

LEADER'S CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the 76th Meeting held at 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday 6th August 1975, in the Leader's Room at the House of Commons.

Present: Mrs. Thatcher (In the Chair)

Sir Keith Joseph, Sir Geoffrey Howe,
Lord Hailsham, Mr. Maudling,
Lord Carrington, Mr. Prior, Mr. Peyton,
Mr. Maude, Mr. St. John-Stevas,
Mr. Raison, Mr. Edwards,
Mr. Buchanan-Smith, Mr. Neave,
Mr. Fowler, Mrs. Oppenheim,
Mr. Jopling.

Mr. Atkins

Mr. Montgomery, Mr. Shelton, Mr. Patten,
Mr. Ridley, Mr. Forman, Mr. Nicholson
(in attendance)

Apologies: Mr. Whitelaw, Mr. Gilmour, Mr. Jenkin,
Mr. Heseltine, Mr. Younger, Lord Thorneycroft.

Provisional Business for the week following the return of the House

Mrs. Thatcher outlined the provisional business for the week, 13th to 20th October.

On Monday, 13th October there would be the first day of the Remaining Stages of the Community Land Bill.

On Tuesday, 14th October there would be the conclusion of the Remaining Stages of the Community Land Bill, with a running three-line Whip.

On Wednesday, 15th October there would be Lords' Amendments to the Sex Discrimination Bill, followed by Motions on the Price Code Orders, and a motion on the Incumbents (Vacation of Benefices) Measure.

On Thursday, 16th October there would be the Remaining Stages of the Welsh Development Agency (No. 2) Bill (Lords), with possibly a debate on Welsh Affairs, on a motion for the Adjournment.

On Friday, 17th October there would be a debate on EEC Agricultural Matters, including Common Agricultural Policy, the Green Pound, Markets, Wheat, Milk Products and Fisheries. (Documents R/635/75, R/1947/75, R/1944/75, R/1991/75, R/1831/75, R/2713/73 and R/2193/74).

On Monday, 20th October there would be a debate on the Report of the Finer Committee on One Parent Families (Cmd. No. 5629). This would be followed by the Remaining Stages of the Inheritance (Provision for Family and Dependents) Bill, and all Stages of the Iron and Steel Bill (Lords).

Duty Rota

Mrs. Thatcher said that a duty rota was being prepared, in which each member of the Shadow Cabinet would be required to be available for a given period to make statements or speeches on matters and events as they occurred. It would be useful for colleagues to make a number of speeches during August, as in that month the press tended to be short of news. The next Shadow Cabinet would be at 3.30 p.m. on 1st October, provided Parliament was not recalled before then.

CONTINUED DISCUSSION OF POLICY GROUP STATEMENTS

Social Services

Mr. Fowler, introducing the paper (PG/60/75/1), said that he feared the Health Service was in danger of breaking down, and the Group were in close consultation with the local organisations of the Conservative Medical Society, which had about three hundred members. They needed to arouse public concern about the future structure and finance of the Service. Specific proposals in the paper were the reduction of the self-employed National Insurance contributions from 8% to 5%, the abolition of the earnings rule, and general support for voluntary organisations.

In discussion, the following points were made:

(a) We should try to identify the four or five main themes we wished to emphasise, rather than producing a long shopping-list, the effect of which might be lost.

(b) We were reluctant to commit ourselves to appointing a Royal Commission, as suggested for the Health Service, but it was understood that this proposal would only be made if there was an election this autumn.

(c) There was considerable concern in the Party especially among working class Conservatives, about abuse of Social Service benefits. It was understood that the Liberals were attempting to exploit this issue. On the other hand, we should be reluctant to encourage "snooping": the existing system was meant to eradicate abuse and computerisation should help. It was agreed that it was right to set up a Group to investigate abuse, but it as suggested that we should not say anything publicly about this for the moment.

(d) Tax credits would, of course, eradicate most abuse, and in discussing this subject the point was made that, if no attempt were made to improve the general standard of living through tax credits, these would cost less than was originally proposed. Perhaps the level of credits should be related in the first stage to the money available; the important thing was to set the machinery up. It was thought that David Price might provide some expert advice.

(e) While a Group should examine the financing of the National Health Service, we should be careful to avoid publicising any proposals for radical change until the subject had been fully considered.

Education

Mr. St. John-Stevas introduced the Paper. A number of Groups had been set up in this field and if it was not possible to get sufficient people to staff them all, some members of existing Groups would need to be switched to new ones. He referred to the principles behind the work of the Groups. A pamphlet would be produced in the autumn on the Conservative attitude to comprehensive schools, which would show that we were not concerned simply with preserving grammar schools.

In discussion, the following points were made:

(a) An additional principle to those already set out in the paper might be the need to encourage the teaching profession and restore its morale. Teachers were more sympathetic to us than many people realised and we should be careful not to emphasise parents' rights too much at the expense of teachers' authority.

(b) We needed to examine the role of the HMI's, the effectiveness of teacher-training colleges and relevance of curricula, and also the subsidising of compulsory membership of students' unions, and misuse of such subsidies.

...../(c) We should

(c) We should be careful to examine closely the viability of providing education vouchers, although the difficulties of such a scheme were appreciated. We should be careful not to do damage or cause confusion by experimental schemes.

(d) The parental contribution to university grants was very unpopular but it was felt that we could not give an undertaking to abolish it in the present economic and political atmosphere.

(e) Attention should be paid to the vocational relevance of the last year at school, and the need to fill the gap between the atmosphere at school and the entirely different atmosphere in the first years at work.

The Arts

Mr. St. John-Stevas referred to the Paper which had been circulated. Small sums of expenditure could bring considerable benefits as there was great disillusionment with the present Government. In discussion the point was made that each Policy Group should think of one or two proposals which, while costing a small sum now, might save large sums in the future. Examples given included devoting more resources to the NSPCC and better use of waste.

Agriculture

Mr. Jopling introduced the Paper. There had been a major fall in food production in the U.K. and this was likely to have an increasingly serious effect on the balance of payments. The Group wished to examine possibilities for cutting Ministry of Agriculture man-power, and also wished to emphasise the need to re-create prosperity in the "uplands", where both Nationalists and Liberals were serious rivals. In discussion, it was suggested that the Group should compare the relative effectiveness of loans and credits with grants and subsidies, and should look at French experience. It was important not to publicise our work on the uplands, as our rivals might then come forward with similar or with seemingly more attractive proposals.

Wales

In a short discussion on the Welsh Development Agency, it was suggested that we should not commit ourselves yet to removing in Government those powers of the Agency which the House of Lords were resisting.

The meeting closed at 6.15 p.m.