

Transport

Free



cc: Mr. Keecher

16

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

26 February 1982

ASLEF DISPUTE

The Prime Minister was grateful for your Secretary of State's minute of 23 February.

The Prime Minister agrees that your Secretary of State should speak to Sir Peter Parker shortly, making it clear to him that the tough option of facing up to a national strike on the railways is not excluded. The Prime Minister agrees, too, that this should not be done in such a way as to give Sir Peter Parker carte-blanche beforehand; and that he must so handle affairs at the time as to be able to give the Government the considered view of his Board on the need to follow that course if that is their judgement. The Prime Minister hopes that your Secretary of State will emphasise to Sir Peter that Ministers believe that, should it come to a strike, the specific issue on which it is fought should be a good one, that an acceptable way through should be clearly foreseen, and that there should be a background of cumulative influence on the attitude of the drivers. (It is the Prime Minister's view that it is extremely important during the time between now and a possible strike for the Board to take all sensible steps to influence the attitudes of the drivers).

I am sending copies of this letter to John Kerr (HM Treasury), John Halliday (Home Office), David Omand (Ministry of Defence), Julian West (Department of Energy), Barnaby Shaw (Department of Employment), Jonathan Spencer (Department of Industry), Muir Russell (Scottish Office), Gerry Spence (CPRS) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

M. C. SCHOLAR

Anthony Mayer, Esq.,  
Department of Transport.

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SECRET AND PERSONAL

Prime Minister

①

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shall I, in promulgating  
your response to Mr Howell's  
minute, include the points  
at x?

Yes  
MCS 24/2  
[Signature]

24 February 1982

✓c JV

Qa 05843

To: MR SCHOLAR

From: J R IBBS

ASLEF Dispute

1. I have just seen the minute from the Secretary of State for Transport to the Prime Minister dated 23 February which was not copied to me.
2. He refers there to "the possibility that we may need to face and win a national railway strike". I have two practical observations to make on this, both related to the principle that it is generally a mistake to face a strike unless you can see an acceptable way out of it.
3. First, one crucial factor in determining the prospects of a strike having a satisfactory outcome is the precise ground on which it is fought. This is not just a matter of the broad principle that BR needs greater productivity, on which Peter Parker should of course be supported, but depends on the specific issue on which the dispute turns. For example, if the RSNT in March rules in favour of flexible rostering on terms acceptable to BR but this is rejected by ASLEF, the BR Board could well be on good ground if it imposes the settlement and if necessary faces a strike. But before taking this key decision it would of course still need to foresee the way out of the strike and the Government would need to judge the likely duration compared with power station endurance.
4. On the other hand, if the RSNT does not favour flexible rostering on terms acceptable to BR there may be no good ground on which to have a major fight with ASLEF; in this event the best course may be to accept the decision and start afresh on the productivity issue in the new round of pay negotiations this Spring against the background of BR's appalling commercial and financial situation.
5. The ground on which it would be worth standing and fighting therefore deserves most careful preparatory thought by the BR Board. Incurring a strike in a desire to avoid obvious defeat could turn into a worse disaster.



SECRET AND PERSONAL

6. Second, as I pointed out in my minute to you yesterday it is extremely important during the period between now and a possible strike to take all sensible steps to influence the attitudes of the drivers. Affecting attitudes is not something that can be done at the last moment.

7. The Prime Minister may therefore wish the Secretary of State when he talks to Peter Parker to emphasise that Ministers, while leaving the immediate conduct of the matter to BR, believe it is important, should it come to a strike, that the specific issue on which it is fought should be a good one, that an acceptable way through should be clearly foreseen, and that there should be a background of cumulative influence on the attitude of the drivers.

8. I am sending a copy of this minute to Sir Robert Armstrong.

*Handwritten signature*

SECRET

cc Ad  
JV  
Prime Minister

①

14c

Agree to this approach?

MS 23/p

Qa 05841

To: MR SCHOLAR

From: J R IBBS

23 February 1982

Aslef Dispute

1. Your letter to Anthony Mayer dated 18 February records the decisions reached at meetings on 16 and 17 February. The subject of the dispute is now a matter for negotiations which are expected to culminate in a hearing by the Railway Staff National Tribunal in mid-March. However, it is by no means certain that agreement will be reached. The attitude of the drivers themselves to flexible rostering proposals may still turn out to be crucial.
2. At the first of the meetings recorded in your letter some thought was given to how the attitudes of the drivers might be influenced. The CPRS produced a note "Ways of Inducing the ASLEF membership to accept the British Rail productivity proposals" which I attached to my minute to you dated 15 February: this note was handed out and considered at the meeting and collected again at the end. It listed five ways by which a change of attitudes might be brought about. The next three weeks will be a further opportunity for trying to influence the attitudes of individual drivers. Clearly this is a matter for BR but Ministers will want to be reassured that all possible sensible steps are being taken.
3. In particular I should like to draw attention to the need to persuade the drivers that the changes proposed are fair. (Paragraph 5 of the CPRS note.) At the meeting on 16 February the Prime Minister asked the Secretary of State for Transport to find out from BR what the effect of the proposals would typically be on pay, total hours and pattern, both of rest days and within working days. I am not myself aware of what the answer was; no information on this aspect is contained in the guidance notes issued by the Secretary of State for Transport's Private Secretary

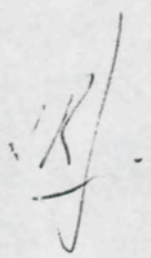
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on 19 February. My concern is that if Ministers cannot be given a reasonable answer, it is unlikely that the drivers can be persuaded that what is being asked of them is fair. At the very least BR management need to explain at each depot the likely effect on individuals.

4. It may be that the Prime Minister may wish to enquire further from the Secretary of State (a) whether he is satisfied that BR are doing enough to influence drivers during the next three weeks and (b) what information he has on the effect that the rostering proposals would have on individuals. (These seem to me to be matters requiring immediate attention and it would be inappropriate to leave them to the new MISC 72 Committee of Officials which is considering options in the event of further industrial trouble on the railways).

5. I am sending a copy of this minute to Sir Robert Armstrong.



14B  
Prime Minister (1)

Agree to X?

Mr 23/2

~~est~~  
Yes Mr.

PRIME MINISTER

ASLEF DISPUTE

The basis on which Sir Peter Parker accepted the McCarthy report is from his point of view only just defensible. The efforts of the press - which we must firmly squash - to give credence to reports of a division, which does not exist, between his approach and ours may for the moment insert a further element of uncertainty. But we can none of us assume that he will not have to face a major fight on the railways if he is to win from ASLEF the changes that are needed, and it would certainly be better if he can have that fight on grounds where ASLEF cannot call on the support from the other railway unions.

This may come when the issue of flexible rostering has been back to Lord McCarthy and his colleagues, and they have reported in the last week in March. We shall need then a clear analysis of possible options, including the possibility that we may need to face and win a national railway strike. My Department is putting this in hand, in consultation with the others concerned, as envisaged in paragraph 'd' of your Private Secretary's letter of 18 February. This will cover the financing question referred to in paragraph "f".

As the same time we must ensure that Sir Peter Parker is left in no doubt of our willingness to consider the need to back him in a national strike. Clearly we cannot give him and his Board carte blanche beforehand. But we must make clear to him that the tough option is not excluded, and that

he must so handle affairs at the time as to be able to give us the considered view of his Board on the need to follow that course if that is their judgement, and for us to deal with that. I would like to speak to him shortly in these terms. I regard this as vital, since there must equally be no suggestion that he and his Board are in a position to accept a defeat and by such a surrender involve us in a most severe setback in the handling of other questions on the wider industrial front. X

I am copying this minute to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Defence, Energy, Employment, Industry and Scotland, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

14.

DAVID HOWELL

23 February 1982