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1. Mr Butler

3 October 1984

2. PRIME MINISTER

NACODS AND THE COAL DISPUTE

This morning's meeting of MISC 101 gave a good airing to the difficult handling issues involved in the NACODS dispute.

The Coal Board has to get across to the average NACODS member and the public the point that the original cause of the dispute - the 15 August circular - is no longer in contention. This should be broadcast loudly, both to demonstrate that Ian MacGregor and the Coal Board are flexible, and to make it more difficult, if the need should arise, for NACODS to get their members out on dispute. This is an urgent matter.

Ian MacGregor could say that he had listened carefully to NACODS views and, having seen the intensity of the violence and intimidation which they were facing in the worst affected areas, he had decided that the normal commercial rules could not apply in this situation.

How should the talks with NACODS proceed? The NCB should concentrate on an advisory panel rather than an arbitrating committee of wise men: it would be wrong, given the wish to avoid a strike coinciding with next week's Conference, to break off all discussions now.

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Of course an advisory panel can become the thin end of the wedge: it represents backtracking from the perfectly satisfactory arrangements for pit closures operated over many years prior to this dispute. It ultimately calls into question management's right to manage. This is a point which many on our side, and many newspapers, will be making in the next few days.

However, the talks should be kept going and there are many issues which can be discussed. How wide a remit should the advisory panel have? How many people should sit on it? If the numbers could be decided, what kind of people should they be, and would there be rows over the membership? How strong could their advice be? And who ultimately has the task of sifting their advice? What happens if the advice is rejected, etc, etc?

A week of such discussions could serve to confuse the whole issue of the desirability, shape and workability of an advisory panel. These confusions should be used as an opportunity by the NCB to reaffirm (a) its flexibility; (b) its broader point about having given in to NACODS on the issue of concern to them; and (c) to raise in people's minds the doubts about the point of talking to NACODS at all about these issues, when the NUM would be very unlikely to agree to any such solution. At the end of the week, the NCB could break off and explain to the public how hard they had tried

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to accommodate sensible NACODS requests, or could go on talking about a deal with NACODS (that the NUM would doubtless refuse).

Meanwhile, it is vitally important that the NCB should sack any miner convicted of violence against fellow NCB employees or property. The NCB should reiterate its intention to do this.



JOHN REDWOOD

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