

Thatcher softens tone on mines

By Philip Webster, Political Reporter

The Prime Minister said yesterday that when the miners' strike ended interest and mortgage rates would come down again and the downward trend of inflation would be resumed.

Her acknowledgement of the effect of the strike on the central aim of the Government's economic policy came as Mrs Margaret Thatcher made a number of radio and television appearances in which she emphasized her view that the dispute had gone on too long.

The interviews, on BBC, ITN and Independent Radio News, were notable for the apparent moderating of the Prime Minister's tone from two weeks ago when her remarks about "the enemy within" were followed by a full-scale blitz against Mr Arthur Scargill by her ministerial team.

Yesterday she refused to talk about the strike in terms of victory or defeat, adding that she considered only the possibility of getting the miners back to work. "I hope to goodness the strike will be off very soon," she said.

The coal dispute was a prominent item on the agenda of the Cabinet yesterday, at its last meeting before September 13. The special committee of ministers which has been dealing with the strike will continue to meet when necessary during the summer; it is meeting again on Monday. The

leading role will be taken by Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, and Lord Whitelaw will chair meetings of ministers in the absence of the Prime Minister, who goes on her annual holiday to Switzerland next week.

Yesterday Mrs Thatcher said that she saw no reason for the strike continuing. The coal board had made a fair and reasonable offer and the Government had provided an excellent deal in terms of pay, investment and redundancy payments.

"We have done all we can. The strike will stop when people realize there is nothing left to strike about", Mrs Thatcher said.

"Both sides have been together for seven days. They have not managed to agree. Mr MacGregor made a fair and reasonable offer. That is all we can do and hope to goodness that those to whom the offer had been made will realize how fair and reasonable it is".

Mrs Thatcher defended the Treasury's estimate of £400m for the cost of the strike, and described the cost as "very considerable".

She conceded that the Government had had a "bumpy ride" in the past year in putting through its legislation.

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