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MISC 101(84) 49th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 26 NOVEMBER 1984 at 11.00 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Lord Young of Graffham
Minister without Portfolio

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

The Rt Hon John Stanley MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence

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

Mr David Trippier MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Department of
Trade and Industry

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 6000 striking miners had returned to work during the previous week. Just over 800 had returned on the first shift that morning. This number, which he expected to rise to about 1000 during the day, was smaller than for the two preceding Mondays, though about average for other recent weekdays. The acceleration in the return to pits in Scotland and the North East was continuing. Only 24 pits now had no men present, compared with 111 at the beginning of the month. About 36 per cent of members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were now not on strike: of the total of 222,000 employees in the industry a figure of 100,000 not on strike should be reached that day or the following day. There were some grounds for hope that discussions underway in the Nottinghamshire area of the NUM might result in the overtime ban being called off in the County.

Movements of coal in the previous week had matched the high levels of the week before. No difficulties were reported with road or rail transport. Estimates of endurance, which took full account of the Christmas break, showed the power stations in a strong position.

A number of pits were being prevented from resuming production by the refusal of some members of the National Association of Colliery Overseers, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) to cross picket lines. This problem arose particularly in the North East and in Yorkshire, where the personal influence of the President of NACODS was strong. NACODS members were under pressure both from the National Coal Board (NCB) and from working miners to work normally.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the decline in mass picketing by the NUM continued. The highest number of pickets reported at any pit that morning was 600. Numbers elsewhere were very significantly less.

19 people had been arrested in connection with the attack on 23 November on Mr Michael Fletcher, a working miner from Pontefract. 9 had been charged and would appear in court that day on charges of which the most serious was one of aggravated burglary, which carried a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Charges were not thought likely in the case of 3 men at present on police bail. The remaining 7 - who included an officer of the NUM - were still being interviewed by the police.

There had been no arrests in connection with a fire at the home of another working miner. 5 arrests had, however, been made in connection with the vandalism which had taken place at the ^{NCS} NUM Geological Unit at Cadeby on 18 November. 3 of the 5 were unemployed and the remaining 2 were juveniles; no link had as yet been established with the dispute.

He was advised by the Lord Chancellor that a number of serious cases arising from the dispute were due to be tried in the period up to early December by the Crown Courts at Warwick, Derby, Stafford, Liverpool, Chester and by other Crown Courts in the North East and South East.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that it was likely that the Government's decision to indemnify the sequestrators pursuing the national assets of the NUM would become public on or shortly after 28 November.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. There was a danger that recent extreme instances of intimidation and vandalism might effectively deter miners from returning in small numbers to strike-bound pits. The best way of countering this would be for the courts to be seen to deal appropriately and promptly with offences. It was noticeable that the President of the NUM, although he had deplored attacks on property, had not condemned violence against Mr Fletcher and others.

- b. It might be possible to guard against violent intimidation by equipping working miners with home alarms of the kind widely used by the elderly and handicapped.
- c. Exchanges during the previous week between the NCB and NACODS about the Board's policy of avoiding compulsory redundancies had not been well handled. It would have been preferable to lay greater stress on the positive aspects of the Board's stance and less on circumstances which might make it hard to avoid compulsory redundancies in some abnormal cases if the strike continued.
- d. The lack of a Chairman or Chief Executive for NCB (Enterprise) Limited continued to damage the effectiveness with which the NCB's case could be deployed.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Government's aim should be to foster conditions in which the steady return to work could continue and accelerate. The NCB's case required careful handling to encourage strikers to return to work, to ensure that those who had worked throughout had no grounds for feeling aggrieved at their treatment and to avoid action or statements - particularly in relation to NACODS - which might damage recent favourable trends in the dispute. Recent violence and vandalism made it all the more important that criminal cases arising from the dispute should be dealt with promptly in the courts. The Attorney General, consulting the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor, should consider additional means of expediting the most serious cases, including the possibility that prosecutions in some cases might be taken over by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Attorney General, consulting the Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor, to consider additional means of expediting trial of the most serious criminal cases arising from the dispute.

Cabinet Office

26 November 1984