
Thatcher defends decision of NCB to import coke

Mrs Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister, defended the decision of the National Coal Board to buy coke from abroad in order to fulfil the first part of an American contract.

In response to a Conservative MP who said violence and thuggery was continuing in the miners' strike unabated, she said in the Commons that only correct picketing was peaceful picketing and "what we are seeing is not that."

Mr Robert Atkins (South Ribble, C) asked: Does she think it is an extraordinary state of affairs that the NCB, in the face of intense competition, has obtained a contract for 175,000 tonnes of coal to be exported to the United States but is now having to buy on the open market because it cannot be provided by those in this country?

This puts some doubts about the credibility of those within the leadership of the NUM who are saying that they have the interests of the coal industry at heart.

Mrs Thatcher: I agree. The NCB obtained a valuable contract to export coke to the United States. It is an essential part of the contract that the first amount should leave this country by the end of May. If we cannot get it, because we are not producing any in Britain at the moment, it makes sense to keep the next tranche within the possibility

of sale from this country by purchasing coal and exporting from here.

What the NCB is doing is trying to keep the possibility of retaining those sales in this country, which is a very advisable policy. It would be far better if there had been coal produced in this country.

Sir Anthony Grant (South-West Cambridgeshire, C): Since the matter was raised with her a week ago, violence and thuggery in the miners' strike has continued unabated. All decent people are disgusted by it.

Is it not time that illegal picketing of any sort was unequivocally condemned by all sections of this House.

Mrs Thatcher: Yes, I believe that is correct. The only right to picket is the right peacefully to picket, to try to persuade people on their way to work. Most people would agree what we are seeing is not that.

The criminal law on picketing has not changed... (Labour interruptions) The law as it relates to violence and intimidation has not changed. It is the same as it was.

Most people are grateful to the police and congratulate them on the excellent way they are carrying out their duties, and this goes for the majority of miners.

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