Party, discourage the miners, who've got a very hard battle on".

ITN said last night that Mr Benn was entitled to his point of view. ITN's reputation for impartiality was a matter of public record.

'Fetish' of ballots

Mr Bill Paynter, an influential figure in the National Union of Mineworkers, yesterday attacked the "fetish" of secret ballots on industrial action and argued that a rolling strike was "no less democratic than a ballot vote". (Our Labour Editor writes).

Mr Paynter, a former general secretary of the union whose views still command wide respect, said the Government, the National Coal Board and certain union leaders were plugging for a ballot vote in the belief that the outcome would be against a strike.

In a letter to the union journal, *The Miner*, he insisted: "It is not unknown for ballots to be operated to defeat action. It is over-simplistic to see a ballot as a sort of pure instrument of democracy within the union and ignore the external forces at work to influence and possibly determine the outcome."



A mobile miner, protected by police, crossing through pickets outside the Parkside colliery at Newton le Willows in Lancashire yesterday (Photograph: Brian Harris).

PCs on pit duty can earn £500

By Peter Evans
Home Affairs Correspondent

The Police Federation confirmed yesterday that a constable on duty at a picket line could get £400 or £500 a week in overtime and basic payments.

The actual amount depends on how much time the officer spends on his feet, and his position on the pay scale.

The pay system for police back-up provides that any time in a support unit should be divided into eight hours at basic pay, eight hours at time and a third, and eight hours sleep.

If sleep is not disturbed and reasonable facilities are given for leisure, no pay is available for that eight-hour period. However, if no proper sleeping accommodation is available, the third eight-hour period in the day also qualifies as time and a third.

A top-rate constable with a minimum of 15 years' service earns £203.58p for each five-day week on an ordinary eight-hour a day shift.

Royal visits likely to go ahead despite unrest in pits

By David Young, Energy Correspondent

Plans for the inauguration by members of the Royal Family of two of the Central Electricity Generating Board's new power stations in the next three months are going ahead despite the miners' dispute.

The possibility of the Drax B coal-fired station in Yorkshire and the Dinorwic hydro-power station in Gwynedd becoming embroiled in the dispute has been discounted. More than 20 of the board's 95 power stations are now being picketed.

Drax B is due to be officially opened by the Queen in June and the Dinorwic station in May by the Prince of Wales.

The board's official position is that it is not directly involved in the miners' dispute, although various contingency plans have been drawn up and can be put into operation at short notice.

A Buckingham Palace spokesman said that the engagements at the two power stations would be reviewed only if the hosts involved made a request to do so.

Dinorwic, deep inside a Snowdonia mountain, can feed power into the national grid for up to five hours. It has been designed to operate only when demand is high.

The board is considering increasing oil generated power from the 2,000 megawatt Kingsnorth station in Kent, its only station capable of generating electricity from both coal and oil.

At present coal is being used but a switch to oil could be made within hours if coal stocks fall below the level regarded as the safe minimum. Kingsnorth is one of the board's "top ten" producers of power.

The board also has small turbine-powered stations in London, Watford, Leicester and Letchworth, which could contribute to the national grid at short notice. These unmanned stations use generating equipment similar to that on the North Sea oil production rigs.

A large North Sea platform such as the Marathon Brae A

platform, due to be officially opened next week, generates enough power to supply a city the size of Leicester from gas normally burnt as waste.

The local turbine stations have seldom been used, because they have to depend on aviation-type fuel which makes the electricity they produce 70 per cent more expensive than that produced by coal or nuclear power.

Nuclear power stations now contribute about 18 per cent of Britain's electricity, but as they are run as base-load stations and turned off only for maintenance it is unlikely that they would be used to make up the shortfall from coal-fired stations.

The board is therefore concentrating on producing more power from its five big oil-fired stations to preserve its coal stocks, and on persuading the Government to pay for the increased use of oil. These stations normally produce 4 per cent of the board's output.

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