

AUTHORITY OF GOVERNMENT

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday,
27th October 1976 at 1.15 p.m. in Lord
Carrington's Room in the House of Lords.

Present: Lord Carrington (In the Chair)
Mr. Forman
Mr. Hardy
Lord Jellicoe
Mr. Waldegrave
Mr. Douglas (Secretary)

Apologies for Absence: Mr. Gilmour, Mr. Peyton, Mr. Younger
Mr. Sumption

Guest: Sir Anthony Part

Lord Carrington welcomed Sir Anthony Part and explained briefly the objectives of the group.

Sir Anthony Part replied that he would deal mostly with the governmental machinery for dealing with emergencies but would be prepared to answer questions about other aspects. He had been concerned personally in three of the emergencies of the 1970-1974 period - the power cuts of 1972, the oil crisis and the three-day week.

The elements in the Government machinery were as follows:-

The Ministerial Committee on Emergencies - a large committee chaired by the Home Secretary.

The Civil Contingencies Unit - an inter-departmental committee of officials, normally chaired by a Cabinet Office official. It had a hard core of members who were not full-time members of the Unit but occupied key positions in the Departments. Other officials could be added as required. When an emergency actually occurred the Unit was normally chaired by a senior Minister. He thought it was important that this Minister should be someone who carried major political weight and had been rather surprised when Mr. Howell had been appointed to deal with the water emergency.

There was also a central operations room in the DTI whose essential function was to maintain liaison with industry. The liaison had worked well during the oil crisis partly because people in the oil industry were used to dealing with crisis situations. Institutionally the links were maintained through the CBI and through the Chambers of Commerce who had the better regional structure of the two bodies.

Finally there was the regional structure. This consisted of officials from principal departments. The officials were relatively junior. The head man would be an Under-Secretary or an Assistant Secretary and much of the day to day work including the maintenance of an Operations Room in the region would be done by Executive Officers.

In criticism of the arrangements he thought the Ministerial Emergencies Committee was too large to be really effective and he was doubtful whether it should always be chaired by the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary might not necessarily be the right sort of person to deal with emergency situations and although he was almost invariably a very senior minister he might not be in a position to give the necessary impetus to his Cabinet colleagues.

The other element he thought was particularly weak was the central assessment of intelligence. He thought the intelligence from industry notably during the three-day week had not been as good as it might be nor had, for that matter, the intelligence from the Departments. Industry by and large was not very used to this type of work which needed to be organised on almost a semi-military basis.

Finally, there had been a lot of complaints about lack of consultation. He was not really in a position to judge as to how far these were justified but the volume of complaints was such as to suggest that there probably was a problem. He thought the problem arose at two levels: lack of consultation between the departments and the CBI and perhaps equally, if not more, important between the CBI and its member firms,

Replying to Lord Carrington, he said that extensive contingency plans were prepared, sometimes months ahead, on such subjects as how power cuts should be organised, what stocks were available, where and how they could be moved around and so forth.

Replying to Lord Jellicoe on the question of the use of volunteers he said that, of course, one heard of a great deal of frustration amongst people who thought they could help, for example, retired sappers. There were really two constraints on the use of volunteers. The first was how far such volunteers could actually do the job. They often underestimated the amount of specialised knowledge that would be required and imagined that all one needed to run a power station was to know how to work switches or to run a water works by turning taps. The second limitation and probably the more important one was that the use of volunteers would often be counter productive as if volunteers were brought in you got even less co-operations than before from the people remaining at work.

Lord Carrington recalled that as Secretary of State for Defence he had been reluctant to allow troops to be used largely because he felt that people did not join the Army to wash dirty sheets in hospitals but he wondered whether a greater willingness to use the Army would have helped.

Sir Anthony Part agreed that the reluctance of Army personnel to do the sort of jobs required was a factor but probably a minor one. The main factor again was whether it would be counter productive to bring in the Army. He thought the difficulty was when the Army had to work with other people who were still at work. Here there was a difference between situations where they could work on their own for example clearing garbage and those where they would have to work with other people who might as a result be incited to withdraw their labour.

Mr. Waldegrave thought there was a whole range of possibilities varying from running a nuclear power station where highly specialised skills and experience were absolutely

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essential, down to clearing garbage in Glasgow which could be done by one battalion of troops. He thought there was a tendency in official thinking to consider only the most difficult cases and to assume that since in these cases neither volunteers nor troops could be used they could never be used in any kind of emergency. He thought officials had also tended to be too cautious about the costs that might result from using volunteers or troops. It might be that hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of damage to equipment could result in, say, a water works from the use of unskilled personnel but the risk of this and indeed the cost of repairing the damage might be far less than the damage involved in refusing to do so.

Mr. Hardy, referring to Sir Anthony Part's introductory remarks said he had dealt with the question of communication with the CBI, the Chambers of Commerce and so on but did not mention the question of communication with the public, many of whom wanted to help in an emergency.

Sir Anthony Part replied that probably more could be done about keeping the public informed. There were, of course, complications about the rights to reply to Ministerial broadcasts and so on but he thought more could be done to explain to the public exactly what was happening.

Lord Jellicoe referring to Sir Anthony Part's remarks about the chairmanship of the Emergency Committee said that it did seem to him to be logically a job for the Home Secretary as it fitted in with the rest of the Home Secretary's responsibilities.

Sir Anthony Part agreed and certainly the Home Secretary could be the right senior Minister to chair such a body but whether he actually was depended on his own personality and he also thought it was important that the person in charge of the Emergency Committee should know something about industry.

Summing up Lord Carrington said that he thought the two points that had emerged from Sir Anthony's extremely interesting description was the need to keep the machinery in good running order and the need for a good Minister in charge of it.

Sir Anthony agreed with this summing up but emphasised that what he suggested was not just one good Minister but a small group of Ministers who would have the necessary drive and authority.

As a postscript he added that he had spoken about the DTI and although Trade and Industry had now been separated, the common services still remained so that there was still a sense in which one could talk of using the DTI as distinct from the two separate Departments. He also suggested that the group might like to talk to the CBI and suggested that Sir Campbell Adamson who had seen the whole thing at first hand would be a suitable person to talk to.