

WILLIS PRESS CONFERENCE - 14 DECEMBER

We have of course met the Secretary of State. We welcome the discussion and welcome having the meeting and he's been glad to talk to us, and there will be every opportunity for us to talk again if and when that appears to be helpful.

As far as the outcome ... I think I'm bound to say it's disappointing, no really cheerful news coming out of it. We have been trying for some time to get ... we recognise the fact that there will have to be an agreed view about the March 6 proposals and the closure of the five pits before any chance of a return to work.

There are many other ideas and many other areas that have been discussed over long, long hours. What we've been trying to put in very broad terms is the possibility of the Government encouraging the idea that there should now be concentration on the future of the industry. In all the discussions that have been held, both sides have always emphasised the importance that they give to an efficient expanding industry. And what we've been trying to do is to see if the Government is enthusiastic about the idea that we concentrate on that future, get an agreed return to work, and then look at the Plan for Coal with the parties doing that job themselves, perhaps setting a particular agreed date between them so there is no lack of urgency and seeing if some of the very important issues and difference that have existed between them can be resolved in the light of that process.

The Minister is obviously not enthusiastic about just going ahead in that direction. All sorts of contacts can no doubt be made.

But it is disappointing .. I think a real problem exists that there is a disposition to feel that in advance of any negotiations about the sort of broad ideas that we've got in mind or anything else that the NUM should indicate - advance flexibility or whatever you care to call it about these proposals.

Now we've explained to the Secretary of State that that poses enormous difficulties for any negotiator on the first day of a dispute. And when a dispute has been on a long time it does pose real practical difficulties and so we will of course be talking with the NUM.

We've asked the Minister to consider all the points we've put to him, particularly our deep concerns - which many people share - about the future of the industry and everything that's happening in the coal fields and the coal communities. So we will be pursuing those. We shall intensify our thoughts, work out the best way to go about it, but I think 1984 was not the best year for a lot of people and we're very keen to go into 1985 with a bit more optimism than I'm afraid I have to feel at the moment.

As far as the TUC is concerned we certainly shan't be backing away from our determination to find - as I've said so often and it's still so true - a negotiated settlement which is acceptable to the parties concerned, which the only basis on which we feel we can establish better circumstances in the coalfield communities and a good future for the coal industry.

Q. Will there be talks next week?

A. We are going to talk first of all to the NUM ... give them a report about our experiences this morning. We've urged and do urge on everyone the concern, the need to have talks. At the moment that will be for the two parties concerned to see how they wish to develop it further.

I'm sure that there is a need for that to happen.

Q. What do you feel you've learnt about the Government's involvement and attitude?

A. I think what I've learned about them ... I think that there is a very wide appreciation of all the problems. Whether there is a total appreciation of the ways that you get into discussion about that, I'll have doubt that. We've tried again and we will try again.

Q. When you said that you wanted to concentrate on the future of the industry does that mean that you would accept pit closures yourself?

A. You'll have to wait for some of those answers. Of course what we've said .. no opposition to pit closures in line with the statements we've made. All the details - we always said this - have to be between the NUM and the NCB and how they would react to that situation. We're continuing to try to get those negotiations restarted because I believe that it's damaging if there's further delay and we're just going to have to press on it that area.

Q. But there's no immediate prospect of more talks as some people had thought, next week?

A. We have no information at the moment that there's going to be any talks but that would have to require consultation with the parties.

Q. Will you be meeting the NUM today?

A. No.