

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

1. MR BUTLER
2. PRIME MINISTER

*I think Mr. Ingham spoke well. But what a broken reed David Barnett is.*

*TERS*

*13.11.*

*Bernard was  
manoeuvre me*

COAL STRIKE

I saw David Basnett, GMBTU General Secretary, privately for an hour last night in the presence of Geoffrey Goodman, associate editor, Daily Mirror. Mr Goodman had been trying to set up this meeting for a week at the instigation of Mr Basnett; one meeting was called off last week because Mr Basnett found it inconvenient, though there is some evidence it reflected his congenital indecisiveness. At one stage last evening Mr Basnett said his wife had told him he should see me, so he had to do so.

I made it clear at the outset that only one person (whom I subsequently identified as the Prime Minister) knew I was seeing him. I fully recognised that it was important to him that confidentiality was maintained. He agreed it was and took it for granted that it would be. I reassured him.

Mr Basnett had no reason to suppose that I would be leaving a comforting message because I told Mr Goodman last week that, in my judgement, the outlook for a Government/TUC (or a more private version of such a contact) was bleak. He never actually asked for a private meeting with the Prime Minister, though he might have summoned up the courage to do so had I been more encouraging. But the conversation was conducted against the background of my knowing he was seeking:

- contact with Government; and
- Government intervention in the dispute to secure a resumption of negotiations.

Mr Basnett began by saying there was no point in trying to do anything before next Monday (November 19) when the NCB's "bribe" expired. It was however already clear that the NCB's tactic had failed, notwithstanding a return to work yesterday of 1,900 miners. The drift back to work would end this week and the dispute would then become a war of attrition. The strike would not be resolved in this way; it could only be ended by negotiation.

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

2.

The NCB, however, had unnecessarily boxed itself in by putting a terminal date on its offer. It was now a prisoner. And its refusal to negotiate was unacceptable and unrealistic.

The TUC could not stand idly by in the face of this immobility. It must try to secure some movement, though Mr Basnett freely admitted that there was no consensus in the TUC as to how it might be achieved. He gave the impression that most thought that the NCB must somehow be brought back to the negotiating table.

I asked, by way of the first of a series of questions, what made Mr Basnett think that Mr Scargill would negotiate. He acknowledged the force of the question but went on to suggest that the TUC was steadily acquiring some influence over the NUM. His whole strategy had been to bring the NUM in to the TUC fold and this was proving successful. But the NUM were like "frightened rabbits" ready to bolt at the first sign that the TUC was playing the 1926 game. TUC influence and pressure had therefore to be exercised extremely carefully.

He implied, but did not spell this out fully, that if the TUC could be seen to get the NCB to resume negotiations it would acquire greater authority in the eyes of the NUM and would in turn be able to exercise greater influence over the NUM.

I asked Mr Basnett if he was a one-man-band and whether, as a one-man-band, he had formed any judgement of whether he could command a majority on the TUC General Council for the application of pressure on the NUM in the appropriate circumstances.

He said that so far as he knew - and he thought he would know if it were otherwise - he was the only person in touch with the Government. No-one else knew he was having even this contact (with me). After some thought and evident mental arithmetic he felt he might just secure a majority on the TUC General Council for applying pressure on the NUM to negotiate meaningfully.

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

During his opening exposition Mr Basnett appeared weary, uncertain, uneasy and anything but resolute - in short, a troubled man without many ideas or alternatively lacking the courage or stomach for decisive action.

In reply I made the following points:

i. the Government seriously doubted whether Mr Scargill would ever negotiate or strike a deal;

ii. in my 18 years of watching Ministers at close quarters in industrial disputes I had to say that I had never personally known such a sustained unity of purpose; Ministers were at one in resisting any compromise with Mr Scargill's avoidance of his union's democratic procedures and his use of violence and intimidation;

iii. there were, however, practical reasons why the Government should do nothing to end the stalemate:

a. miners were going back to work in increased numbers; it was a matter for speculation whether the stream would dry up next Monday - the need to earn a living would remain;

b. there was much to be said for as many miners as possible returning to work by their own free decision in order to ease the post-strike problems which would arise;

c. renewed negotiations, which could only be designed to get the NUM off the hook and give them more than NACODS had got, would be the most effective stopper on a return to work;

d. thus the TUC ploy for renewed negotiations could only be seen as an attempt to assist the NUM at the expense of the NCB, NACODS, taxpayer, Government, etc;

e. yet the NUM had manipulated its members into a strike and had been responsible for the worst period of industrial violence and intimidation witnessed in this country for many a long year;

f. for all these reasons I saw little point in Government/TUC contact with the aim of securing new negotiations, especially when the TUC (and the Labour Party) had done so little to condemn the abuse of the NUM's democratic procedures and Mr Scargill's blatant use of violence and intimidation.

Mr Goodman told me after we had left Mr Basnett that the force of this response had clearly shaken him.

In reply, Mr Basnett first seemed disinclined to criticise Mr Scargill much for his creative use of his rule book. Indeed, his inclination was much more to push it on one side as not a serious blot, if not actually to excuse it. He could not answer for the Labour Party. But he himself had condemned the use of violence, and so had others in the TUC.

I felt obliged to retort that I was absolutely convinced that Ministers did not regard TUC condemnations as being either adequately forceful or sustained. It was a matter for conjecture whether, if the TUC had been consistently condemnatory, the strike would still be on. But I felt pretty sure that had the TUC stood its ground on two fundamental aspects of a democratic society - the NUM's need to use the ballot box and to picket peacefully - there would now be more point in talks with the Government and that it would have more leverage with Ministers.

Mr Basnett saw the point but gave me no reason to suppose that either he or others in the TUC were contemplating a tougher public line against NUM tactics. He seemed preoccupied with preserving the basis for exercising private pressure on the NUM within the TUC, while at the same time tacitly admitting that it would not necessarily bear any fruit.

The conversation then drifted, at my prompting, into a not very revealing discussion of internal TUC problems. Mr Basnett avoided personalities but said enough to reveal his dislike and contempt for Norman Willis whom he portrayed as a tool of the Left and a windbag. He also said enough to suggest that he would rely a great deal for support on white collar unions (who will not carry much clout with the NUM), and on Tony Christopher (IRSF) in particular. (I happen to know the two work closely together.)

Mr Basnett then became somewhat philosophical about the role of Government in a democratic society, no doubt as a means of returning to the purpose of the meeting: namely to explore the scope for a Government/TUC contact in whatever form.

He said that the TUC simply could not allow the NUM to be ruined and wrecked. It had an obligation to protect it from humiliation and annihilation. Similarly, he argued, the Government in a pluralistic society had an obligation to reconcile. The longer term consequences of the strike in South Yorkshire were already awful to contemplate. But the outlook for responsible trade unionism, as a pillar of society, was even worse if the dispute was not brought to an orderly and reasonable conclusion.

It was at this point that Mr Basnett argued that one consequence of a public defeat and humiliation for the NUM would be to create extremism in trade unions. Did the Government wish to reinforce this?

By way of reply, I said that I did not think the Government cared two hoots for the NUM. But it did care deeply for the members of the NUM, both those on strike and at work. We must remember that people were more important than institutions - a point, I may say, which predictably discomfited Mr Basnett. And people were being cruelly treated by this strike.

It was all very well, I added, to say that the effect of public defeat for the NUM would be to create extremism in trade unionism and trade union leadership. But surely there was no hope for moderates like himself unless the forces of Scargillism were effectively defeated - and seen to be defeated.

I gained the impression that this point was painful to Mr Basnett who, like most trade union leaders, has difficulty in distinguishing between the machine and the people it is supposed to serve. At all events he did not make any noteworthy response.

It was at this point that I began to feel that not only might I be abusing Mr Basnett's generous hospitality - the GMWU, as it was, has its own label malt whisky - but that I might be becoming counterproductive. I therefore inquired whether Mr Basnett had any contacts at all with Government, apart from me.

He revealed, very hesitantly, that Tom King had asked to see him shortly but that he did not view the discussion with enthusiasm - He muttered something about the monkey and the organ grinder and asked if I got the point. Otherwise, he commented somewhat bleakly on the isolation, which he saw as Government enforced, of the TUC - a pillar of society, he repeated - from Government. He had, he said, wondered about talking to Peter Walker but dismissed it. He would be very ready to see Lord Whitelaw when I mentioned his name by way of probing.

I said that Lord Whitelaw had a fixation against going behind fellow Ministers' backs. Mr Basnett said he had no such problem. }

I then moved to summarise the discussion:

- i. I saw little benefit in a Government/TUC meeting, however organised, at present for all the reasons stated;
- ii. I did however recognise the TUC's understandable concern about the post-strike future of the NUM and the consequences of a long and futile strike for the wider trade union movement; but they did appear to be asking the Government to come to their and the NUM's rescue;

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

7.

iii. I would communicate the substance of the conversation to the Prime Minister who knew I was seeing Mr Basnett and had made no attempt to stop me;

iv. I was bound to express my concern at the isolation of the TUC, and not least moderates like Mr Basnett, from Government and I would make that point known;

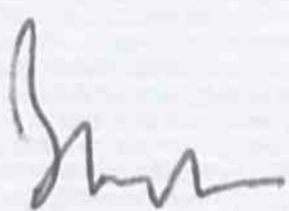
v. but I must reiterate the need for all democrats who abhorred extremism and violence to stand up for the ballot box, Parliamentary democracy and law and order; that was the way to win friends and influence people;

vi. in the meantime, notwithstanding my rather discouraging message, we must keep in touch, through Mr Goodman.

Mr Basnett said he did not dissent from my summing up in the sense that it reflected the conversation. He agreed we should keep in touch as suggested, but that there was no point in any further contact before November 19 - ie until later next week.

After the meeting, Mr Goodman described the discussion as a useful first exploration. He thought I had established a sound basis by being frank, however brutal in the process. Mr Basnett would not have understood - or alternatively would have been suspicious - had I been bland or encouraging.

The initiative rests with Mr Basnett via Mr Goodman.



BERNARD INGHAM  
13 November 1984

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL