

THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MISC 101(84) 12th Meeting

COPY NO 18

CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
WEDNESDAY 25 APRIL 1984 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Norman Tebbit MP  
Secretary of State for Trade  
and Industry

The Rt Hon Tom King MP  
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP  
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP  
Secretary of State for Transport

Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP  
Solicitor General

Mr David Waddington QC MP  
Minister of State, Home Office

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin  
Minister of State, Scottish Office

Mr Giles Shaw MP  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of  
State, Department of Energy

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong  
Mr M S Buckley  
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE  
COAL INDUSTRY



SECRET AND PERSONAL

## INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY said that, at the Special Delegate Conference (SDC) held on 19 April, the rules of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had been amended to reduce from 55 per cent to 50 per cent the majority required in a ballot for national strike action. Rather than call a ballot, however, the SDC had passed a motion in support of the earlier decision by the NUM National Executive to promote a national stoppage by action on a regional basis. Following the SDC, the Nottinghamshire leadership of the NUM had called on their members not to work. Nevertheless, of 15 pits available for work, 12 had worked normally, and only one had decided to strike. Pits were also working in Staffordshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, North Wales and Cumbria. That day, in all, 40 pits were working normally and there was some production at 6 others. Four others in South Derbyshire were still on holiday. Where pits were working the turn-out of workers was encouragingly high. Supplies from open-cast operations, however, remained severely restricted by pickets, although some supplies continued to be moved to customers.

Stocks of coal at power stations had fallen in the previous week by 0.8 million tonnes. Taking into account the effect of maximum oilburn, which should be attained in the course of the week, this rate of consumption remained consistent with endurance up to the Autumn. 0.5 million tonnes of coal had been moved the previous week, 0.3 million of them to power stations: if deliveries to power stations could be improved to 0.5 million tonnes per week, endurance would extend to February 1985.

A meeting of the Coal Industry National Consultative Council was taking place that day, attended by the National Coal Board (NCB) and the coal unions other than the NUM. The NUM had declined an invitation to attend. The meeting would discuss the possibility of rephrasing the restructuring measures planned for the current year. The Chairman of the NCB, Mr McGregor, had indicated at the meeting of the Council during the previous week that he would be



prepared to have such a discussion. The NCB had made clear both at the time and subsequently that acceptance by the unions of the need to reduce capacity by 4 million tonnes and manpower by 20,000 was a precondition for any rephasing. It was possible that Mr MacGregor might make a statement on the outcome of the meeting in the course of the day. He was clearing with Mr MacGregor a form of words about the offer of discussions on rephasing for use in connection with a Private Notice Question for answer that afternoon. In his answer, he proposed to state the number of pits and men currently working, to compare them with the position before Easter, and to make brief references both to the consultations which the NCB continued to offer the NUM and to events at the SDC on 19 April. If necessary, in response to supplementary questions, he would make it clear that current stocks of coal were sufficient for the endurance of a strike lasting many months.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that between 40 and 45 coal trains were expected to run that day. Only 3 were reported to be held up by action by railwaymen sympathetic to the miner's strike. Virtually all coal offered to British Rail was being delivered.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that, though his Department were not making detailed enquiries of industrial consumers, the information available suggested that the position was broadly unchanged and that no serious problem had emerged since before Easter. This was confirmed by the Confederation of British Industry, who had consulted a sample of their members. The position in the steel industry remained much as before. Production the previous week had been 94 per cent of average for a week in the first quarter of the year and production levels at Teesside and Port Talbot had been above the average. Deliveries of imported coal and coke had been made at Hunterston and Teesside.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, HOME OFFICE said that those miners who wished to go to their places of work had continued to be able to do so. The heaviest picketing that morning was at Bolsover and Cresswell in North Derbyshire. Picketing in Nottinghamshire had been relatively light, though more pickets were deployed than at the same time the previous week. All picketing had been reported as



peaceful. 500 demonstrators had been reported outside Lincoln Prison, where 4 miners were being held on remand after being rearrested for a second offence of obstruction while on bail on a similar charge. The demonstrators had now withdrawn, but there were reports that the local Labour Party intended a further demonstration that afternoon.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that there had been little significant change since before Easter in Scotland, except at one pit in Ayrshire where picketing had prevented maintenance staff from entering and where there was some danger that the coal face would be lost.

The following were the main points made in discussion -

- a. The President and General Secretary of the NUM were reported to be in Nottinghamshire that day seeking to rally support for the strike. It would be necessary to be alert for any change in the position there.
- b. It was important that discussions between the NCB and unions about the possible rephrasing of closures should not lead to an erroneous public impression that no further closures would be required in future in addition to those planned for the current year. Considerable numbers would, in fact, be required for the fulfilment of the Board's financial strategy. On similar grounds it would be undesirable for the impression to be given that the undertaking by the NCB of no compulsory redundancies in the current year extended indefinitely to future years.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that in his answer to the Private Notice Question that afternoon and in replies to supplementary questions, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Energy should take account of the need for the Government to avoid being represented as a party to the dispute, of the content of the oral reports which had been given to the Group, and of the points made in discussion. For the longer-term, the outcome of the Special Delegate Conference of the NUM on 19 April made it all the more important to maximise endurance, not only by oilburn and the use



of the Scottish interconnector, but also by achieving higher levels of deliveries to power stations. The Secretary of State for Energy should investigate and report on whether there were any obstacles to moving coal to the power stations from stock at pits which remained open. He should also investigate and report on whether it would be possible by any means to increase supplies from open-cast workings.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion, and invited the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Energy to be guided accordingly.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Energy to report on -
  - a. whether there were any obstacles to moving coal to the power stations from stock at pits which remained open; and
  - b. whether it was possible to increase supplies from open-cast workings.

Cabinet Office

26 April 1984