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MISC 101(84) 51st Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held in
Conference Room A, Cabinet Office
on TUESDAY 18 DECEMBER 1984 at 11.15 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council
(In the Chair)

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 Lord Young of Graffham
Minister without Portfolio

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

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

Mr Norman Lamont MP
Minister of State, Department of
Trade and Industry

Lord Trefgarne
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State for the Armed Forces,
Ministry of Defence

Mr David Mitchell MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Department of Transport

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that there were now only 25 pits with no-one present. Since his last report, 2 more pits had begun production in Scotland. He expected a further pit in Yorkshire to begin production that day and another on the following day. Total production had increased by 20 per cent over the past four weeks. 974,000 tonnes of coal, a record for the strike, had been moved during the previous week by the National Coal Board (NCB) alone. Stocks were high and the position of the power stations and industrial users of coal was strong.

Just over 500 men had ended their strike during the previous week. About 80 had returned on the previous day and a further 30-40 that day. The NCB was preparing personal letters to strikers and press advertising to encourage a further return to work from 7 January, the first working Monday in the New Year. Strikers who returned now would pay little income tax on their wages up to the end of the tax year, but these benefits would be lost to those who did not go back before the tax year ended. If a further 15,000 returned to work, more than 50 per cent of National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) workers in the industry would be working. In practical and presentational terms, this would be equivalent to a vote in the national ballot in favour of returning to work. It would be necessary for the NCB to pay particular attention to South Wales, where the regional management appeared weak.

He and the Secretary of State for Employment had met on 14 December a delegation from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) led by the General Secretary, Mr Willis. The TUC representatives had conducted themselves well, but it was clear that they had little or nothing to say in support of the NUM, no worthwhile initiative to propose and no authority from Mr Scargill to negotiate. Their statements following the meeting had recognised the Government's concern for a prosperous future for the coal industry and had not included the usual references to intensification of industrial action in support of the miners' case. He would circulate a transcript of the press conference given by the TUC following the meeting on 14 December. The TUC had met the NUM on 17 December and were reported as accepting that no initiative to end the strike was now possible before Christmas.

The proposed rule change to make the Nottinghamshire Area of the NUM no longer automatically subject to national NUM decisions was due to be discussed by the Area Council on 20 December. The legality of the change, which was expected to be agreed by the Area Council, would be challenged in the High Court by the NUM in a significant departure from their previous attitude to the law and the Courts. He understood that the Nottinghamshire Area were confident on legal advice that the legality of the change would be upheld. If so, other working areas might well follow suit; and it was likely that the overtime ban would be called off in Nottinghamshire.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the level of picketing and violence on picket lines was considerably lower than earlier in the strike, though it was clear that intimidation was continuing elsewhere. The numbers of police deployed, though not at their peak, remained high to deal with intimidation and guard against vandalism and sabotage over the holiday.

Mr Scargill had now said that he would not after all appeal against his recent convictions. He had been given 14 days to pay the fines and costs imposed on him.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that 18 Members of Parliament had entered the ballot for debates on the Consolidated Fund Bill on the night of 19-20 December with the intention of raising the question of the indemnity given by the Government to the sequestrators of the funds of the National NUM.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT said that 187 coal trains had run the previous week, the best weekly total since October. There had been indications at a meeting of the Rail Council during the previous week of concern on the part of some moderate unionists over the loss of freight business as a result of the strike.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, summing up the discussion, said that the Secretary of State for Energy was to be complimented on his handling of the meeting with the TUC on 14 December. The increasingly apparent isolation of the NUM and the lack of any prospect for new negotiating initiatives were

favourable to the efforts of the NCB to bring about another acceleration in the return to work in early January. Past experience suggested that the Government could best aid those efforts by leaving the management to pursue them and resisting the temptation to make any political points. In the meantime, it would be most important for the police and NCB to be vigilant over the holiday against vandalism and sabotage which could damage production when work resumed in the New Year.

The Group -

Took note, with approval, of the Lord President of the Council's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

18 December 1984