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E(79)62
29 November 1979

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC STRATEGY

CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR A CENTRAL PRESS UNIT

Memorandum by the Paymaster General

INTRODUCTION

1 At its 11th meeting on 16 October, E Committee asked me to prepare a contingency plan for establishing a Central Press Unit (CPU) for use in emergencies, and to bring my proposals before it.

2 Experience has shown the need for better handling of information and publicity to influence public opinion in industrial disputes where the Government is involved, whether as employer, or because it has a statutory responsibility to intervene or because the public interest requires that Government should take emergency action to maintain essential services. Indeed, the experience of the threatened London Underground strike last June showed that an early indication of the Government's intention to minimise the effects of a strike on the public can actually help to avert the strike.

3 i I suggest that plans should be approved now for the recognition of a Central Press Unit, under my Chairmanship, to be activated at the outset of a potentially dangerous industrial dispute or other emergency.

The CPU would be activated by me at the request of the Prime Minister, or the Home Secretary (as Chairman of CCU) or the Lord President (as Chairman of E(CS)).

ii Its membership would consist of the Chief Information Officers of the Home Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office, Treasury and the Departments of Employment and Industry, together with the Prime Minister's Press Secretary and the Home Controller of the Central Office of Information. The Northern Ireland Office, which has its own publicity arrangements, would have a standing invitation to attend meetings, as would the Ministry of Defence and any Department (eg Energy, Transport, Civil Service Department) involved in the industrial dispute or required to take emergency action. Other Departments claiming an interest could ask to be represented. All Chief Information Officers would be free to send deputies if necessary.

i Early warning of an impending dispute or emergency

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will normally have reached me from the lead Department or in the ordinary course of my regular meetings with Chief Information Officers and with the Press Secretary at Number 10.

It would be the responsibility of my Office to ensure at the early warning stage that the Department of Employment and the lead Department had prepared full details of the substance and financial implications of the disputed claim.

ii During the early stages of a dispute the CPU would be activated to ensure that the substance of the dispute - with its likely consequences - was presented as effectively as possible to the media and the public.

iii The CPU would operate from my Office and at this stage the secretarial and administrative work could be handled by my staff, assisted as necessary by officers of the Information Service, with the agreement of the Director General of the COI and the Press Secretary at Number 10.

5 i When an emergency is foreseen, I would expect that the CPU would already have been activated. In addition to dealing with the presentation of the Government's case, it would be preparing to publicise and explain the Government's emergency plans, as directed by the appropriate Ministerial Committee.

ii During the emergency the CPU would arrange for an operations room to be set up in the Press Office of the lead Department in the dispute. This would be capable of being manned twenty-four hours a day, although at times there might be a need only for a duty officer based at home. The operations room would be manned by the Information staff of the lead Department, with representatives (at need) of other major Departments involved. I understand that this system has been operated effectively in the past.

iii At this stage CPU secretariat would be provided by COI with the necessary back-up facilities provided by the Cabinet Office. Liaison between CCU and CPU would be through my Office, which would be in close touch with the operations room and Number 10 throughout.

6 EXECUTIVE POWERS

The CPU would have no executive powers. Executive responsibility for taking action would rest with the Department or Departments concerned, who would handle their own publicity arrangements.

7 FINANCE FOR PUBLICITY

During an emergency a Department is often called upon to pay for

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an extensive advertising programme. This cannot always be met out of the normal budget, even with help from COI. I recommend that the Treasury should accept that the funds necessary to conduct an effective campaign will be regarded as a legitimate claim on the Contingency Reserve. It would be for the Department concerned to seek rapid Treasury approval in each case.

8 I invite my colleagues to agree:

i that the CPU be recognised, activated, operated and staffed in the manner indicated; and

ii that the Treasury should finance from the Contingency Reserve Departments' additional advertising costs caused directly by exceptional advertising during an emergency.

AM.

Paymaster General's Office

29 November 1979

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