



For 13/6
meeting

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CONFIDENTIAL

PRIME MINISTER

OPENCAST COAL ACT 1958

We are to meet on 13 June to discuss Sir Robert Armstrong's minute of 21 May. Since I have both economic and planning responsibilities (and some constituency experience involving proposed opencast working near a national park!), it may be helpful if I comment in advance.

While accepting that some local authorities may obstruct plans for opencast workings for political reasons, it has also to be recognised that these operations bring noise, dirt and additional heavy traffic to the locality, as well as income, jobs and eventual improvement to the environment after the site has been completed. Local residents argue strongly that the coal should be got from somewhere else first. Politics aside, local planning authorities will always be under pressure to oppose.

But the question of how to secure a competitive coalfield in South Wales is also vitally important to me as Secretary of State. Opencast may well have a part to play in this. The Chairman of the NCB has spoken to me of the good market prospects for anthracite if it can be extracted in south west Wales and sold at a competitive price. We would all wish to see a successful development, and I have told him that I will give all help I can in reaching speedy planning decisions, and that the transfer of powers will assist by enabling me to balance all the conflicting environmental, economic and political requirements. My department is in touch with the South Wales Area of the NCB to discuss future plans for exploiting the anthracite reserves, and it is clear from these how important the development could be for resisting import penetration.

The previous system, under which my officials acted as agents of the Department of Energy under the Opencast Coal Act 1958 was neither quick nor convincing in Wales. The new system does, I believe, enable me to assure Peter Walker that the powers will be used in Wales so as to minimise delay, as he asks. Under it, the NCB could in any case appeal against rejection by a local authority, or against failure to determine the application within a reasonable time. But if that were not enough, my department can intervene. In many cases - anthracite may well be one - there will be obvious grounds for my swiftly calling in applications, especially where there is excellent market for the coal which might be damaged or lost through delay. Indeed, I should expect to do so wherever national interests of that kind were so clearly at stake, of course consulting Peter Walker in cases of importance. So far as Wales is concerned, I believe that the transfer of responsibility will expedite

/decisions, but not ...



decisions, but not put the NCB at a disadvantage, and I am strongly in favour of continuing with it: and removing the requirement for authorisation as well as planning consent by repealing the relevant provisions of the Opencast Coal Act as soon as possible.

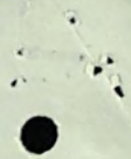
/ I am sending copies of this minute to the Lord President; the Secretaries of State for the Environment, Energy and Scotland: and Sir Robert Armstrong.

6 June 1985

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