

Nacods agreement not in jeopardy

COAL DISPUTE

Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, insisted three times in exchanges with Mr Neil Kinnock, leader of the Opposition, that the agreement made between the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shifters and the National Coal Board last October had not been put in jeopardy.

Mr Kinnock was equally insistent, during question time in the Commons that Mrs Thatcher was grossly misrepresented or misrepresenting the morning's meeting between Nacods and the NUM. She should make a serious effort to get negotiations restarted, he said.

The Prime Minister's retort was that the NUM should accept the agreement between Nacods and the NCB. She later added that an agreement between two bodies held and was reaffirmed and could never be upset, except by further agreement between those two bodies.

Mr Gerald Huxford (Cannock and Burnwood, C) who began exchanges on the coal dispute, asked: The Prime Minister will have heard that more working miners have been stoned by pickets as they went to work. In view of the critical part played by violence and intimidation in prolonging the dispute will she set up an inquiry to examine the organization and financing of picketing and violence in the dispute?

Mrs Thatcher: The Home Secretary has been undertaking a review of the Public Order Act which will take account of experiences on the picket line. I agree that the strike has been prolonged by violence and intimidation. The review is nearing completion and I hope we will soon be in a position to make an announcement.

Mr Kinnock: Mrs Thatcher has repeatedly demanded that the NUM accept the Nacods agreement. In the

light of the joint statement from the unions that the conditions demanded of the NUM by the NCB effectively negate the agreement reached between Nacods and the NCB, will she strongly advise the board to return to full negotiations so that there can be a settlement of the strike?

Mrs Thatcher: The board met Nacods earlier this week and made clear that the board will honour the agreement with Nacods in full. It is a great pity that this morning Nacods was not able to persuade the NUM to accept the single Acs compromise previously negotiated.

Mr Kinnock: She is either grossly misinterpreting or grossly misrepresenting the events of this morning - the discussion and agreement between the executives of the NUM and Nacods. She has before her the joint statement by those unions.

Will she not now make a serious effort to get negotiations restarted for a settlement and start to act like a responsible Prime Minister instead of seeking further to impede negotiations and being a wrecking ball who wants conquest at any cost? (Labour cheers.)

Mrs Thatcher: That is absolute nonsense. The board will honour the agreement with Nacods in full. May I stress that again and again? (Labour interruptions.)

That is not in doubt and if the NUM will also accept the Nacods agreement and the spirit of the Nacods agreement, the coal strike could be over.

I urge Mr Kinnock to urge the NUM to accept the Nacods agreement.

Mr Kinnock: She has used exactly the words she used last week. I urge her, because the circumstances are significantly changed by this morning's negotiations, discussions and agreement between the two unions, to use the power she knows she has, to go to the board and advise them to resume negotiations.

Nacods has agreed that conditions being demanded of the

NUM by the NCB would effectively negate the agreement reached between Nacods and the NCB in October.

Does she not understand that the whole basis of the agreement is in jeopardy because of her interference and because of the way she has sought to prolong the dispute?

She has a chance to secure negotiations and a settlement. Why does she not take it?

Mrs Thatcher: He is trying to make out that an agreement freely negotiated between the NCB and Nacods is in jeopardy. It is not.

Mr Kinnock at this point threw a piece of paper across the table of the House to Mrs Thatcher. She appeared to ignore it.

Mrs Thatcher: It is not, and nothing he says can put a freely negotiated agreement between the two sides in jeopardy. That agreement with Nacods is not in jeopardy.

The NCB met Nacods earlier this week to reaffirm yet again that that agreement will be honoured in full.

Why does Mr Kinnock not urge the NUM to accept that agreement? It will honour the NCB in full, regardless of the impression Mr Kinnock is trying to give.

Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democrats: The Nacods settlement allows for an independent review procedure. That still allows the NCB to go ahead and close pits against the advice of the independent review procedure. Equally here is no commitment on Nacods part to have to accept this review procedure, and they can take strike action.

The same would apply to the NUM if they signed the Nacods agreement. They are not bound to accept the advice of the independent review procedure. What is vital is that the NCB's right to manage should not be interfered with.

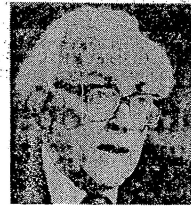
Mrs Thatcher: Yes. The last paragraph of the agreement states: if at the end of this process - the colliery review procedure - the matter is still in conflict and might

lead to foreshortening of the colliery's life expectancy, then the question - as has already happened - can be referred for national consideration would then be subject to the independent review procedure and full weight given to its findings just as would be the case in any distinct closure proposal.

The Nacods approach was given in evidence to the select committee. It was very different to the NUM approach given to the same select committee.

The Nacods evidence made it quite clear, on November 25 1982, that they still of course opposed closures. They made it perfectly clear that the association would normally agree to closure only when reserves to coal had been worked out.

In other circumstances, the decision to close would be made by



Foot: Demand wrecked position with Nacods

NCB. Dr Owen is correct. Nacods can oppose all the way but in the end they will accept the NCB's right to manage. And of course they are perfectly free to use the strike weapon if they wish. (Loud Labour interruptions.)

The Opposition do not want to hear the actual agreement and the evidence. The agreement cannot be negotiated by things which are said outside the agreement.

Mr Michael Foot (Barnsley, Gwent, Lab): Does not Mrs Thatcher appreciate that what changed the situation last week was the issue with her approval, by the NCB of a demand that the NUM sign a document before they came to the negotiating table?

It was that demand also that wrecked the position with Nacods. Does not Mrs Thatcher understand why did she and her ministers not consult with Nacods before they gave approval to the document which injured the negotiations going?

Mrs Thatcher: He is under a fundamental misconception. An agreement between two bodies holds and is reaffirmed and can never be upset except by further agreement between those two bodies.

The NCB met Nacods earlier this week and reaffirmed that that agreement they had previously negotiated still stands. It cannot be upset by what is said elsewhere other than between those two groups of people.

Later, during business questions in the Commons, the Prime Minister was accused by Labour MPs of having gravely misunderstood the miners' strike and of deliberately trying to block a settlement.

Mr Peter Hardy (Westworth, Lab) said: The Prime Minister during question time displayed a serious lack of adequate understanding of the coal dispute and of the position of the association with which I am involved (Nacods).

The Prime Minister's misunderstanding is so grave that it causes further peril and protracted difficulty. The dispute has now gone on long enough to justify urgent and positive steps to achieve a negotiated settlement.

Mr Biffen Leader of the House, said he would report these views to Mrs Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher's words were well chosen and like everyone in the Commons she wanted a speedy resolution to this dispute.

PHONE TAPPING

The Government legislation being introduced next week to establish a comprehensive statutory framework for the interception of communications will not in any way seek or permit extension of the present scope of interception. Mr Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary said in the Commons.

He was making a statement about the White Paper on interception published today outlining the main features of next week's Bill and describing how effect will be given to that legislation.

The Bill, he said, would cover interception of all forms of telecommunications in the public networks and the post.

Mr Gerald Kaufman, chief Opposition spokesman on home affairs, said that he had serious misgivings about the proposals, which could open the door wider to big brother state.

In his statement, Mr Brittan said that the Bill would incorporate existing stringent controls and limitations into the law and would define the grounds on which a Home Secretary would be empowered to authorize interception. Those were in line with existing practice and were narrower than the grounds permitted by the European Convention.

Those would be a national security, prevention and detection of serious crime and the safeguarding of the economic well being of the United Kingdom. In the latter case, interception would only be permissible to obtain information about events outside the country.

Unauthorized interception (he said) will be made a Criminal offence.

The legislation (Mr Brittan said) will also greatly increase the existing safeguards, not only by creating the new criminal offence but also by providing a means of redress for

communications to private individuals or democratic organizations.

There was extreme concern about a provision which could lead to the surveillance of almost anybody.

The provision which allowed interception of communications likely to endanger Britain's economic well-being was worrying.

It could be used (he added) for partisan and political purposes described as in the national interest.

Mr Brittan said the Bill would merely put on the statute book the powers exercised by most democratic governments already.

The tribunal would consist of legally qualified people who commanded the confidence of Parliament and the country. The privatization of British Telecom would make no difference.

The Secretary of State would have to judge what information should be intercepted and further protection was provided by the independent tribunal.

Dr David Owen, Leader of the SDP, asked the Home Secretary to look again at what he had said about the appointment of an independent tribunal. There was a strong reason for the House to authorize the appointment of its members. At least there should be a consultation mechanism among the parties. It should not be seen as part of government patronage.

Mr Brittan undertook to consider the point about the tribunal. In practice it would not be difficult to find a way of appointing people to the tribunal which would command general confidence.

Mr John Wheeler (Westminster North, C): While congratulating him on proposals that are important for civil liberties, will he confirm that the important decisions to be made in connection with this issue will be made by him personally and not by officials?

Mr Brittan: I can give that confirmation. It has always been the case and will continue to be the case

Coal Dispute.

The Times (London, England), Friday, Feb 08, 1985; pg. 4; Issue 62057. (1354 words)

Category: Politics and Parliament

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS67342408