

With Compliments

PRIME MINISTER.

ALFRED

WANTED

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28/10/1982.

Centre for Policy Studies

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DEFENCE GROUP MINUTE

First Meeting of the DEFENCE GROUP: Monday 11 October 1982 at the Centre for Policy Studies.

ROLE OF THE DEFENCE GROUP

- 1 SIR JOHN HOSKYNS said that it would be easy for the Group to find itself overwhelmed by the enormity of the subject before it. Firm guidelines would have to be set to prevent dilution of effort over too broad a field.
- 2 World War III started decades ago, and the West is still losing. We should face up to the problem of the Soviet threat and its various dimensions. There is a disequilibrium; must we live with it?

What are the alternatives when it comes to destabilising Soviet power-dissidents, economic warfare etc?

Are we faced with a question of the West being in theory able to win the battle against the Soviets, yet not having the cash to do it? Or is it a question of resolve?

How do we establish political equilibrium for an economic price of avoiding World War III?

- 3 Where does one start with a study of defence policy? Where is the interface with the foreign affairs side?

One of the initial problems when thinking about defence policy is that it is inextricably linked with foreign policy, and as far as he can see the Foreign Office has no coherent 'world view', or indeed any clear objectives (as is similarly the case with the Treasury, Department of Industry etc).

- 4 The Falklands had been a brutal example of lack of Foreign Office - Ministry of Defence co-operation. The Foreign Office had been trying for years to give the place away. In doing so it had encouraged the Argentinians to attack, in the belief that we would do nothing about it. The implications of a defeatist foreign policy to defence are too obvious.
- 5 This Group should be concerned with examination of our defence interests at a global level. What is the desired state of the world? Having established a view, we should decide under what circumstances the factors that contribute to that view could change. Such fundamental thought is not carried out by the civil service.

The reluctance to think rigorously is the tragedy of modern politics and civil service administration.

This is reflected in the Ministry of Defence where it is obvious that the top people are unable to start from point zero when they view defence policy.

- 6 Sir John referred to the theme of his forthcoming lecture to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Why is Whitehall thinking so disappointing?

One of the main obstacles to original thinking by ministers is that the incoming ministerial brief is 'pipeline'. Civil servants will 'exhaust' any minister who runs against the main stream of their thinking.

This phenomenon is illustrative of the difference between having politically committed top civil servants working to achieve the objectives of a new government, as in the United States, and our own system where the civil service appears to set out to frustrate every government's objectives with equal impartiality.

The situation is not helped by the very short tenure of most ministers in any post, and their general lack of calibre. He said he was reminded of the story of the minister who was changing brief from Agriculture to Education. The minister was asked whether this was not a major disorientation. "Not at all", he replied "I'll just cross out PIGS in my speeches, and insert SCHOOLTEACHERS".

The failure to set objectives means that, in Whitehall, performance is judged by conduct rather than results.

Ironically it is our brilliance at improvisation that often saves the day eg, Rhodesia and the Falklands. The Whitehall machine is at its best when it is responding to an emergency. The sudden awareness of clear and pressing objectives seems to come almost as a relief. But strategic objectives appear not to exist.

However, since the Falklands, the departure of Carrington (and the "non-aggression pact"), perceptions of foreign affairs have changed. We should take advantage of this new momentum.

- 7 Time on reconnaissance is seldom wasted. Our study should essentially be a recce, to plot the dimensions of a defence policy.

Direct communication with the Ministry of Defence will probably not be possible or even necessary. The Group's study will largely be an "overview".

We should establish a framework, and then attempt to construct a sub-structure within it.

- 8 ALFRED SHERMAN said that all he knew about a defence policy for Britain is that at present we don't have one. He agreed with Sir John that the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence have no coherent world view. As per Alan Walters (economic affairs), Ferdinand Mount (social affairs) and the foreign affairs advisory group being formed, we should be prepared to provide an individualistic and alternative source of knowledge on defence policy.

- 9 The Group should cover some of the more abstract questions of defence policy like: "What do we mean by a defence policy? Where are its boundaries? Who should dictate its outlines?"

The Foreign Office solution that "if we are nice enough we won't need a defence policy" has clearly been shown to be vacuous.

- 10 The Ministry of Defence exists purely to keep a promotion ladder for civil servants (like every other ministry in Whitehall) and the general Staff. They are happy running the ministry, without running anything else. As Sir John had put it "civil servants are not judged by results but by conduct". Those they cannot control have to be crossed off the promotion list.

There is little control operated by the ministers, who are largely out of their depth and too weak to stand up to their civil servants.

- 11 Because of the politicians' obsession with elections, not the possibility of war, they never give the latter the priority it is due. For instance, the billions of pounds wasted on the railways, coal, shipbuilding, British Leyland, British Airways; all or part of this could be more usefully spent on defence. But the politicians have not the will or the guts to attempt to convince the electorate that this is what should be done.

A lot of the blame lies with poor calibre ministers. NIGEL MORGAN said he was reminded of a conversation with an ex senior civil servant who, when asked "to what extent did you control your minister?", replied "If he was made of wood, I'd make a puppet of him."

- 12 ALFRED SHERMAN said that the trouble with the civil service in every department is that they are "intellectually corrupt". They spend the early years of their career following the departmental 'view' in order to ensure promotion, and with retirement at 60 the last ten looking for their next 'outside' job, and thus had favours to earn. There is always every incentive not to 'rock the boat'.
- 13 NIGEL MORGAN said that few recognised that the 'uniformed civil servants' (serving officers in the MOD) were like in mind to their civil servant counterparts. There was some magic transition that came over perfectly good officers when they go into the Ministry. The qualities of leadership, initiative and independence of mind, so encouraged in the command structure are treated as irrelevant, or troublesome traits to be discouraged. Both elements, civil servants and their military bureaucrat colleagues, combine happily into a "freemasonry of mediocrity".
- 14 ALFRED SHERMAN said the Group would need unfettered brains. This is one of the best reasons for keeping direct contact with the Ministry of Defence to a minimum. As he put it: "If you want to design a mousetrap don't put a mouse on the design panel".
- 15 During the Falklands crisis it was fortunate for the country that Downing Street had sources outside the Foreign Office to rely on. And since the Falklands the Prime Minister is more aware that the Foreign Office does not understand foreign affairs. Is she aware that the Ministry of Defence is seemingly incapable of constructing a coherent defence policy? Are the questions already in her mind, or do we have to put them there?

This is the right time for the formation of such a Group. And one of the main rewards of working for the Prime Minister is that she is one of the few people who can forgive someone for being right.

- 16 One of the most important spin-offs of the Falklands is that Mrs Thatcher has proved her strength and courage as a political leader. One of the key elements of defence is credibility; she's got it. Let's use it.
- 17 The Group should aim to write the contents page of decent Defence white Paper. What are we trying to defend and why. We should be prepared to map out the dimensions of defence - economic, moral, political and attempt to provide an educated guess on the requirements for a defence policy in the next 15 - 20 years. Assume that: (a) the people who should be thinking about such fundamentals are not; (b) there is market for such thought.

A start might be made at the next meeting by inviting HUGH THOMAS along to read a paper on his interpretation of a British foreign policy.

- 18 AIR VICE-MARSHALL MENAUL said that perhaps the most damning admission (or was it deliberate 'card-playing'?) of the Falklands affair had been the Chief of defence Staff's confession that there had been no contingency plan for the Falklands, and that the whole operation had to be improvised. To have a defence commitment without any contingency for support in time of emergency is madness.
- 19 Referring to Sir John's point about the lack of rigorous thinking in Whitehall, he said that so much of it was the fault of 'jargon', and the depressingly inward-looking character of Ministry of Defence thinking. He said that he was often horrified by the lack of technical knowledge, vis-a-vis their U S counterparts, of many of the Admirals, Generals and Air Marshalls at the top. His experience was that American senior staff were constantly updated on the latest technological developments. They read and analysed all the latest Soviet military books and magazines to keep abreast of the enemy's thinking. If the Pentagon does it why doesn't the Ministry of Defence?

The Chiefs of Staff ought to have access, and make regular use of, the best men in each technological field. They should have contact with real scientists, and not just academics, who largely re-write other men's work until it sounds a bit different.

- 20 Referring to NATO the Air Vice-Marshal said that it has a strategy and a commitment, without the resources to meet them.

One of the main problems with NATO is that the 16 Nations can never agree on the extent of the threat, or how to respond to it. And a lot of the resource problem is simply a manifestation of a lack of willingness to face up to decisions.

In addition the yellow line of the Tropic of Cancer was fatal. The old argument for non-involvement south of it used to be the difficulty of logistical resupply. Post Falklands this is looking rather thin.

- 21 Addressing himself to the role of the Group the Air Vice-Marshal said we should first decide "What is defence for?" If it is the arm of State that defends vital interests, what are they? For instance, do they include the Middle East, Africa, the South Atlantic and Antarctica?

Britain and NATO should have a "Grand Strategy", as do the Soviets.

One starting point in the Group's studies might be to examine the contents of Reagan's brief prior to the Presidential Election. This 2 inch thick document starts with first principles of defence and an opening policy statement. It outlines a comprehensive defence policy, with all the detail in annexes.

- 22 PROFESSOR R V JONES warned of the danger of allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the trivia of defence. The Group must stick to the wider picture.

A new definition of "Theatre of war" is needed. The conventional definition is now outmoded.

The whole question of defence against subversion should be looked at.

- 23 RV said that the role of the Group should be that of a 'compass', setting the general direction of defence policy. The technical detail can be filled in by the specialists.

(on a technical aside, he said that he was surprised that more work was not being done into the potential of RPV's (remotely powered vehicles) eg. Drones. USAF have some very interesting new developments. There is enormous potential in the electronic warfare role and also in tank-hunting and killing.

TRIDENT

- 24 The question of Trident came up time and time again throughout the evening. What are the real costs, and the real implications for conventional and other defences? Will Trident be so expensive that it will swamp the defence budget? Will it be superseded even before it comes into service? What are the real alternatives? Was it purely a question of prestige?

Do we need the 6000 mile range? Alfred Sherman said he was reminded of the chinese philosopher who, on hearing that an athlete had broken the record for a mile by two seconds, asked "what did he do with the two seconds?".

The French only have a range of 2500 miles; yet they have displaced us in the nuclear power table in the last twenty years.

How large a number of cruise missiles would be needed as an alternative? Is it true to maintain that 3 out of 4 would be shot down? What are the implications of STEALTH radar reflex reducing technology? The Falklands showed that low-flying aircraft are not so vulnerable. Also cruise can now go supersonic.

We should be prepared to look again at the choices.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Group will be TUESDAY 16 NOVEMBER, 7.30 for 8.00 pm at the Centre for Policy Studies.

Alfred Sherman outlined the provisional agenda as follows:

- 1 A short paper on British foreign policy; followed by discussion on the implications for a defence policy.
- 2 Discussion and allocation of tasks for the "Contnets Page" of a Defence Policy Paper - plotting the dimensions of a British Defence Policy

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